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Strange meeting



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Knutsford, Cheshire, England; Thursday April 13th, 1967 2:00pm

Rachel Bannerman gave each of her children's hands a little squeeze as she looked at their faces in turn. Anthony, on her left, and Sharon, on her right, both looked at her, their smooth unblemished cheeks bulging as they smiled up at her.

Rachel forced a little smile at each of them, heavy though her heart felt. They were too young, really, to fully understand what this was all about. At an age when they still had so much life in front of them, when they still had that child's feeling of immortality, how could either of them truly appreciate what death meant?

As Rachel looked upwards again, forwards to where the coffin was being ever-so-carefully unloaded from the shining black hearse, she could sympathize. She'd not been much older than Anthony when she'd lost her own grandfather, and although she was old enough to know he'd died of a heart attack, and seen how it had upset some of the grown-ups in the family, she herself had not then had the life experience to *really* appreciate the fact that she'd never see her grandfather again, that he was really gone for good.

The memory of her grandfather saddened her now more than it did back then. An old, faded memory. It had been so long ago, and the memories of a time when she'd taken him for granted were all she had to cling to.

And now, watching the huddle of men in their bulky black overcoats hoisting the coffin onto their shoulders, Rachel could feel a lump aching in the back of her throat. In that iconic, diamond-shaped varnished wooden box, was the body of her dear Dad.

"Is Granddad really inside that coffin?" Sharon asked innocently, but embarrassingly loudly, almost as though she'd been privy to her mother's thoughts.

"Yes, of course he is," Rachel hissed back, hoping that the child would take the hint that now was a time for quiet respect.

Then her train of thought continued its journey. With her father now gone, that left her as the senior member of the immediate family. Dad's passing signaled the end of the higher generation. The next cycle of funerals would be her own generation. Then, perhaps, the children would truly understand.

As if suddenly needing some reassurance that she was not alone, Rachel looked over her shoulder for William. She saw him, just a few feet behind, shoulders slouched, head slightly bowed. But he met her gaze and she knew that he understood. As her brother, he was the only other person in the massed group of mourners congregated outside the little chapel that was saying a final farewell to a father that day.

Then Rachel's eyes wandered around the other glum, ashen faces. There was Auntie Val and Uncle Reg... Dad's cousin Albert... Dad's old friend Frankie Taylor... Rachel could draw comfort from just about every other face she saw there. People who'd known Dad. People who were still alive, to keep his memory alive.

But hanging off a little way distant at the back was a slightly stooped, white-haired man, smartly dressed in a dark tweed suit with a buttonhole. He just stood there, calmly, hands behind his back, looking straight ahead with an air of respectful dignity about him. Rachel was sure that she did not recognise him. Perhaps he was one of those odd people you heard about, who gatecrashed other people's funerals on a regular basis because they had a morbid fascination with such ceremonies. Or maybe he'd been in Dad's regiment. He looked old enough.

The thought quickly evaporated from her mind as her eyes wandered down to the children again.

"Anthony, stop picking your nose!" she hissed, giving his arm a reproachful yank.

Then, all of a sudden, there came the faint groans of organ music from within the doors of the chapel and the pall-bearers began their slow, rhythmic journey inside.

Tightening her grip on her children's little hands, Rachel led them in slow pursuit.

The TARDIS interior; somewhere within the space-time vortex

There was something that just seemed so wrong about cleaning clothes, Silver thought. Not insofar as clothes obviously needed to be cleaned, but the laborious act of doing so seemed to be a chore that was somehow out-of-step with a natural lifestyle.

No, it was *more* than a chore... It was an ordeal, a penance. Humans just weren't *supposed* to do laundry, that was a law of existence that you could just *feel* it was wrong to break.

With an exasperated sigh of frustration that blew the forelock of her thick black hair airborne for a couple of seconds, Silver paced over to the old wooden seat and sat in it as comfortably as its tall, narrow erect stature would allow. In fact the back was so hard and straight that the teenager quickly leaned forward, dug her elbows in on top of her knees and rested her chin on her out-turned hands. Her full lips pouted grumpily. Wasn't life traveling through time and space supposed to be fun?!?

Laundry was one of those tasks she thought she'd left behind in Connecticut! But no, it would appear that laundry was a monster with the ability to pursue her relentlessly across the universe.

Oh, it had been a novelty at first. When Silver had initially run out of clean clothes and brought herself to mention this fact to the Doctor, he'd introduced her to this sizeable gloomy roundelled room she was now in. It didn't look like a launderette at all, except for the clothes hangers and the big wicker skip that had *Limehouse Laundry* written across it in big red stenciled letters.

The room was dominated by big machines, bulky square metal things that came up to waist height and had lids that opened. Even on her first visit to the room it had been obvious that the dirty clothes went inside these things, but she had then expected to have to put soap powder in them somewhere, and then wait for them to fill up with water.

Not so in the TARDIS. The Doctor had explained it in his usual rapid matter-of-fact style and if she had understood the process correctly then these machines made some kind of chemical analysis of everything placed inside them, right down to a molecular level, and were somehow able to calculate which molecules were unwanted – ie, the dirt and the stains – and disintegrate them. It had been very impressive, especially as clothes came out as dry and as uncreased as they went in, and there was no risk of them shrinking or losing their colours or elasticity. Yes, the Doctor might almost have been advertising a new brand of washing powder when he'd gone through that particular part of the explanation.

But the novelty of using this revolutionary new process had long since worn off. The machines weren't particularly fast at doing the job and Silver knew she was her own worst enemy for continually letting her dirty linen build up and up and then having to clean a large volume at once. Only these machines couldn't cope with too much at a time so, rather like the old automatic washing machine in her mum's kitchen, she had to feed them a few items at a time.

The machines, their blue active indicator lights lit brightly in the gloom, vied with the rest of the TARDIS to see which could hum the loudest – and most irritatingly.

Could there ever be any escape from dirty laundry, Silver wondered to herself? And, inevitably, her thoughts were drawn back to Seth.

She rubbed her eyes. There were no tears coming from them and she wanted it to stay that way.

Life with Seth promised so much. Love, sex, laughs, happiness... She'd craved him so much. But there'd be dirty laundry too. Cooking, cleaning, all the other chores she hated doing. They would all come as part and parcel of a relationship. Unless she was

going to land herself either a man willing to do it all himself, or else a man so rich that they could just keep buying new things and permanently discarding anything once it needed cleaning.

Silver stood up again, angry with herself for thinking of Seth again. The anguish was always great enough to make her whole body ache with sadness.

Blowing out her cheeks and sweeping back her thick black mane of hair with a pass of her hand, she hovered by the nearest cleaning machine for a few minutes waiting for the blue indicator light to go out.

Finally it did and Silver opened the lid to retrieve her garments, now spotlessly clean. With them drawing her attention, she failed to notice any other activity in the room until she felt a stroking sensation across her calf muscles.

“Oh, it's *you*,” she said chidingly, looking down to see the black shaggy form of Mortimer brushing up back-and-forth against her. “I suppose you want feeding again, well you'll just have to hang fire for a few minutes while I sort this lot out.”

It only took a moment before the cat's need for attention swelled to the point where it silently jumped up on top of the machine, expertly landing on Silver's freshly-cleaned zebra-patterned sleeveless top.

“Hoi!” she cried and shooed him away.

The cat hurriedly jumped down again.

“It's thanks to you and your molting hairs getting all over me that I've had to clean most of these things, so don't you dare mess them up again, buster!”

As the cat's head revolved to give her a grumpy look, Silver stuck her tongue out at him and then continued her task of plucking her garments out of the cleaning machine.

“Ah, there you are!” the clipped, masculine tones of the Doctor's voice sounded.

By reflex, Silver looked up and saw his tall, elegant figure cheerily regarding her from the doorway. She then quickly hid behind her back the bra she was holding and felt the temperature of her cheeks rise a degree or two. She was never sure why she felt that sex was such a taboo subject when the Time Lord was around... Maybe because it was about the only subject he never raised himself. Or maybe because he felt too much like a parent at times.

“Oh, er, hi,” Silver forced a smile to conceal her momentary discomfort.

“I wasn't sure if you were asleep in your room,” the Doctor said, his long legs slowly stepping into the room, preceded by an even longer shadow on the perfectly flat grey metal floor.

“No, I, er, just thought it was about time I caught up on some cleaning.”

“So I see,” the Doctor's face creased into a smile and then he crouched down and began tickling Mortimer's neck with his forefinger. The cat responded by rubbing the sides of his face against the Doctor's trouser leg.

Then the Time Lord reared himself up to his full six feet once again and his pale blue eyes peered down at her from beneath that prominent intellectual forehead. “I was thinking,” he said, “about spending an evening at the opera. I appreciate it's probably not your cup of tea, Silver, but you're most welcome to join me.”

“The opera?” Silver screwed her face a little. The idea of stage actors in extravagant costumes singing their woes in impossibly high voices held little appeal.

“Yes, I had late nineteenth century France in mind. Not least because I found a few old francs in my other coat.”

Silver was still more concerned about keeping her undergarment hidden from the Doctor's sight behind her and could only stumble through a response. “Er, no thanks, I, uh, don't really fancy it.”

There was a second's pause and then the Doctor shrugged. "Not to worry. Some other time, perhaps?" He gave a gentle smile.

"Yeah, perhaps," Silver breathed, probably smiling rather too much in return.

The Doctor turned away, and beginning to whistle an operatic tune that Silver recognised but could put no name to, he marched out of the room once more.

Silver sighed, shaking her head, and slapped the bra down on top of her pile of clothes. Then she chuckled and shook her head once again, thinking how silly it all was that two rational adults, who'd faced all manner of danger together, couldn't handle the sight of a simple piece of underwear.

Mortimer's yellow eyes were looking up at her from the gloom.

"And *you* can wipe that smile off your face, buster!" Silver said, reprimanding the cat with a wag of her index finger.

Knutsford, Cheshire, England; Thursday April 13th, 1967 2:42pm

Rachel Bannerman could feel relief lifting the weight from her shoulders. The service she'd been dreading had passed more sweetly than she'd dared to hope.

She remembered all too clearly the anguish of her mother's funeral, almost five years ago now, and had feared ending up in floods of tears once again this time as Dad's life was reviewed for the final time, and his body was sent off on its final journey into the incinerator.

However, although sad, she'd found the service to be rather calming. Father Harris had conducted it in a gentle, warm manner and Rachel had felt quite proud listening to all those tales of her father's bravery, serving his country with such distinction in two world wars. He really sounded like quite a hero – which of course he had been, even though the predominant image of him in her mind was that of a rather jolly, sometimes curmudgeonly old rogue.

Almost as a mark of respect the clouds had parted and the sun was beaming brightly now that the congregation were filing out into the open air, having said their goodbyes to Peter Watson. Rachel accepted the stream of condolences being proffered, remembered to thank each person in turn for attending, and checked which were intending to come back to the family home for the buffet.

