

THE CAPTAIN AND JOHN SMITH

By Druid Wolf
druidwolf7@yahoo.com



To retrieve a powerful weapon stolen by the Nazi SS, two mysterious strangers enlist the aid of 1st Squad for a top-secret mission behind enemy lines. This dangerous undertaking threatens not only all of their lives, but could threaten the outcome of the War and the future of humanity itself.

(A *Combat!* / *Doctor Who* crossover story—but don't let that stop you from reading it. Go on, you know you want to.)

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**ETO, France
Fall, 1944**

PROLOGUE: 1st Squad Takes the Point

"Another mission?" Kirby looked as if he'd been hit with a two-by-four. "Now?" he added in total disbelief, every spark of unbridled elation he'd felt since arriving safely back in base camp extinguished. Then it suddenly dawned on him what else his sergeant had just said. "What'dya mean, 'top secret?'"

"You heard me, Kirby." Sergeant Saunders' icy blue gaze zeroed in on his BAR man. "Classified. They didn't tell me anything, just that 1st Squad pulled the assignment."

Doc frowned, shifting uncomfortably beside Kirby. No wonder the squad had been ordered into the tent so quickly after they'd returned from the morning mission. *Secrecy*. And secrecy usually meant trouble. "But we just got back, Sarge," he said, disappointment clearly evident in his tone. "Everyone's exhausted."

"I know, but I don't make the rules, Doc. HQ ordered this one done strictly by the book, no questions asked. They want us ready to go back out in two hours."

"Two hours!" Kirby blurted, with disgust. "That's just not right, Sarge, and you know it."

Before the noncom could respond, Littlejohn spoke. "I thought we were supposed to get downtime after this last recon." He looked from one fellow soldier to the next. To a man, they nodded in agreement, their grim expressions clearly visible through the sweat and grime of their recent mission.

"Yeah, I have a forty-eight hour pass," Kirby reminded, with belligerent defiance.

"As of now, all passes are cancelled, until further notice." Saunders responded sharply, fully aware that the finality of his tone would not do much to quell the tension spreading among his men.

"Come on, Sarge, what's up with this secret mission?" Cajé inquired, wearily, his face mirroring the deep concern and exhaustion in his voice. "Why us?"

The sergeant's reply was firm, but not without sympathy. "Sorry. Luck of the draw. Orders are orders."

"Luck?" Kirby snorted and looked around the tent at the crestfallen faces of his comrades. "Didn't I tell you guys? First Squad's got a reputation for pullin' the hard duty. Anything dirty or lousy needs doin', we get the orders. *Damn!*"

"Knock it off, Kirby." Saunders was rapidly losing his patience.

"But it's true. We get all the dangerous crap now."

Nelson sheepishly raised his hand, his voice hesitant. "Can't another squad take this one, Sarge?"

"Yeah, why not?" Kirby chimed in. "Hey, what about Morris' Squad? They ain't been assigned nothin' for over a week. Those lucky bastards have just been sittin' around on their asses, playin' cards, shootin' craps, and thumbin' through pin-up mags. I think it's time they got the hazardous duty for once."

"No one cares what *you* think, Kirby, least of all HQ!" Saunders snapped. He'd just returned from one uncomfortable confrontation at headquarters and was in no mood to argue with his men or indulge any of Kirby's goldbricking antics.

Kirby was not about to let the matter go. "But, Sarge—"

"All right, all right, quit your belly-aching, cut the crap, and listen up! *All of you!*" Saunders ordered, looking quickly from one disgruntled and exhausted squad member to the next. "I don't like this any more than you do. But we have our orders. Now, get some chow, stock up on ammo and rations for at least four days—"

"Four days?" Kirby interrupted, dumbfounded. "You gotta be kiddin' us."

Saunders back muscles tightened and he tried to ignore the abrasive private's contentious remark. But he could not. "Look at my face, Kirby. Does it look like I'm kidding?" It was hard enough to have to send his men out so soon after the harsh fighting they'd endured earlier that day. But he had orders to follow, too, and this new mission was under someone else's command. His hands were tied. "Everyone! Be ready to move out in two hours."

"Belay that order, Sergeant," came a commanding voice from the tent opening. Lieutenant Gil Hanley entered, setting off a flurry of activity as the soldiers within scrambled to attention. Even before everyone settled into position, Hanley continued. "As you were, men," the platoon leader ordered, his features calm as he strode forward to face them. "This operation is extremely important, but it has been pushed back twelve hours, to zero five hundred."

"How'd you manage that, Lieutenant?" Saunders inquired with complete surprise, but he was clearly relieved that the original two-hour timetable had been scrapped. Only minutes before, when he was at command headquarters, those orders had appeared irreversible.