Not the last out, but the last to speak to her because he held back, was the white-haired gentleman in the tweed suit that she'd spotted earlier, the man she didn't recognise.

"Thank you for coming, I'm sure my father would have appreciated it," Rachel said, shaking the man's hand.

The man smiled back and gave a curt nod with a slight click of the heels, in a rather militaristic manner. "It was the least I could do, Peter and I go back many years."

Rachel was surprised by the thick German accent and then realised she was showing it. "Oh, you must excuse me," she quickly apologised, "I didn't realise... You're not my father's old pen friend are you..? Gunther Reisenmann?"

The man smiled and nodded again, his bright pink forehead creasing into numerous lines as he did so. "Ja, I *am* Herr Reisenmann, and your father and I were..." He paused, his leather-gloved hand swishing around as he sought the words. "*More* than pen friends!"

"Oh, but you surely haven't come all this way just for the funeral?" Rachel was astonished, quickly remembering that William had telephoned this old German friend of their father's to convey the news of his passing. If the man had been at home in Germany then, he must have made very quick arrangements to be here now, just a week later.

"It was a duty," the German said, sounding quite sincere.

"Well, you must come back to the house, I mean, are you okay for somewhere to stay and everything, how did you..?"

As Rachel's words petered out, the German took over. "I am in a guest house, not far away, not costing too much, and they give me a very good breakfast!" he laughed. "Und ja, I would very much like to come back to the house."

Rachel was distracted as William called over to her. Having to hold back the strands of her long mousey hair that the wind was battling to blow across her eyes, she looked and saw her brother waiting at the car, with the door open, his black clad form almost like a giant raven against the backdrop of the lush green lawns.

She turned back to the German, who had already read the situation and was beginning to walk her over to the vehicle.

"Didn't you and my father know each other from the war, somehow?" Rachel asked.

"Ja, dat is so," the man nodded.

“He never really told me much about it,” Rachel mused. “I expect the horror of everything that happened, all the friends he lost... He didn't like talking about it.”

The man suddenly stopped in his tracks, looking sternly at Rachel as she did likewise. His eyes swung sideways for a moment as he seemed to be considering what to say next. Then he took a deep breath. “My dear fraulein...” he sighed, “what your father und I experienced during der Great Var is... not believable!”

Four miles north of Givenchy, France; Saturday 11th December 1915 9:14am

“It's as miserable here as it was in Loos.”

Peter Watson felt bad enough already without having to listen to the continual negative comments from Lunt. He was tired. He was hungry. He was cold. And he was miles and miles away from his family and home.

But, as always, he tried to put a positive spin on things. “At least we're not in Wipers. And I bet it's even colder there than it is here.”

Lunt, as usual, was having none of it. “I bet it's colder in bloody Blackpool, but I'd still rather be there than in this godforsaken place.”

The two young soldiers exchanged glances, Lunt having that usual know-it-all look in his beady little eyes. Peter turned away, preferring to look at the desolation before him. Whatever had once been here on this strange patch of French land, whether it be sprawling green meadows or well-tended farmland, months of relentless carnage had reduced the landscape to a brown, sodden mess of mud as far as the eye could see. Wet mud was not only a familiar sight to him now, it was a familiar smell also. And if he should ever get back to dear old Blighty in one piece, Peter knew he'd put greater value in the simple luxury of enjoying a hot bath than had ever been the case before.

If there was one consolation to be brought from their arrival here at this new location, it was that they'd missed the worst of the action. The biggest struggle at Givenchy had taken place a year earlier, whilst he'd been getting prepped at Colchester. Now his division, the Ace of Spaders, had come to relieve this section of the front from the 33rd Division who had been holding it. With the worst winter weather now upon them all, a major enemy offensive was unlikely for weeks, or even months. At least, that was the hope. Bad as this depressing place was, this was as good as it was likely to get.

Peter leaned against the rough side of the trench, the best rest he could get for the moment. His shoulders ached from carrying his kit. His coarse brown uniform continued to itch. And the long hours of standing combined with the cold weather wasn't doing his knees much good, he was sure. And they were going to be in for another whole day of standing around, in all likelihood.

“Okay lads?” asked the chirpy young voice of Billy Sewell, who came marching along the trench towards them, his pasty face grubby but cheerful.

“Here he comes, Mister Optimism!” jeered Lunt. “The man who told us we'd be home in time for Christmas.”

“Leave it, Lucky,” Peter scowled.

“Welllll,” Lunt defended himself. “I said at the time, didn't I? According to the newspapers, the war was going to be over by *last* Christmas!”

“Be thankful it wasn't then, or you'd have joined up for nothing, wouldn't you!” Billy quickly countered.

Peter couldn't help but smirk at the teasing remark and, particularly, the dour look it drew from its target.

“How are the feet, Pete?” Billy asked, a recurring question that was now something of a catchphrase amongst the lads, ever since Peter had complained about his blistered feet in training and been mocked for it in front of everyone by Captain Meredith.

“Bearing up,” Peter told him. They were sore, but he barely noticed the pain anymore, he'd become so used to it. “The right boot's got a leak as well now though.”

“Just watch it don't let any frogs in!” Billy quipped.

Peter managed a smile and then peered through the rolling barbed wire again at the misshapen muddy landscape stretching forwards as far as the eye could see. Knowing that

somewhere out there, just a few miles away, lay the enemy. The Germans. Surely they wouldn't try an attack this late in the year, not with the ground itself so unstable after all the rain?

Or perhaps that was what they were waiting for, to attack at the least expected moment, to try and take them by surprise...

Peter's steely resolve that they were British and the better men had dwindled with the numbers of his division. The loss of comrades, the actual sight of his friends being killed or horribly wounded had shattered all the illusions he'd had about them being invincible, about assuming everything was going to have a happy ending. As he'd written in many of his letters home, he knew now that war wasn't some routine exercise out of a storybook where the good side always won. This really was a fight to the death, and a long-drawn out fight at that, in the worst of environments.

He cupped his hands and blew into them to try and stop his fingers stinging from the cold morning air. He took one final long look across the battlefield. There was the feeling that the enemy was out there, watching their every move. There was *always* that feeling.

Then he turned and saw Lunt watching him from just a couple of feet away. Short, freckle-faced Norman 'Lucky' Lunt, the one man who, all along, right from the word go, had consistently cut through all the proud patriotic rhetoric and painted this war in its true colours.

"This'll roll on for *years*," he muttered dryly, as though reading Peter's mind.

Peter was distracted by a nudge and saw Billy offering him a cigarette. He gratefully took it and in return produced his box of matches.

Lunt was offered a cigarette also and took one, giving a token nod of appreciation. And then, a moment later, the trio silently enjoyed one of their few remaining luxuries.

All too soon it was over. "You three!" snapped the voice of their sergeant. "Over here, there's another vanload of supplies to unload!"

Sharing resigned looks, the three soldiers trudged down the trench to join the activity of their colleagues once more.

Three miles northeast of Givenchy, France; Monday 13th December 1915 11:23pm

With a roar as though the very fabric of space and time was being ripped asunder, the blue Police Box form of the TARDIS strained to appear, solidifying on the slop of mud and water that currently passed for the ground in this area.

Seconds later the door opened and the Doctor emerged, the eager look on his hawk-like face instantly creasing into displeasure as his immaculately-polished black shoe squelched into the waterlogged soil. His eyes squinted as he tried to pick out any details of the surrounding area but the blackness of the night sky confounded such attempts.

“Where the Dickens...?” he murmured to himself, quite unable to see anything except the tiny white wisps of snow dancing softly down inches in front of his nose, and a patch of perhaps two square feet of wet muddy ground, into which his foot was swallowed, that was illuminated by the interior light from the TARDIS.

“Silver!” the Doctor hollered sternly.

He only had to wait a moment before the teenager's pretty face popped out of the door at his shoulder.

“Paris?” she asked.

“The old girl seems to have wandered astray,” the Doctor said. “Fetch me a torch would you please?”

The request was duly complied with and the Doctor shone the torch around, but the circle of light only skimmed across more and more mud.

“Probably not even Earth,” Silver commented.

“Oh, it's definitely Earth,” the Doctor quickly retorted, “I'd know the smell of that nitrogen-oxygen ratio anywhere by now. I'm just a little concerned about the lack of light.”

“Scared of the dark?” Silver quipped mischievously.

The Doctor continued, oblivious to the joke. “The TARDIS usually homes in on light, where possible. Either by drifting a mile or two, or by a few hours. If she's set down in the middle of the night then there must be a circuit fault.”

“Bang goes your night at the opera.”

“It does look that way,” sniffed the Doctor. “But we might only be a fraction off course. Ideally I need to gauge our approximate position so that I can ensure the drift compensators are correctly calibrated.”

“In other words you're going to wander off?” Silver said, folding her arms tightly to suppress her shivers, her breath visible in the cold night air.

The Doctor sniffed in the cold vapours and tapped his cane against his leg. “Can't be far from the flow of things... Just in the middle of a farmer's field, that's all...” His head suddenly jerked as he spotted a movement. “Hello! What's that?”

“What?” Silver asked.

The Doctor began moving the torchlight over the ground once more. “I'm sure I just caught sight of something...”

Then, enveloped in the circle of yellow light, was Mortimer, eyes aglow as though facing an approaching car.

“Ha ha har! I didn't see you slip out, you little rascal!”

“Get back in here you stupid puss!” Silver ordered but the cat didn't need telling twice and it pushed between their legs and dashed back inside into the deeper confines of the TARDIS, leaving a trail of muddy pawprints across the otherwise-spotless floor of the console room.

“Serves you right,” Silver noticed the Doctor's look of disgruntlement, “I keep telling you to get a doormat.”

“Like he'd use it,” the Doctor scowled. “Right, well anyway, I'll just do a little recce, I shan't be very long.”

“Just you hold on a moment!” Silver snapped and ducked back inside the police box.

“What's that?” the Doctor said impatiently, squinting to see where the teenager had gone to. “Don't tell me I've forgotten something?”

She reappeared, pulling on a long thick coat. “Yes, me! There's no way I'm letting you wander off into the unknown alone.”

One of the Doctor's eyebrows arched upwards as he said sardonically, “Oh?”

Silver linked arms with him and patted him affectionately. “I know you, you can't keep out of trouble.”

The Doctor looked quite disdainful, craning his head upwards. He straightened his tie, then his top hat, adjusted his shirt cuffs... and then broke into a grin. “Let's go then!”

They marched purposefully forward into the all encompassing blackness, shutting the door of the TARDIS behind them. Each footstep seemed to sink inches into the ground, the temperature seemed to drop a degree with each additional step they took away from the TARDIS.

Silver was the first to stumble, losing her footing on the uneven ground, but was kept upright by the Doctor. Then it was his turn and she returned the favour.

The torch afforded them only a very limited view of what was ahead and with virtually no other light available, their eyes weren't becoming accustomed to the darkness at all.

“Are you *sure* this is a farmer's field?” Silver was compelled to ask after stepping into a puddle so deep the water crept over the rim of her heavy walking boot.

“There does seem to be a lack of crop,” the Doctor ceded. “Maybe we're on part of a building site or something.”

Silver looked ahead, then over her shoulder, then to the right. “You know, there's no light visible *anywhere*.”

“Nineteenth century Frenchmen weren't exactly noted for putting streetlamps in fields,” the Doctor responded sarcastically.

Silver didn't care for the remark. “But shouldn't there be lights in the distance if there was a town or something nearby?”

“Maybe. But maybe there are trees, or a barn or something blocking the view.”

They stumbled blindly onwards for several minutes, Silver regretting the journey more and more as her boots took on an increasing load of cold dirty water. By now the combination of the chill wind and the occasional snowflakes was really making her face and fingers sting.

Then there came a distant rumble. Instinctively both stopped in their tracks and listened intently. The rumble continued for a second or two then ceased.

“Thunder?” Silver suggested.

“You don't usually get thunder with snow,” the Doctor pointed out.

“A distant lorry, or an aeroplane?”

“Maybe,” the Doctor said in a way which suggested to Silver that he wasn't the slightest bit convinced.

He pulled at the lapel of his tailcoat, composing himself, then continued on, more slowly than before, Silver still clutching his arm. In just a moment he stopped again.

“What's up?” Silver whispered.

The Doctor nodded downwards, and flashed his torch so that she could see. His cane was prodding something thin and wiry in the ground, in great sweeping curls.

“Barbed wire! So this *is* Earth! There *must* be people around!” she squealed excitedly.

The Doctor's hawk-like face remained grave. “Yes, there must.” Then his eyes narrowed, darting from side to side as possibilities streamed through his consciousness.

Silver hugged him more closely.

“Maybe we ought to go back,” he said, calmly.

As they turned Silver stumbled. Her foot shot out but then skidded forwards in the mud as she tried to steady herself. The Doctor tried to hold her upright but in his attempts to maintain his own balance he too skidded and they went careering forwards. Silver yelped loudly.

They landed in an awkward heap, Silver pulling a face as she retrieved her left hand from another muddy puddle.

“You okay?” the Doctor asked as soon as he caught his breath.

Silver sighed and nodded, shaking the water off her hand. “Yeah, you're right, let's get back and get away from this filthy place.”

The Doctor rose unsteadily to his feet and then gave her a helping hand up. Then he froze, his eyes looking around once more.

Silver frowned. “What now?”

“Ssh!” the Doctor said quietly, clearly an instruction to listen.

At first all Silver could hear was the faint rush of the wind but then, barely detectable, she could hear a voice carrying on the breeze.

“Hellooooo? Who is there?”

Silver looked at the Doctor, who looked back solemnly. “Someone must have heard your scream.”

She slapped his arm with the back of her hand. “That's right, blame me! Anyway, it wasn't a scream, I just gasped, that's all.”

“Hellooooo?” the voice called again, a little clearer now. Clear enough for Silver to recognise it as a man's voice.

* * * * *

Gunther stood as still as he could, though he was powerless to stop the trembling throughout his body. His frozen fingers tightened around the ice-cold barrel of his rifle as he stared out into the darkness, seeing nothing but the wisps of snow. For the moment the pain in his head was forgotten.

He was *sure*. Sure that he'd heard a cry! But a cry could only tell him that somebody was near. It could not tell him whether that somebody was friend or foe.

Dare he call out again? He so desperately wanted to see a friendly face, but calling out could mean that he was alerting an enemy to his whereabouts. Whilst the night might conceal everything from him, it was at least also concealing him from the enemy.

“Hello?” a voice suddenly called back from somewhere ahead of him, and from not so very far away either. “Is anybody there?”

Gunther's trembles increased, this time from mounting excitement. The voice was strong and masculine, and it was unmistakably German! He almost sang out with joy but had to restrain himself. He *had* to be sure... His very life depended on it.

He crouched down and waited, his breaths shallow and rapid. He kept his rifle pointed in the direction from which he'd heard the voice, struggling to keep it steady. Struggling to hear even the breeze over the sound of his breathing.

“Perhaps it was more over this way,” he heard the voice again. Unquestionably German, and this time not addressing him.

Unable to contain himself, Gunther stood up and yelled. “Here! Over here!”

He stepped forward a couple of paces then saw a small light dancing around. He realised it was a torch in somebody's hand. He lowered his rifle and waved, smiling, almost laughing with relief. “Over here!” he called again.

Almost magically out of the gloom two figures started to appear, but they were nothing like Gunther was expecting. They weren't soldiers, they had no uniforms on! One, the taller of the two men, was dressed exceptionally smartly, like an aristocrat, in a long tailcoat with a top hat. From what Gunther could see he had a gaunt, intelligent look about him.

Huddled to this mysterious figure was an even stranger one – smaller, squatter, with shaggy hair and unusually tight black trousers. It wore an odd design of coat.

Surprise gave way to fear and Gunther instinctively leveled his rifle once more, only just managing to point it in their direction. His eyes bulged as he croaked “God in heaven!” Flashing through his mind was the thought that he might have been better off if he'd been found by Allied troops, for these two figures surely had to be phantoms.

“He's a soldier!” Gunther heard the shorter of the pair comment, again in perfect German.

“I rather suspected he might be,” the other said.

“Stay back! Stay back or I shoot!” Gunther blurted, his throat contracting. Though he knew his gun would be quite useless against such creatures.

He was actually surprised when the duo did cease their advance. The tall man smiled warmly at him.

“Please don't be afraid,” he said, “as you can see we are unarmed. We are not your enemies.”

“Doctor, be careful!” the other warned in his curiously soft high-pitched voice.

“Doctor?” Gunther seized upon the word. “You... are a doctor?”

Could it be? Could it possibly be? Perhaps he was really was a man of medicine... If he wasn't actually serving in the army but had come to the front to offer assistance to the cause, it *might* explain why he was dressed in civilian clothes...

“Yes, I'm a doctor,” the tall man nodded, still smiling. “A doctor who has wandered a little off course.”

Gunther swallowed hard and lowered his rifle. “Thank the Lord,” he breathed. “I thought...”

The words didn't come. Gunther stumbled forwards and shook the tall man's hand vigorously. “It must be some miracle! I too am lost...”

Gunther couldn't stop himself babbling words of gratitude until the man noticed the wound on his temple.

“You're injured.”

“Yes, but I cannot see it, is it serious?” Gunther stammered, the sensation of pain in his head returning now that he was reminded of it.

The man peered at the wound for a second or two then smiled. “Can't be too serious if you're walking around.”

Gunther chuckled, relieved, and let go of the man's hand then took the other man's. He was instantly surprised at how soft it was, and frowned when he saw the brightly coloured long fingernails and the singular jewelry. He looked questioningly into the man's face and was even more startled to see the deep purple lips and the thick dark lines around

the strange but beautiful green eyes. The features of the face were soft and rounded, almost like a child, or...

“What are you looking at me like that for?” the voice said, sounding offended, and confirming Gunther’s sudden realisation that this person was not a man at all but a female. Though she was totally unlike any female that Gunther had set eyes on before, and he recoiled a couple of steps, wondering if perhaps this *was* a phantom after all.

“You’ll have to excuse my companion, she comes from a land quite far away from here,” the tall doctor explained politely.

Gunther gave a false smile to try and mask his fear and discomfort. “She speaks German very well...”

The Doctor smiled. “I taught her myself.”

Gunther couldn’t help but look at the female again, even though he felt threatened by her. The emphasis of her eyes and lips – was it make-up? - had a very disarming effect, in fact it made her face stunning, intriguing... Her hair was wild, like that of a caveman, which made him wonder if she was some feral person. He couldn’t really see her torso, hidden as it was by her coat, but she could not be decent or civilised wearing those trousers, so tight that they clung to every curve of her legs. He considered it a blessing that the coat stopped him seeing any further up.

“He looks like he’s out of the First World War or something!” the wild woman spoke, looking straight at him and yet apparently speaking to the tall doctor.

“Ah, we *are* near the front, I presume?” the tall doctor asked him.

As Gunther nodded, the wild woman asked “The front of what?”

The doctor wore a pained expression and hushed the woman up quickly, then tuned back and bowed his head courteously.

“Perhaps,” he asked, “you would be good enough to assist us? As I said, I appear to have strayed somewhat from where I was heading... What area is this?”

“But I am lost also,” Gunther shrugged. “My colleagues and I had left our trench to do some reconnaissance early this morning under the cover of mist but we encountered enemy troops and were attacked. Something hit me in the head, shrapnel or debris, and knocked me senseless... I lay in a daze for some time then tried to find my way back but must have fallen unconscious. When I woke up, night had fallen and I have been wandering around in the dark.”

“You must know the approximate area, though? What’s the nearest town?” the doctor insisted on information.

“Givenchy.”

The doctor’s eyes closed as he assimilated this fact. “Givenchy... Some way north of Paris then...”

“But Paris is in enemy territory, Doctor, surely you would not be heading there?” Gunther was puzzled.

“What? Oh, er, no, I was just getting my bearings, that’s all.”

Before any of them could utter another word, there was another rumble of distant gunfire. The two strangers looked a little alarmed by it. Just as he himself had been when he’d first arrived at the front, all those months ago. Distant rumbles barely even registered with him now though, not after weeks on end living amongst the constant thunder of heavy artillery, shells continually exploding within metres of him.

“The natives are restless,” the wild woman said. “We really ought to leave, it isn’t safe here.”

“Have you no sense? You can't just wander around blindly. **Even** if you don't blunder your way into the enemy's path, this area is full of death traps! Barbed wire, mines, unexploded grenades, sinking mud...”

“You were more than prepared to wander around!” the woman challenged him, as strongly as a man would have done.

Gunther stood his ground. “To me, perhaps death would be a blessing. An escape from this hell. As soon as the Schlieffen Plan failed, many of us soldiers became resigned to our fate, we know that it may only be a matter of time before it is our turn to fall in action. But you are civilians, you have a future!”

“Our friend is right,” the doctor said to the woman. “It is probably more dangerous to move than it is to wait. Besides...”

The woman, whom Gunther was taking an increasing dislike to for the lack of respect she showed to either man, had her arms folded and had her weight shifted to one leg in a stance of arrogance. And she rather rudely raised her eyebrow in a questioning manner to her senior companion.

The doctor seemed untroubled by her attitude, however. “Well, put it this way, Silver. Could *you* find the way back to the TARDIS?”

Gunther had no idea what the word 'tardis' meant, but it certainly seemed to register with the woman, whose face quickly lost its look of defiance in favour of one of wide-eyed worry.

“It can't be far, we'd manage to find it before long..!” she responded urgently, looking around rather aimlessly.

“Or blindly wander even further away from it,” the doctor argued. “No. We'll wait, we'll move at first light.”

“But we can't wait here! It's freezing, it's filthy!” the woman protested.