"I told them an exhausted squad was not a safe squad for this sort of mission, and HQ agreed. Operation *Boe-Sigma* is delayed twelve hours. Any questions?"

Saunders bristled as Kirby stepped forward, but Hanley simply nodded, "Yes, Private?"

"How is that spelled, sir?"

"That is not your concern, Private. *Boe Sigma* is an Operations' reference only and not for general use among the squad or during this mission. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir, but exactly *what* is our mission, Lieutenant?"

"I can't tell you that. But I can tell you that you'll be working closely with two undercover agents from the OSS and SAS. Beyond that, I am not at liberty to divulge any further information. But I promise you will all be briefed before departure, as deemed necessary."

Kirby stiffened. *As deemed necessary? What the hell does that mean?* "But why *us*, sir?" Stubborn and tenacious to a fault, the private refused to give up. Sweat beaded in furrowed rows above his brow. "Excuse me for saying so, but the squad just now got back from a helluva fire fight out there. We were lucky to get back in one piece."

"I am well aware of that, Private. The orders came directly from brass higher up than HQ," Hanley explained, his tone even, but firm. "This one was stamped 'top priority and top secret.' And they requested the best – the hardest, most discrete, the sharpest, and most reliable squad I could give them under my command." He looked at each soldier in turn, letting what he'd just said sink in before adding, "Any other questions?"

"No, sir," came the squad's quick unison response. Even Kirby reluctantly shook his head and stepped obediently back in line.

"Very well, then. I advise all of you to take advantage of your down time. You've got twelve hours. If I were you, I'd hit the chow line. And get some rest, that's an order. You're going to need it." He matched each man's gaze with confidence and reassurance in his own before he added, "Dismissed. Sergeant, you're with me." The lieutenant turned and left the tent, quickly followed by Saunders, who flashed Kirby a disapproving glance as he departed.

When the tent flap closed behind the two leaders, the weary soldiers looked from one to the other without speaking. Resigned to a fate over which they had no control, each man silently stowed his gear within the tent and laid out his bedroll. Just before they departed to hit the chow line, Kirby could no longer resist one final comment on the afternoon's events. "What'd I tell you? *Reputation.*"

His remark was unanimously ignored.



DAY ONE: Of Overcoats and Tennis Shoes

In the ghostly light of a dreary overcast and chilly dawn, three figures approached the squad of six men waiting patiently beside their gear near two camouflaged munitions trucks. The soldiers immediately recognized Lieutenant Hanley, but the two men accompanying him were completely unknown to them.

The taller of the two strangers strode with solemn determination just slightly ahead of his companions. Head bent, dark hair an unkempt mass of spiked tangles, his gaze was directed intently on the ground. Attired in civilian clothes, the man's hands were buried in the trouser pockets of a rather rumpled blue suit, and an overly long brown overcoat billowed loosely about his thin frame as he walked. In place of boots or shoes, he wore a pair of white canvas sneakers, which further accentuated his already eccentric appearance. He did not appear to be armed.

The other stranger was smiling broadly as he approached, casually conversing with Lieutenant Hanley. His manner was relaxed, even friendly. More muscular than the gaunt companion preceding him, this man was clearly military, clad in an unbuttoned, boot length, double-breasted, blue-grey field greatcoat, the epaulets denoting an officer's rank. The shirt and suspended trousers beneath were of a similar blue-grey color, but his non-regulation brown boots were badly scuffed and worn. He carried one side arm, a modified MGC M1911 .45-caliber Colt pistol, as lethal a weapon as any in the services, and one with considerable killing power.

As the trio drew closer, the lanky brown-coated figure moved quickly away from the others, passed by the squad without looking in their direction, and headed deliberately toward the nearest munitions truck parked about twenty feet away. After walking back and forth beside the vehicle for several seconds, scrutinizing every inch, he moved around to the other side, and emerged again to stop beside the rear wheel. Then, he pulled his hands from his trouser pockets and dropped down on his knees to peer underneath.

"What in hell's he lookin' for?" Kirby asked under his breath to no one in particular.

Caje shrugged. "Maybe he thinks that's his ride and he has to inspect it first."

"Guess no one told him he'd be walkin'." The BAR man shifted his gear and added, "Scrawny high-pocket, ain't he?"

"I think the Lieutenant's got him beat by a couple of inches," Caje observed flatly.

Kirby agreed. "Yeah, you're right there, but the Lieutenant ain't skin and bones."

The oddly dressed stranger sprang to his feet and turned his face skyward, studying it as if seeing something no one else could. He appeared completely oblivious to his surroundings and unaware that his movements were being scrutinized and only a few yards away.

Looking down at the stranger's feet, Billy Nelson's eyes widened. He nudged Littlejohn, "He's got sneakers on."