The doctor rendered the discussion over by turning back to Gunther and examining his head closely once more. “Let's see if we can tend that wound of yours, shall we?”

A moment later Gunther sat down on a firm mound of mud, and the doctor sat next to him. Gunther removed his helmet and let the older man examine his head more closely. He couldn't see precisely what he was doing, but could feel his fingers gently probing and prodding his temple, occasionally wincing when a sore spot was touched.

“Perhaps we ought to introduce ourselves,” Gunther felt like saying something whilst the examination progressed. “My name is Gunther... Gunther Reisenmann.”

“Hello Gunther, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm the Doctor.”

“Yes, you told me, but your name?”

Gunther wasn't sure but he thought he heard the older man mutter something under his breath like 'why must they always insist on a name'.

“Doctor Von Wer,” he then announced clearly. “And my sulking friend there is called Rachel.” He indicated the woman who had adopted her pose of arrogance once more, and was stood a couple of metres distant.

“Rachel?” Gunther was surprised. “You called her Silver or something...”

“Just a nickname. Keep still, a moment.”

Gunther winced again as Doctor Von Wer held his white handkerchief to Gunther's wound. It felt moist and stung. “What is that?”

“Just a little iodine to fight any infection,” the Doctor explained calmly. “I can't see anything stuck in you, if it was a bullet or a piece of debris then it must have glanced off you.”

“A shame! Ha!” Gunther chuckled. “Maybe if the wound was worse I would be sent home to Stuttgart!”

Three miles northeast of Givenchy, France; Tuesday 14th December 1915 01:44am

Gunther felt calm. Strangely, perhaps more calm than at any time since he'd come to the front. That might possibly be a feeling of calm before an approaching storm, the Lord in His mercy allowing him one last period of peaceful relaxation before he was taken from this Earth.

Yet he attributed the feeling more to the company he was now in, though he was at a loss to explain why.

It must have been Doctor Von Wer. He seemed so unruffled, you'd have thought they were taking a stroll around a park on a sunny day in peacetime rather than being lost in no man's land, exposed to all the cruel elements of a winter's night. There was something indefinable about his presence, he had a confidence, an assurance and a vibrancy that just rubbed off on you.

Gunther rubbed his arms, wishing that he could feel as warm as the Doctor's personality. The weak fall of snow had now given way to a steady patter of rain, hard to see but easy to feel. The only protection he could produce was to draw up the collar of his grey uniform, but the swirling wind defied his attempts by blowing the rain into his face, no matter which way he turned.

The Doctor, he could just about see in the darkness, was standing quite calmly a few metres away, looking out into the gloom as he had been for some time. Yes, his very presence was a reassurance. Even so, Gunther knew very little about him. The fellow was polite and courteous, and willing to talk, but was rather evasive in providing information about himself.

The woman, the strange wild woman, was now sitting on the mound, arms wrapped tightly around her drawn-up legs, shivering in an almost foetal position. She looked miserable and had not attempted to make any conversation with Gunther at all, her only speech for the last hour or more coming in the form of complaints to the Doctor or requests to look for this tardis thing, whatever it was.

Intimidated though he felt by her, Gunther finally decided that he ought to at least try and befriend her. If nothing else it would help pass the time in this night that seemed destined never to end.

He sat down alongside her on the mound.

"You said I looked like a soldier," he finally started to speak. "Maybe I do. But I don't feel like one."

He paused, giving the woman an opportunity to comment, which was not taken up.

"No, in my heart I am still just a simple clerk. Many would have called my old job boring, but I was happy. I like the simple things, you see. I like routine, I like knowing what to expect next. But I am also a proud man. Proud of my family, proud of my country. When the call came, I had to answer. A glorious fight, they told us. I was naïve. I headed for battle not thinking I was going to see good men die."

The woman was looking straight ahead, and Gunther wasn't even sure if she was listening to him. But he found it helped just expressing his feelings. It helped that they were strangers. Trying to talk his feelings through with his comrades had been futile because everybody had felt the same. And as for his letters home... Well, he'd been reluctant to tell his parents and Nina about the true horrors of his new existence. He loved them too much to worry the life out of them.

"Kill or be killed. That is the only rule out here. And sometimes I wish the bullet would come and end it all for me. But I have a duty to our country, to our people. I must fight for their freedom. It will be worth it."

“It won't,” the woman, Rachel, said softly, expressionlessly, still looking straight ahead. Then she slowly turned to him, her face looking quite sad. “It won't solve a thing.”

Gunther laughed off her cynicism. “We would not be here if there wasn't just cause.”

“How do you see this war going?” she asked. “I mean, how do you think one side will eventually win?”

“We will win... We must... We have to...” he shrugged. “Otherwise... Otherwise it will all have been for nothing.” The thought left him colder than the night air.

“And a few miles west there's another army who have exactly the same outlook,” she told him.

Gunther tried not to think about the enemy too much. He knew, deep down in his heart, that she was right, of course. But he blocked the thought from his mind. He didn't dare imagine the enemy as men like him, as individuals. He couldn't think of them as men at all. If he did, he'd be unable to fight them, incapable of killing them.

“They can surrender at any time,” Gunther reasoned, with his own conscience as much as with Rachel. “We will be merciful. We are not monsters.”

“They won't surrender anymore than your lot will,” Rachel said. “And you're two evenly matched armies. All that happened is that both sides fought and fought until they ran out of men.”

Gunther frowned at her sudden slip into past tense. Maybe her German wasn't quite perfected yet. After all, her reference to 'your lot' reminded him that she wasn't of German blood, no matter how fluent her speech was.

“With respect, I think you are wrong, Miss Rachel,” he told her gently. “This war will not be won through strength and courage alone. It will be won with intelligence also. Our experts will develop new weapons that will give us the upper hand, such as the flame throwers that have recently proven to be effective against the Allied forces, or the Fat Bertha guns.”

Rachel shook her head in despair. “And all these weapons do is kill more men. Tanks, gas, all the way up to atom bombs.”

“Tanks?” Gunther asked, struggling to keep up with the woman's words.

“Yeah, tanks, you know..!”

“Rachel!” the Doctor's voice snapped. He had suddenly reappeared and was staring at her quite gravely, almost like he was reprimanding her.

Yes, Gunther thought. He must be teaching her respect. She did seem to think she was equal to a man at times. Even so, she was beginning to open up to him a little bit and he didn't want to lose the chance of getting to understand a little more about her. He gave the Doctor a nod and a wave as if to say everything was alright and that he wasn't offended by her attitude.

The Doctor seemed a bit uneasy, but turned away again, letting them resume their conversation.

“You should not have come here, Miss Rachel,” Gunther said.

“Tell me about it,” she muttered.

He put an arm around her shoulders. “This is no place for a woman. We have a few nurses behind the lines, they are the only women from the homeland I have seen near the front. What made you come here?”

“Him,” she nodded at the Doctor, still with his back to them, standing quite erect as though waiting for a bus which was expected imminently.

“Is he your guardian or something?”

“I suppose you could say that,” she nodded, looking over towards him. “Just look at the state of his clothes,” she added, suddenly sounding more like the Doctor's mother than his ward.

Gunther followed her gaze, gently smiling. He'd seen so many men covered in mud recently, in fact it was nigh on impossible finding one anywhere near the front who wasn't. Yet the Doctor seemed to be in a filthier state than most, probably because of his smart attire.

As if sensing he was the subject of the chat, the Doctor turned to face them again, showing his front to be as mud-spattered as his back, particularly around the lower part of his trouser legs.

Rachel giggled at him. He missed the joke so she had to explain. “All dressed up for a night at the opera and you look like you've been out mud-wrestling instead!”

The Doctor looked awkward and embarrassed whilst the woman laughed, his dignity affronted. Gunther couldn't help smirking either.

“Well, perhaps I'm not wearing the best attire for these conditions,” Von Wer conceded, still trying to look dignified as rainwater dripped from the brim of his top hat. “Still, perhaps it's a blessing that things are so foul... I presume, Gunther, that hostilities are generally on hold until the weather improves?”

“This is war, Doctor,” Gunther responded, “hostilities are *never* on hold. But yes, these are not ideal conditions for major assaults. An advancing army would have to fight the elements as much as the enemy, if not more so.”

“As I thought,” the Doctor nodded. “Which means we're unlikely to run into a stampede of charging soldiers when we move at sunrise, thank goodness. All we'll have to worry about are any shells that come our way, or trigger happy snipers if we wander too near the trenches.”

A thought struck Gunther and he stood up in alarm. “Doctor, there is another possibility you may have overlooked.”

The Doctor cocked his head, awaiting the information.

“Gas,” Gunther said.

The Doctor paced towards him, looking ashen faced. “Has it been used here? Recently?”

Gunther shrugged. “The Allies have been using it in Loos recently. And they tend to release it early in the morning.”

“Loos isn't far away at all,” the Doctor thought aloud, stroking his chin. “And we've no possible protection against it...”

Rachel stood up and faced him, clearly concerned. “What about gas masks? Maybe we could find some lying around?”

“Masks, Miss Rachel? All I have is a chemical-impregnated pad to hold over my mouth. If I had others, I would gladly share them, but I've just the one. There is a theory that a handkerchief soaked in urine could provide protection...”

“What?!?” the woman screwed her face up in disgust.

“No, it's all too risky,” the Doctor interrupted, wiggling his fingers in frustration. “It's my fault, I should have thought about it earlier.”

“So what do we do, then?” Rachel asked.

“There's only one thing we can do,” the Doctor told her. “Move!”

Four miles northeast of Givenchy, France; Tuesday 14th December 1915 04:27am

“We must be mad doing this,” Bradshaw broke the silence with a typical comment.

“Mad?” Peter Watson heard Lunt sneer behind him, predictably. “We leave the safety of our homes, the comfort of our families, we travel all the way out here to a foreign country so that we can join in shooting games to please our politicians, and you only say we're mad when we're volunteered into checking the local roads in the middle of the night?”

“Alright smart alec, we must be even madder than normal then,” Bradshaw answered back. “It's one thing checking the condition of the roads, but if the Hun have been moving in the dark like we have, they could be lying in wait ready to ambush us.”

“Look, if they're hiding out on a wet and windy night like this, just on the off chance that some stupid Tommies like us might have decided to go on a night-time stroll, then frankly they bloody deserve to get us,” Lunt shared his usual cynicism with the group.

Peter looked across at Billy Sewell, who was walking alongside him, holding the lamp. The light from it was illuminating the man's rain-lashed ashen face and the breath issuing from it. “We don't want to go too far, though,” he suggested. It wasn't easy to judge distance in the dark, but he was beginning to fear that they were straying too far from the safety of the British line.

“If these roads were that important that the men in the long coats wanted to know their condition, they'd have sent an airplane to check them out,” Lunt continued.

“Planes are needed elsewhere, probably,” Bradshaw said.

“Aye,” Lunt agreed. “Cos there's not many of them. And they're not expendable like we are.”

Billy drew the small group to a halt, holding the lamp up high and surveying the immediate area as best he could. Peter hoped Billy was able to pick out some useful details, because he could see practically nothing.

“The road seems to continue up that way,” he said, pointing to their left. “But there looks like a track of some sort through that gate,” he added, pointing towards the right.

As Peter peered, he could see the wooden five-bar gate, remarkably intact, but only blackness beyond it.

“The road continues ahead too,” Bradshaw observed, “but it looks a bit cut-up.”

“This is too complicated now, I think we ought to head back,” Peter advised his three shivering colleagues.

“You think they'll have a mug of Ovaltine waiting for us, do you?” Lunt jeered.

Peter ignored the remark and looked at Billy, who was biting his lower lip in indecision. “Let's at least get some idea of where these head off to,” he suggested.

“We could split up?” Bradshaw said.

“We've only one lamp,” Peter pointed out.

“Frightened of the dark, are we?” Lunt jeered again.

“Look, just shut up!” Peter rounded on him. “I'm not scared of the dark, just of wandering right into the path of the enemy!”

Billy quickly stepped into the gap between Peter and Lunt. “We'll head back in a few minutes. But let's just take a quick look, eh? How about each of us takes a different path for a couple of minutes, and one stays here with the lamp?”

After some collective hesitation there followed a consensus of nods.

“As long as I'm not the one left holding the lamp,” Lunt insisted. “If there *are* any Germans around, that'll be the first thing they shoot at.”

“I'll mind the bloody lamp if that makes you happy!” Billy snapped loudly.

It was agreed via reluctant mumbles that Lunt would take the road to the left, Bradshaw would continue onwards and Peter would take the track beyond the gate.

Peter found himself opening the gate when he might have just climbed over it. The fact that it was undamaged made him want to keep it that way. This godforsaken war made you respect little things like that.

The track, almost as wide as a road and probably intended for a horse and cart, had a graveled surface for the most part, but soon started to become uneven. He couldn't really see where he was treading, but Peter could feel waterlogged craters or large stones underfoot at virtually every step.

He tried not to look back, to force himself on, but eventually he had to, just *had* to take that little look. And when he did, he was surprised at how small and distant Billy's lamp now looked. Almost like a far-off star. Billy wasn't even visible.

When he turned back round and looked at the gloom, the darkened unknown before him, Peter felt quite alone. He gathered himself and marched on. What use this exercise was now, he didn't have a clue, because he'd be able to report nothing at all about this route because he simply couldn't see much, even though the moon was striving to help him by peering out from the clouds overhead.

"Just another minute, then I'll turn back," Peter told himself, stumbling on. He tried to count down from sixty in seconds, but found his counting kept falling in tune with his footsteps.

He saw a tiny light up ahead, a distant spark, moving. He stopped so that he could watch it properly.

Confused, he snapped his head around, trying to locate Billy's lamp, trying to work out if what he was seeing ahead of him was some reflection of it. But he couldn't see Billy's light anymore.

He looked once more at the light ahead of him. The way it was moving in swift but short arcs, it could be from a hand-held source... But it was so small it had to be fairly distant.

Peter wondered what to do. Calling for the others would betray himself. If he tried running to fetch them, what would he tell them? Would they want to come looking, or would they want to hurry back to the trench?

He heard a crack, and then another. Gunfire. He instantly dropped to a crouching position, cocking his head. A third crack left him in no doubt that the shots were coming from back where he had come from. One, or all, of his colleagues had encountered trouble.

Peter readied his rifle, breathing hard. He wanted to run to aid his colleagues, but he considered now that perhaps Germans were massed in this area. Running was likely to make himself a target. Crouching, biding his time, not panicking, keeping his head down and waiting for an opportunity had to be his best option.

Looking around, he noticed that the light was coming closer. Was it his imagination or could he hear the faint sounds of voices being carried in the breeze?

Fixing his eyes on the light he tensed, scarcely blinking, rifle gripped tightly. All alone in the dark, only the moon a familiar friend.

Vaguely, very vaguely, outlines of figures seemed to form. Just three!

Peter aimed. Hitting the figure carrying the torch would be a formality. But then he doubted himself. Was there any chance these people could be Allies? Frenchmen?

An image flashed through his mind of Taffy Hughes, who had mistakenly shot a fellow soldier at Ploegsteert Wood back in the summer. Yes, after that one incident he'd seen Taffy change from the happy-go-lucky type he'd trained with to a distraught,

inconsolable wreck of a man, broken and demoralised. Just one of the innumerable haunting memories of this conflict.

“Halt! Who goes there?” Peter shouted out, amazing himself that he was risking his life in such a manner.

There was a hesitation. Peter could just make out the three figures stop still, then glance at each other in surprise.

“We are friends,” a man's voice called back in immaculate English.

English! Peter let out a long breath. Relieved that they were not enemies. Relieved that he had not opened fire.

“Thank goodness, you gave me a fright for a moment there,” he called back. “Stay there, I'm coming over...”

Peter stood and left the track, hopping and stumbling across the ravaged battlefield towards the little group. Typical that they hadn't received warning that other Allies would be roaming around!

The torch shined at him as he got close, and he waved.

“My God..!” he heard one of them remark in surprise.

“You know, you're lucky I didn't open fire, for a moment I thought...” then Peter froze.

The three men weren't Tommies. In fact, two of them weren't even soldiers, they were wearing unusual civilian clothes. But the one who clearly was a soldier was wearing the unmistakable grey uniform of a German infantryman. And he was armed.

Peter didn't even think. He raised his gun. He pointed it at the German soldier.

“No!” they all seemed to cry out in unison.

Peter pulled his trigger and there came a loud crack as his rifle fired.

It was all so quick. And it wasn't the German soldier who fell, but the tall, thin, older man, who was dressed like some smart London gent. He'd dived in front of the soldier to protect him and taken the bullet in his place.

As he collapsed, clutching his side, face creased in agony, the other two seemed to instantly forget that Peter was even there as they bent down over their ailing companion.

“You impetuous fool!” the German soldier then rebuked him in perfect English. “This is a man of peace, a doctor! He would not have harmed you!”

“Doctor! Doctor!” the other figure was shrieking, so high-pitched that Peter, the blood draining from him, thought it sounded more like a woman than a man, even though she was dressed in trousers rather than a skirt.

“If you've killed him,” she turned her tearful face at Peter, full of venom, “I'll kill you! I swear it, I'll *kill* you!”

Peter gulped hard. Everything was happening so quickly he just didn't know what to do. There was a man who was gravely wounded, who needed urgent assistance. There was a bizarre woman, threatening to kill him... A woman, threatening to kill a man! And there was an enemy soldier who, although more concerned with tending the fallen man, nevertheless had a rifle slung over his shoulder and was potentially dangerous.

“Drop that rifle...!” Peter stammered, failing in his attempt to make his voice sound calm and authoritative.

The German soldier cast him a frosty look and then contemptuously cast his rifle aside. “I am trying to save a life, not take one,” he scowled.

The attention on the fallen gentleman, Peter cautiously edged forward and then quickly snatched up the German's rifle.

“H-how is he?” he then needed to know.

“He is bleeding badly,” the soldier said.

The man was breathing rapidly, eyes closed, barely conscious. Peter took the fallen torch and pointed it at the man, instantly illuminating the man's waistcoat on which was spreading an oozing red patch of blood.

"Don't just gawp, do something! He's dying!" the girl shrieked at him. "Help him for God's sake!"

Peter gulped again and rummaged in his pockets, quickly pulling out a handkerchief. "Here, try and staunch some of the bleeding with this," he said, handing it to the enemy soldier.

"Tight..." gasped the injured gentleman. "...Hold it... tight... against... the wound..."

Peter found himself taken that the stricken man still had the resolve and clarity of thought to direct them.

"I... I'm sorry..." Peter's guilt began to flow out. "You took me by surprise... I thought you were English..."

"Your excuses are flimsy," the German said dismissively as he held the handkerchief firmly in place. "You speak to us in our own tongue so as to try and fool us."

Peter didn't understand the comment. How could he be trying to fool them by speaking in English? And what did the German mean by referring to English as his own tongue? Perhaps the other two were English, but in that uniform he couldn't possibly be... Could he?

"I didn't know you were people in disguise," Peter realised. "How could I have known?"

"Stop your babbling and hold this," the soldier commanded him.

Peter obeyed without even thinking, taking the handkerchief and keeping it pressed hard against the gentleman's ribs.

The soldier began unfastening the older man's collar, loosening his tie. "Easy Doctor," he said. "Try to breathe normally..."

Peter looked at their faces in turn. The determination of the soldier... The pain of the gentleman... The anguish of the girl.

Things just didn't seem real anymore.

"We've got to save him! We've just got to!" the girl urged them both, sweeping her hair back repeatedly with trembling fingers.

"If the bullet is not too deep, I may be able to pluck it out with my fingers," the soldier told her.

"No..." the injured doctor gasped, to the surprise of all of them. "The bullet's... plugging the wound..."

Peter watched the girl take the doctor's hand, squeezing it, and moving her face close to his, her eyes glistening with moisture in the moonlight.

"Doctor..." she said. "I don't know what to do!"

"Let me..." the older man fought for breath, "let me rest... must rest a moment..." Then his eyes flickered shut.

"Doctor!" the girl sobbed. Then she looked accusingly at Peter and the other soldier. "You and your stupid damn war!"

Peter was taken aback by such language coming from a woman, but his surprise was surpassed by his guilt. "I thought you were the enemy!"

"We told you we were friends!" the girl reminded him.

"But..." Peter shook his head, searching for some justification in him shooting an innocent man. Then he looked at the other soldier. "I saw the uniform. I just saw the uniform!"

“Do you think I was not surprised also when I saw your uniform?” the soldier argued. “But did I reach for my gun?”

“I’m sorry!” Peter yelled, clawing at the sides of his face. “Look, I’m bloody sorry! I hate this damn war too! I hate it!”

Screwing his eyes up to try and keep at bay the tears that were threatening to flow, Peter stood up and staggered away a little to be alone. He’d always tried to do right by everybody, be a good, law-abiding man... And now this war was testing his resolve to the very limit.

As he wiped the tear from his eye, thinking of St Mary’s church in his home village where he used to attend each Sunday before he answered the call of Lord Kitchener, he felt a hand rest gently on his shoulder.

It was the soldier. The Englishman in a German uniform. Or maybe a German who could speak fluent English. Peter really didn’t know what was going on anymore.

“I share your anguish, my friend,” he said. “And I would not deny your right to search your soul. But right at this moment we need to act if we are to save the Doctor’s life.”

Peter nodded, and looked over to the injured man, still apparently unconscious, with the girl huddled over him, holding the hankie against his wound.

“You must go and fetch help,” the soldier said to him calmly.

Peter nodded, then frowned. Why him? Was this a ruse of some kind? Why couldn’t one of them go and get help, surely they had come from somewhere near?