The big man suppressed a laugh and leaned in closer before he whispered. "Maybe he doesn't want to make any noise."

"Really?" Nelson seemed surprised.

Kirby rolled his eyes. "He's just a damn civvie," he declared with disgust, no longer bothering to whisper. "What'dya expect?"

"I wonder if he's OSS or SAS," Billy said, with genuine curiosity.

"Does it matter?" Caje frowned. "They're all cut from the same cloth, anyway, aren't they?" He hated the prospect of babysitting such secretive and often unpredictable personnel.

Doc offered his thoughts on the matter. "Well, whichever he is, he's not armed."

"That's creepin' me out," Kirby remarked, eyeing the stranger's movements around the truck with misgiving. "Now he's givin' me the willies."

"Definitely looks like a cracked egg to me," Caje observed. "He hasn't looked at us once."

Doc chuckled. "'Cracked egg' is right. I doubt he even knows we're here."

At precisely that second, the stranger turned to look directly at the squad, making eye contact with each man, seemingly all at the same time. Then a larger-than-life smile brightened the man's lean features, and, with a relaxed, rippling movement of his fingers, he waved in their direction. "Hullo there!"

If the men of 1st Squad were startled, they tried not to show it, nodding slowly in response to the cheerful greeting, but to a man, they found themselves abruptly wondering what exactly command



had gotten them into. With a quick sideways motion of his hand warning his men to keep silent, Saunders stepped forward and everyone's attention abruptly shifted. In unison they snapped to attention as Lieutenant Hanley approached with the grinning officer in gray.

"As you were." The lieutenant's manner was crisp, but the tone betrayed a lack of sleep. "Sergeant Saunders, men, listen up. This is OSS special liaison, Captain Harkness. The gentleman standing over there is his SAS advisor, Mr. Smith."

The lanky stranger in the long brown coat waved once again, this time without smiling, and quickly resumed his inspection of the munitions truck. He now seemed particularly interested in the tires.

The Captain, on the other hand, stepped forward eagerly, sporting a broad smile, and thrust his hand in Saunders' direction. "Jack Harkness. It's a pleasure to meet you, Sergeant. I've heard superior things about you and your squad. You have quite a history. Very impressive, I must say."

"Thank you, Captain." Saunders was taken aback by such a casual, unconventional greeting by an officer, but the man's firm handshake, sincere smile, and words of praise certainly felt genuine. Perhaps this is how the OSS operated when breaking the ice before a mission. It wasn't *his* way, but he'd long ago discovered that it took all kinds to make the military ranks run smoothly. "You're American," the sergeant remarked, his curiosity aroused. The few undercover operatives he'd encountered before had usually been British.

"I am. But don't let that come between us." The Captain laughed affably and winked. "You'll find I'm really quite an easy fellow to get along with. *Really.*" Harkness turned to the rest of the squad, walking the line, smiling, asking for names, and offering his hand to each man in turn, while repeating the same greeting. "Captain Jack Harkness. Pleasure to meet you." It soon became obvious he was trying to put everyone there at ease.

The Captain grinned mischievously as he queried whether Doc Carter had stocked enough morphine and bandages for their mission. He complimented Kirby on his enviable position as the squad's B.A.R. man, and seemed dutifully impressed by the rifle itself.

"I don't suppose I need to ask if you can handle that weapon, Private," Harkness remarked.

"I'm probably the best you'll see, sir," Kirby bragged unflinchingly, "and that's a fact."

"Oh, I believe you, son, but let's just hope you won't need to prove it."

Next, the Captain exchanged some well-chosen French phrases with Cajé, who smiled broadly, but kept the translations to himself, much to the disappointment of his comrades.

When Harkness approached Littlejohn, his blue eyes widened and he assessed the big man's entire length before looking him square in the eye. "Where are you from, son?" he asked.

"Nebraska, sir."

"Farm boy?"

Littlejohn looked surprised. "Yes, sir."

"Well, they certainly grow them tall in Nebraska, don't they?"

"You should see my sisters, sir," Littlejohn replied, then seemed embarrassed by his own boldness.

Harkness gave the big man a knowing smile. "I can just imagine," he admitted, obviously relishing a vision of the ladies in question.

As the Captain turned to greet Nelson, he paused slightly, grasping the private's hand and holding it slightly longer than he had the others'. "How do *you* do, Private?"

"Oh, now don't start," Smith's exasperated tone betrayed obvious irritation.

"I'm getting to know our escorts. No harm in that, is there?" Harkness reasoned, without looking at the other man.

Hands thrust deep in his trouser pockets, his head cocked slightly to one side, Smith peered at the officer beneath knitted brows. "Jaaaack," he cautioned, intentionally elongating the word. "Protocol."