Come to that, why exactly had they been wandering around on the battlefield in the middle of the night? A German soldier who could speak English, another man dressed in civilian clothes... It didn’t make sense unless it was some sinister new scheme by the Hun. Perhaps their plan had been to move at night, get close to the British line, and come sunrise they would try to pass themselves off as English, be allowed behind the line... Espionage! Yes, that fitted! Or, even worse, once behind the lines perhaps they had some other plan, a method of some sort to disrupt everyone, leave them all open to an attack...

Then he thought of the gunfire he’d heard just after separating from his mates. Yes, perhaps they’d had similar encounters, discovered other Germans who were readying themselves for this plan...

Peter raised his rifle and pointed it at the soldier, looking him hard in the eye. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,” he said firmly. “I’m going to take the three of you back to my Division... As prisoners!”

The soldier appeared only momentarily surprised, then looked defiant. “You can take me wherever you choose,” he said grimly, “but I do not think that the Doctor is in any fit state to be moved.”

“I don’t care,” Peter told him. He was the one giving the orders here. “If I say you move, you move. You and the girl will have to help him. If he dies, he dies.”

The soldier gave a last glance of defiance and then turned away and trudged over to his two companions. Peter watched him explain the situation to the girl and saw her gape and then turn to him.

“The Doctor’s dying! You can’t expect us to move him!” she shrieked angrily.

“He’s just as likely to die if you leave him lying there,” Peter called back. “Now get him on his feet.”

He saw a quick exchange and then the soldier took over the duty of covering the man’s wound, allowing the girl to come marching over towards Peter.

He jerked his rifle at her, warning her not to come too close, and she duly stopped five feet away from him.

She spread her arms wide, pleading with him. "Look, I swear, we're innocent people! Why can't you help us?"

"This is war," Peter tried to blot her words out of his conscience.

"The Doctor and I don't belong here... If he dies, I'll be stuck here for the rest of my life..!" she continued. "If you won't help us, then at least leave us alone, we won't stop you going back to your people."

"You think I'm stupid?" Peter sneered at her. "You and the old fellow... You're both Germans, like him," he nodded to the soldier. "Pretending to be English, to gain my confidence..."

"No one's pretending anything!" the girl protested loudly.

"My superior officers can decide that after I take you back," Peter said. "I'm sure they'll be very interested in the three of you."

"Look, stop trying to bully us and listen!" the girl said and lunged towards him.

Although she was an easy target and he had the opportunity, Peter couldn't bring himself to shoot her. Shooting a man was difficult enough, but he just couldn't shoot a woman, even one as peculiar as this one.

And since he didn't shoot her, she grabbed at the barrel of his rifle and tried to wrestle it from him. He was startled by her sheer tenacity, and by her strength. He quickly realised that he had a real fight on his hands and couldn't afford to go easy, so he put all his strength into resisting her assault and pulling the rifle free from her hands.

There were a few more seconds of tussle, arms sweeping in various directions. Then the girl yelped as the bayonet slashed her hand by chance. Peter used the moment to swing his rifle round and club her across the shoulder with the butt. She was knocked down to one knee, panting.

"I-I'm sorry," he stammered, "you made me hurt you then."

She peered up at him from beneath the rain-soaked strands of her black fringe. "Don't you dare apologise!"

He took a precautionary step back as the girl rose to her feet, rubbed her injured hand, and stomped angrily back towards her companions. The soldier was looking over in some alarm and quickly checked that she was okay.

"Right, we've wasted enough time," Peter ordered them. "Now get him up and get moving!"

**Two miles north-northeast of Givenchy, France; Tuesday 14th December 1915
06:19am**

"It's no good," Silver panted yet again. "I need to rest."

This time the English soldier's renewed threats and orders could not overcome the tiredness she felt. The combination of supporting half of the Doctor's weight across her shoulders, and the effort of continually pulling her heavy boots out of waterlogged mud for what seemed like hours now had left her completely drained. Her knees buckled and she dropped, the Doctor almost falling on top of her, stopped only by Gunther who was supporting his other half.

"Get up," the Englishman demanded, waving his rifle again.

Silver barely had the energy to answer him. "I can't go on," she panted.

Gunther eased the Doctor down to the ground beside her. The Time Lord had been drifting in and out of consciousness since the shooting, but had been conscious for a while now and his breathing seemed less laboured, even despite the exertion he was being forced to make.

"You okay?" she asked him.

"Never better," he remarked.

Silver was relieved that his sense of humour was still intact. It seemed that the Doctor's amazing powers of recovery were once more being demonstrated.

"Get up, I say!" the Englishman snapped again.

This time it was Gunther who argued their case. "The girl needs to rest, give her a few minutes."

"No, no rest," he insisted. "Get up."

"Sir, a rest will cost you nothing," Gunther went on, a little out of breath himself after the efforts of the last couple of hours. "You have been guiding us aimlessly for some time now, we are clearly lost."

"No... No, we're not," the English soldier denied, less than convincingly Silver thought.

"We have changed direction too many times now for you to know where you are going," Gunther pointed out.

But the Englishman's patience was wearing thin. "Right, on your feet. Now, or I'll shoot you where you lie!"

Silver considered calling his bluff, but Gunther gestured for her to get up. As a man who had a good idea what irrational desperation warfare could instill in a man's mind, she knew his advice was worth following and, battling against overwhelming fatigue and numbness in her exposed face and hands, she scrambled unsteadily to her feet.

Then, under the constant supervisory gaze of the Englishman, she and Gunther eased the Doctor upright once more. At least he was able to partially support himself now, though he felt very weak in her arms, like a giant rag doll. But still a very heavy one.

They plodded forwards again. The moonlight did at least allow Silver to see vague outlines of the landscape before her, which hadn't been the case when they'd first arrived, but the darkness and the unrelenting rain were still the victors in this battle, defying all attempts to survey the area and make informed judgments of where to head for.

The ground was treacherous. Each step Silver took, her boot sunk right down into the mud, sometimes just a couple of inches, sometimes six or seven, and pulling it out again was often an effort in itself. Though her boots were tightly laced, she was half expecting one or both to get claimed by the mud and left behind before very long.

And her back was aching intensely, not only from bearing the weight of the Doctor for so long but also from being hunched and unable to straighten.

“Doctor, promise me, no more opera, after this, please,” she moaned.

“I must admit, I have rather gone off the idea,” the Doctor quipped in weaker tones than were usual for him.

After another few minutes the ground started to slope upwards in front of them as they came to a great mound of mud. Silver was tempted to avoid it by going around to the left, but saw a huge puddle. Besides, the soldier was urging them straight on so she gritted her teeth and battled to haul herself and her cumbersome load up the hill. Her boots began skidding in the sodden earth, making it very difficult to stay upright, let alone ascend.

She grunted and strained, her thighs throbbing, her feet like lead weights, her shoulders carrying the weight of the world. Rain was running from her fringe into her eyes.

She heard a gasp. Followed, barely a second later by a splash. As she tried to look round her feet skidded backwards and she fell flat on her front, the Doctor crashing on top of her.

Wiping the dirt from her face, she looked around and around, trying to make sense of things. There was a rapid flapping movement and Silver realised it was Gunther, scrambling across, lifting the Doctor from her and sitting him into a more comfortable position.

“Help... God help me!” the cry, a cry of panic, came from the Englishman.

Silver looked and saw that he was flapping about in the huge puddle a few feet down below to her left. It must have been deep because he was submerged right up to his breastbone.

“Now's our chance!” Silver squealed excitedly to Gunther. “We can get away from him!”

Gunther was still on his feet. He looked down at Silver and then down to the flailing soldier. “You were lucky, Miss Rachel. One slip and it could have been you who fell in there.”

“Never mind that, we've got to get away from here while he's busy taking a bath!” she urged him, trying to pick herself up.

But Gunther wasn't showing any signs of urgency.

“Come on!” she slapped his arm. She needed him to help with the Doctor.

“God help me! God help me!” the Englishman was screaming, more rapidly, increasing in pitch. His splashing was becoming more violent.

Gunther half ran, half-skidded back down the slope and around to the edge of the water.

“What are you doing?!?” Silver yelled at him. Valuable time was being wasted!

She felt a hand grip her arm.

The Doctor's hand. “He's doing the right thing,” he said solemnly. “That man's in deadly peril.”

Silver looked around again. Even if the soldier couldn't swim, surely he could wade out of that puddle?

No. No, he couldn't. She realised that now as she continued to watch. The soldier, screaming frantically, was trapped and sinking, and no amount of flapping with his arms was stopping it.

“The mud's so torn up and waterlogged, it's as deadly as quicksand in places,” the Doctor spoke gravely. “Many soldiers in this conflict drowned in it, just by taking a wrong step.”

“Tommy! To me! To me!” Gunther was calling to the Englishman.

Gunther tried to step even closer, daring to enter the water's edge. He leaned right forward, reaching out as far as he could with his arm.

"Tommy! Reach out to me!" he called.

"Gunther, be careful!" Silver screamed, terrified that he was going to be sucked into the deathtrap himself. And if he did, with the Doctor incapable, that would leave only one person left to attempt any further rescuing.

"Aahh! Aahh!" the Englishman was screaming, struggling to keep his head above the surface now, straining to reach Gunther's outstretched hand.

He flapped at it and flapped at it. A couple of times he managed to slap the fingers.

Silver gnawed her knuckles.

Then, finally, mercifully, connection was made. The two hands locked together.

"Grrrrrrraaaaarrgh!" Gunther screamed as he pulled with all his might. He was actually pulled forwards and for one terrifying moment it looked like he might be swept right in, but equally the Englishman was being pulled towards him and the more he was, the more he was able to influence matters himself, kick with his legs on slightly firmer ground.

At last, at long last, the man's legs came free of the mud and he fell forwards on top of Gunther who fell backwards, their hands still held fast.

Both lay still, gasping for breath.

Silver's emotions bubbled over and with welling eyes she clambered down the slope and over to Gunther, hugging him.

Gunther patted her and smiled, still too breathless to speak.

Equally breathless was the Englishman, who wearily lifted his head up and looked at Gunther. After a further three or four pants, the Englishman smiled at him, then noticed their hands were still locked. He smiled again and shook the German's hand, slapping his arm with his free hand.

Gunther nodded in acknowledgment of the gesture.

**Two miles north-northeast of Givenchy, France; Tuesday 14th December 1915
07:03am**

“Cigarette Doctor?” Peter offered the gent, who was sitting huddled with the girl, linking arms. And well enough now to be holding the handkerchief in place himself.

The Doctor shook his head politely. “I gave up smoking a very long time ago,” he said.

Peter nodded and strode over to the German, who was pacing about, flapping his arms around his torso to try and warm himself. “Gunther... Cigarette?”

It felt so strange being friendly to one of the very men he'd come all this way to France to try and destroy. Yet he now owed this man rather more than a simple cigarette.

“No, thank you, I don't,” the German declined.

Peter nodded again and took a cigarette from his tin, putting it in his mouth.

“Don't think about offering one to me!” the girl called over to him indignantly.

Peter was incredulous. “Surely *you* don't smoke, Miss?”

“Not anymore,” the girl said. “But it still would have been nice to have been asked!”

Peter turned away, embarrassed, and reached in his pocket for his box of matches. He pulled out a dripping, squashed mockery of one.

“Bloody France!” he scowled and threw it away, then threw his cigarette after it. Seething, he looked at Gunther, who was smirking. Then Peter also saw the humour in the situation and roared with laughter.

“You know, Gunther,” he said, “right now, at this moment, I feel...” he paused, trying to define it. “I feel like I don't care who wins the war. I feel like I don't care what happens to me.”

“I have this feeling too, Tommy,” the German sighed. “I think it is because I do not have a soldier's blood in me. Until eighteen months ago I was but a simple office clerk.”

“Carpenter,” Peter responded, pointing at himself. “And I was quite happy before this war broke out. I didn't have any quarrel with anyone from other countries... But then the war was declared and they said our country was in need of soldiers. They made the war sound glorious and noble... And so very simple.” He snorted. “They didn't say it would be like this.”

“No right-minded man would have come here if he'd known,” Gunther agreed.

“Well, they fooled us all. They certainly fooled me. I joined up, they trained me and put me in the 12th Eastern Division...” He rummaged in his breast pocket and produced a rather soggy playing card. “That's us... The Ace Of Spades Division.”

“Your story is so similar to my own, Peter...,” Gunther nodded, his sad eyes showing the recognition. “And I am sure for many of our colleagues. Could our countries, our leaders not have achieved so much more by talking as we are doing now?”

Peter replaced the playing card into his pocket and nodded. “Undoubtedly. But it took unusual circumstances to get us talking like this,” he pointed out. “I... I really was prepared to shoot you earlier.”

“I know,” Gunther said with a shrug. “This is war.”

“It took tremendous courage to do what you did earlier... Not just in risking your own life... But to save the life of an enemy soldier.”

“It was not so difficult a decision, Peter,” Gunther shrugged again. “Out in this land... France... so far from my home, my friends, my family, from my beautiful Nina... I have, perhaps, too much time to think. And when I found myself lost and alone tonight, I thought about things even more.” He nodded over to the other two who were still sitting a few metres away, oblivious to the conversation. “Then, the Doctor, a total stranger, shows

me some kindness, some care, when I was not expecting it. And it made me remember how things always were before this war began.”

Peter nodded, understanding the man's words totally. It seemed so long ago now, after everything that had happened, after the turmoil his life had been put through these past months. But the German was right, there had been a time when everyone was considered a friend, when everyone was trusted. Better days.

“One thing, and one thing only, made us enemies, Peter,” Gunther said. “This!” He pinched his wet, grey uniform.

Peter looked down at his own, the brown uniform of a British infantryman that he'd been so proud to wear before he'd left dear old Blighty. Gunther was right. The difference between them didn't really amount to anything more than their clothing.

“I still don't understand though,” he laughed. “You're obviously German...”

Gunther chuckled. “You would not be a good soldier if you could not tell that!”

Peter laughed again but tried to get his question across seriously. “How come you've been speaking English all the time?”

Gunther continued grinning but as Peter awaited a response the grin slowly dropped from the German's face. His eyes, as grey as his uniform, looked back at him in puzzlement.

“This is a joke, no?”

Peter jerked his head back in bafflement, not understanding Gunther's reaction. Perhaps, being from different cultures, they were talking at crossed purposes? But Peter still wanted to know if Gunther had been able to speak English for many years, or whether he'd been trained especially for some plan against the British.

“What about the Doctor? And the girl?” Peter asked, wondering exactly how they fitted into all this. “Where are they from?”

Gunther gave a comical, exaggerated shrug, pulling a long face as he did so. “I have no idea. I have asked them and been told nothing.”

“But they were with you..?” Peter quizzed him.

“I only met them tonight... I told you, Tommy, I was lost and alone, I was wandering this area in the dark, wounded,” the German reminded him. “They appeared out of the night... Just appeared, as if from nowhere.”

Peter stroked his chin and glanced across at them, then turned back to Gunther. “So... You don't know them?”

“I know their names... I know they are friendly... I know the Doctor is German...” Gunther thought. “And that Miss Rachel is from far away. That is about all I can say about them.”

“The girl,” Peter was reminded. “She... Well, I don't like to be impolite, but...”

“She is very strange,” Gunther concluded the sentence for him, in hushed tones. “She is like no woman I have ever met.”

“She acts like a man,” Peter nodded in agreement. “She has no grace or refinement...”

“And her appearance...” Gunther thought aloud. “I found it truly shocking at first. And yet... I see her now and she is strikingly beautiful. Especially when she smiles.”

“The Doctor's attire is also odd,” Peter added. “Given, where we are.”

“Since I came to the front, I have heard many stories from many men,” Gunther said in a very low, serious voice, moving his face close to Peter's. “Some have told stories of the Eastern front. There are whispers of devils lurking out there... Phantoms and the like. And when you think, Peter, of how much blood has been spilled here... Would it not surprise you that such phantoms could roam this area at night?”

“I shot him,” Peter shook his head, smirking, unimpressed by the German's spook stories. “He bled.”

“Yet he lives,” Gunther breathed, raising an eyebrow.

Peter looked over at the Doctor and swallowed hard.

**Two miles north-northeast of Givenchy, France; Tuesday 14th December 1915
07:32am**

“It's nice to see our two friends getting on so famously, isn't it?” the Doctor beamed.

Silver managed a smile, but didn't really have the energy. She couldn't even lift her head from where it rested on the Doctor's shoulder. She clung to his arm even more tightly, trying to squeeze the warmth out of it to eradicate the chill that was coursing through her bones. At least the wretched rain had stopped.

“You know, it is starting to get lighter,” the Doctor chirped, sounding far too cheery for the circumstances.

“Does that mean we're going to get gassed soon?” Silver moaned, too tired to be worried about the prospect.

“Hopefully not. The wind's still too erratic, I think either side would be foolhardy to attempt such an attack,” he answered. “But that's not to say we're out of danger. Come daylight, the heavy artillery will probably start up again.”

Silver hated it when the Doctor could worry her to death about their situation whilst appearing to remain completely calm himself. She finally raised her head. “We'll be blasted to pieces...! We won't stand a chance!”

The Doctor patted her hand affectionately. “Our chance rests with those two men,” he told her. “We're going to have to get to one of their battle lines... And whether we go west or east, at least we'll have someone on our side who can wield a little influence in our favour.”

Silver didn't draw much hope from the Doctor's words as she looked over to where the two soldiers still sat, animatedly chatting away as if they were friends of many years' standing.

“They've hardly paid us any attention since they hit it off together,” she moaned, resting her head again. “They've got more in common with each other than they have with us. They're supposed to be enemies!”

“Yes,” the Doctor sighed. “I'm afraid my presence here has inadvertently given them a common language.”

“Yeah, I was puzzled about that at first...” Silver said after a small, but irresistible yawn. “But it's your trick, isn't it? Like the way that we can understand people wherever we go.”

“Yes,” the Doctor said in his steely voice. “Anyway, I think perhaps we'd better break up their little conversation and press them into some action before we find shells flying at us from both sides.”

Silver found herself gently but firmly brushed off him, then she watched him carefully as he very gingerly got to his feet once more. She noticed him wince in pain, then again as he gave a stretch.

“Hello!” he exclaimed, looking across the landscape. “Take a look at this!”

Silver barely had the energy to stand but the Doctor's hand was quickly beckoning her repeatedly, insisting that she took notice. She reached for it and let him haul her up, only then feeling guilty when she remembered that he was injured.

“Sorry, I wasn't thinking...” she muttered in apology.

“Never mind that,” the Doctor snippily dismissed her words. “Look over there.”

“What?” Silver said, looking. Though definitely getting lighter, light enough to see some distance, it was still pretty dark and not easy to pick out details.

The Doctor's pointing finger appeared in her line of vision. “Over there,” he said.

Silver tried to focus, seeing nothing but banks of mud, huge puddles, the occasional bits of ruined buildings or barbed wire. Then she spotted something far off, hard to distinguish but it was definitely a tall, rectangular shape. She felt a fizz of energy and turned to the Doctor and squealed. "Is it!?"

"I'm pretty sure it is," he smiled. "We must have been wandering around in circles all night, we can't be more than a mile and a half away from her."

"Then we can leave here!" Silver gasped. "We can get away."

"Yes, if we can get to her, without getting our heads blown off."

"But are you alright? Will you be able to make it that far?" Silver worried.

"It's only a flesh wound, the bullet didn't go deep," the Doctor murmured. "I feel much stronger for having rested. Come on."

The Doctor led her over to the two soldiers, who instinctively rose to their feet on seeing their approach.

"It's time we moved," the Doctor said, always so good at taking control of situations. "The sun's coming up. We'll be in grave danger if we stay here much longer."

"So, where do we go?" Gunther turned to Peter, directing the question at him. "My place or yours?" he laughed.

"Do you want to be my prisoner, or shall I be yours?" Peter joked back, to the amusement of the German.

"This way," the Doctor beckoned them. "Follow me."

With that, the Doctor carefully began striding across the battlefield, in the direction of the TARDIS, which had disappeared from view again now that they were on lower ground.

Still making idle chat and humorous remarks to each other, Gunther and Peter followed in his wake, and Silver brought up the rear, watching them.

After what had so nearly happened to Peter hours earlier, she was terrified of getting stuck in the mud so was extra careful in choosing where she put her feet. This made her progress slow and cumbersome.

Whilst the increasing light did aid her, it also had a negative effect in that it now revealed to her some rather unpleasant sights. Men who had fallen. Bodies literally riddled with bullet holes. Sometimes just parts of men. Though she hadn't eaten in hours now, the sights still made her want to throw up.

Their scramble across the desolation became more pressing when distant rumbles could be heard, rumbles which became almost constant. Further up the front, hostilities had begun afresh on this new morning. It was only a matter of time before the gunfire would spread all along the line.

They'd been moving for quite a while and there was still no sight of the TARDIS. Silver began to doubt herself, wondering if it had even been the TARDIS at all that they'd spotted in the distant gloom.

There was a sudden thunderous, double bang from somewhere behind her. So loud that it shook her and the very ground itself.

She yelped and struggled to make up the ground towards Gunther ahead of her, taking less care with where her boots stepped.

More whistles, rattles and whines began to fill the air, some faint, some terrifyingly loud. The relief Silver felt when she climbed over the next rise to see the bright blue box sitting innocently amongst all the desolation was overpowering.

"What is that thing?" Peter asked Gunther, shouting yet almost unheard against the rattle of noise.

"It says 'police box'...", Gunther pointed. "Military police?"

The Doctor turned, looking for Silver, and took her hand as she caught up, gasping for breath.

“We must keep moving!” Peter cried impatiently.

“Doctor, we can't just leave them!” Silver yelled.

“They'll have to come with us,” the Doctor yelled back, hand digging into the inside pocket of his mud-caked tailcoat.

But as Silver looked, hands clamped over her ears, Peter was already running up the next bank of mud beyond the TARDIS. Atop it, he turned, waving and pointing excitedly.

“I can see the road!” he called. “And the gate! I've found the way back!”

“To the British line?” Gunther was shouting back, jogging after him.

“Yes!” Peter answered. “Come on! I'll look after you all!”

Peter disappeared over the mound and Gunther continued after him, not even realising that the Doctor and Silver had stopped by the blue box.

“They're clearing off,” Silver said.

“Looks like Peter knows his way from here,” the Doctor said. “Let's hope they make it.”

He stepped to the door of the TARDIS and put the key in the lock. On opening the door, he stepped back and waved Silver inside.

“Time for a hot bath!” she said, relishing the idea of relaxing in soothing warm water, and just being clean again.

“For you, maybe. I've got to find a surgeon to visit to get this wretched bullet wound seen to,” the Doctor grumbled as she brushed past him. “Maybe I could look up Harry Sullivan...”

Four miles north of Givenchy, France; Tuesday 14th December 1915 07:47am

All that Peter Watson could see before him was a sea of faces. And a wide range of expressions. Some were curious, some were happy, some were tired, some were filled with hate.

As he pushed his way through his fellows, some gave him pats, some welcomed him back. Others were more intent on Gunther, behind him, shouting abuse, jeering, spitting.

“Leave him!” Peter yelled. “Leave him alone! He’s a friend!”

“He’s a bloody German!” was one comment Peter distinguished amongst the many hateful responses.

“He saved my life!” Peter yelled out again, throwing his arm around Gunther’s shoulders to give him a little protection and to demonstrate his standpoint.

Gunther was clearly a little shaken by the reception, and no doubt wary of what was to become of him, but Peter thought he was still taking things very bravely.

Peter marshalled him along the narrow trench, pushing past soldier after soldier. Then, at last, he reached the imposing figure of Sergeant Kent, peering down at him from the top of his oversized nose and equally remarkable moustache.

“Watson! Good to see you! We feared you’d been lost,” Kent said abruptly in his usual loud bullish tones.

“I nearly was, at one point, sir,” Peter said.

“You’re fortunate to have got back.”

Peter thought that Kent was speaking as if he knew what had gone on. And then he suddenly remembered the other lads he’d set out with.

“Billy and the others!” he gasped. “What...?”

He didn’t have to finish the question before Kent gave a slow shake of his head. “Shot by those Germans you all ran into. Only one of your mates came back.”

Kent stepped aside, and Peter saw, just a few metres further down the trench, a shivering soldier sitting on a wooden crate, a blanket draped over his shoulders, a steaming mug clasped between his hands. The figure looked up at Peter with a pair of beady eyes, eyes that like so many others in the British army reflected the horror of the front. It was Lunt.

“Lucky?” Peter gasped.

For once Lunt had nothing to say. He looked down into his mug then turned his head away again.

“Anyway,” Kent’s voice boomed, derailing Peter’s train of thought. “I see you’ve made a capture.”

“I didn’t have to use force,” Peter quickly pointed out. “He came willingly. And I won’t have him done wrong, Sarge, he saved my life out there.”

“Did he, by God?” Kent raised an eyebrow as he looked Gunther up and down. “Want to change sides, do you? What’s your name?”

Gunther made no response other than to shift his weight a little.

“What’s up? Cat got yer tongue?” Kent boomed, impatiently. “I said, what’s yer name?”

Gunther looked at Peter, nonplussed, then back at Kent and shrugged. “Sprechen Sie Deutch?”

Knutsford, Cheshire, England; Thursday April 14th, 1967 11:12am

“Und from zat moment,” Gunther said, setting his empty cup of tea back down in the saucer he held at his lap, “I couldn’t understand a single word your father said to me. Nor could he understand me.”

Coming to the end of his tale, Gunther fell silent, letting Rachel digest it. As only the tick of the grandfather clock could now be heard in the small cosy living room, she realised how spellbound she’d been when she noted how far forward she was now leaning, perched right of the edge of the settee.

She looked across at William, whose long, rugged face looked back at her. Neither of them quite knew what to say.

“But you can speak English?” Rachel pointed out.

The white-haired man smiled gently. “It has taken me many years to learn, and I am still far from good,” he explained. “And I only began trying to learn *after* that night in 1915.”

“But this is incredible,” William said. “Dad could never speak German, so if you couldn’t speak English then how on Earth could you and Dad have talked to each other that night?”

Gunther slowly set his cup and saucer down on the little coffee table in front of his armchair, then spread his hands as if to say ‘you tell me’. The faraway look in his small grey eyes returned as he thought back. “Those two people... Doctor Von Wer und der girl, Rachel... It can only have been some divine influence, exerted by them,” he said. “I am now firmly believing that they were, indeed, ghosts.”

“But you said they were real, solid... That the Doctor got shot and was hurt...” Rachel questioned him, absolutely fascinated.

Gunther nodded. “Zat is true... Maybe ghosts bleed. Who am I to say that they do not?”

William stroked his chin and then pointed a wagging finger to the elderly German as he became gripped by a new thought. “Haven’t you checked the records? Aren’t there records, lists of who was at the front, everyone who died, that sort of thing?”

“Your father made enquiries among his colleagues in der following days,” Gunther nodded. “And we have both tried to trace them in the years following der var... But they will not be found.”

“Well, many people who were killed were never identified,” Rachel said.

“I told you how they first appeared to me, stepping towards me out of the night,” Gunther said, making the point with his finger. “They disappeared as swiftly. One moment they were behind me, when we saw that blue box I mentioned. When I next looked back...” He spread his arms again, in a gesture to suggest they had vanished. “Your father und I went back to find them, we feared they were in trouble. Zer vas no sign of them. Not anywhere. Zer vas nowhere they could have hidden, no way they could have moved so quickly. Also the blue box vas gone. We could see der markings in der ground where it had been standing, but it vas gone also.”

“Could a shell have hit it, blown it apart?” William asked.

“I think not. Your father und I saw nothing to suggest that. But we did not think too much about the blue box for many years. Then, in the 1930s, your father, he send me a photograph taken here in England. A box which looks exactly the same as the one we saw that night.”

“The same box?” Rachel asked.

“The same look, yes. We were both sure of that. But it could not be the very same box. It could not possibly be.”

“How can you be sure?” Rachel asked. “I mean, if it looked the same?”

Gunther paused, smiling. Then he reached into his pocket and drew out two thin, crumpled, rectangular pieces of card. He glanced at the first, and then handed it to Rachel.

She looked at it. It was an old black and white photograph, taken at a busy street corner. From the styles of the clothes, and the design of the motor cars, it looked to be pre-war. And dominating the picture, standing on the street corner, was a police call box.

“But that's just a normal police box,” Rachel said dismissively, handing the photo to William who was similarly interested in seeing it.

“Yeah,” William said, “these things are everywhere.”

“So your father told me,” Gunther said. Then he added, very slowly and deliberately, “In the 1930s. He never saw one like that until then. Und they have never been seen outside of England. So explain this! Explain how your father und I saw one in France in 1915! On a battlefield! And how it vanished completely just minutes after your father und I had seen it!”

“That's impossible, it must have been a different kind of box,” William said, shaking his head as he passed the photograph back to the German. “I mean, you saw it once, then twenty years later you see something that vaguely resembles it, and you mis-remember things and think it's the same box.”

Gunther chuckled. “I see now why your father chose not to tell you these things.” He chuckled again then shook his head. “You do not have to believe. No one else has to. But your father und I both knew what had happened. Und I think they were ghosts, not of the past, but of the future. Even the box was a ghost of the future, somehow... A thing that we saw ten, twenty years before man created it. A thing that disappeared without trace. Und der girl...”

“The girl?” Rachel asked.

“Ja, der girl, Miss Rachel. I believe she was a ghost of the future too. When I see der young frauleins today, und what is coming out of Hollywood, I see der beautiful gentle ladies of my youth looking more and more like der girl Rachel did, der way they paint their faces, der way they speak, der way they act. Und this was a girl who spoke to me of such things as tanks, in 1915, before der first tank ever took to the battlefields!”

“She could have got wind of the plans...” William tried to reason.

“She referred to der var as der First Vorld Var, as though she knew zer would be a second... Explain zat, und explain how she could know also about atom bombs in 1915!”

William swallowed and was silent for a few moments as the kindly German waited in amusement. “No,” William shook his head at last, “you can't remember a conversation perfectly after so many years, you must have got it wrong.”

Again Gunther chuckled at their refusal to believe. “Maybe, maybe. I vill let you draw your own conclusions, as long as you let me have my own. But you know, both your father und I named our first born daughters Rachel after dat girl.”

Rachel blinked, wondering if she'd heard correctly. “What? You mean that's where my name came from? Dad named me after that strange girl from the First World War?”

Gunther nodded. “It vas a little agreement we made. An idea we had... Given that we believed der Doctor und Miss Rachel to be ghosts from the future, we wondered if we could make that future happen. Could Miss Rachel have been from our *own* future? So we called our daughters Rachel, wondering if one of them might become her. But neither of you have.”

“I'm relieved to hear it!” Rachel laughed. “Even if I could travel back in time, I don't think I'd choose to go to the middle of the Great War!”

“Anyway, your hospitality has been appreciated, Mrs Bannerman, Mr Watson,” the German said, easing himself up out of the armchair. “But I really must leave. I have to fly home later and Nina would never forgive me if I am late.”

“We really can't thank you enough for taking the trouble to come all this way for Dad's funeral,” Rachel drove the point home again. And she had to admit it, this sweet old man really was endearing. She could well understand how Dad had remained friends with him for so many years, even despite all the ghost stories.

“As I said, a duty,” Gunther reiterated.

“Oh, your photograph,” William suddenly remembered, handing it back to the old man.

Gunther took it back, thanking him, and Rachel noticed the other piece of card still in his hand that had been in the pocket with the photo.

“What's the other one?” she asked.

“Ah. Just something I felt I needed with me during der funeral,” Gunther said, carefully fingering the card under his own watchful gaze. “This was the first thing your father ever gave me... He gave me it to remember him by, when I was taken away to der detention centre. He wrote his name und address on der back for me.”

Gunther smiled and showed it to them. It was an old, creased, faded playing card. It was the Ace of Spades.

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT



December 1915

Once again the Doctor's uncanny knack for landing himself in trouble manifests itself when the TARDIS arrives in war-ravaged France in 1915.

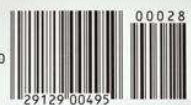
And trouble certainly finds him in the shape of a bullet.

Silver knows all too well that if the Doctor dies, she will be trapped in the past.

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Two men who will spend the rest of their lives wondering about that strange night in December 1915...

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This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the ninth Doctor as played by Anton Robbins