Winking at Nelson, Harkness gestured with his head in the direction of the brown-coated figure. "Don't mind Mr. Smith," he imparted with a reassuring smile. "He's foreign. All business. Lacks the personal touch. I, on the other hand, feel it's good for morale to know the men with whom I'm about to share life-threatening experiences. It's really the best approach...and the safest. Don't you agree, Private?"

Nelson fidgeted uncomfortably, wondering why the man had not yet released his hand. "Um...I guess so, sir. I mean, yes, sir."

"Good man, Nelson. As you were." Harkness stepped back and addressed the entire squad. "Men, I'm sure we are going to get along just fine. I'm looking forward to working with all of you." Then he faced Hanley. "Do you want to brief them, Lieutenant?"

"By all means, *Captain*," interjected Smith, with a tinge of annoyance. "Permit the Lieutenant to complete *his* job, so we can get on with ours. We've already wasted too much time here as it is."

Saunders frowned, recognizing the impatience in the man's tone. So this was the "top brass" responsible for command requesting the squad take on a new mission so soon after their last. He was now even more grateful for Hanley's intervention at HQ, giving the squad the extra down time they needed. He eyed Smith suspiciously, wondering just how long it would be before he locked horns with the man.

"As you wish, Mr. Smith." The Captain bowed slightly. "Lieutenant, would you proceed please."

"Yes, sir." If Hanley had any second thoughts about sending his squad out with the two strangers standing before him, he gave no indication. Clearing his throat, he faced 1st Squad confidently. "Men, you will proceed northeast from base camp. Once you've crossed enemy lines, Captain Harkness and Mr. Smith will brief you, in so far as they deem necessary, with specific details of their operation, and your role in it. Use extreme caution at all times. Maintain radio silence, unless the situation becomes untenable, or contact with the target is made. For this operation, HQ wants to remain informed only on an 'as need arises' basis. Stay off the road as much as possible once you leave the Allied lines, which should be well before nightfall. Your primary mission will be to safely and secretly escort both these men through enemy territory to their destination."

At first, no one spoke, but tension gripped every man in the squad, as the soldiers briefly exchanged looks. Kirby almost dropped his rifle, and struggled to keep his thoughts to himself. *Nobody said anything about crossin' enemy lines! What the hell's goin' on? Just our luck we got a couple of goddamned screwballs runnin' the show. Shit!* Looking directly at Captain Harkness, the BAR man asked the question everyone else was thinking, even if asking it might risk a charge of insubordination. "Exactly *where* are we goin', sir?"

Harkness met the question affably, with a wink and a smile. "You'll know when we know, Private," came the cryptic answer. "But I promise to let you know the moment we get there."

"That should inspire confidence, Jack. Well done." It was Smith again, sarcasm clearly evident in his tone. He was now pacing back and forth. "*Can we go?*"

"Right," the Captain responded, cheerfully. He looked over at Saunders and bowed slightly at the waist. "Sergeant, our fate is in your hands."

"Good luck, men." Lieutenant Hanley said, with a nod to his nom-com. "Come back in one piece."

"Yes sir." The Sergeant answered, flashing a derisive smirk and turned to his squad, now shouldering their gear. He shouted out his instructions without waiting for any acknowledgment. "Saddle up. I want a tight line. Caje, you take the point. Nelson, you're next. You're in charge of the radio." He turned to Kirby and pointed to the end of the column. "Kirby, bring up the rear. Littlejohn, you're in front of Kirby. Doc, you're next and I'm ahead of you." The men all took their assigned positions quickly, while the exasperated BAR man moved much slower to his place at the back. Saunders glowered at him, then turned to the two agents. "Captain Harkness, Mr. Smith, please keep to the middle of the squad, in front of me."

"Certainly, Sergeant, happy to oblige," answered Harkness, optimistically. "Come along, Mr. Smith, looks like we're on our way."

"Finally," Smith muttered and obediently took his place directly behind the young radioman, followed by the Captain. Nelson offered the two men a slight smile, but only Harkness noticed and returned it, while his companion seemed preoccupied with adjusting some cylindrical-looking tool.

Saunders walked the line once, then fell in behind the Captain and raised his hand. "Let's move out!"

"*Allons-y!*" John Smith added, suddenly all smiles, his gaze focused on the long road ahead of them.



The sun was directly overhead when Saunders ordered everyone off the road and into a grove of trees to break for some chow. Their forward progress had been erratic at best, interrupted several times

by Smith darting away from the group and running just ahead to examine parts of the surrounding countryside. He could occasionally be seen wielding some sort of thin, cylindrical tool in one hand, holding it at arm's length like a gauge, as if he was taking some sort of reading. The agent was never far from sight, but the sergeant nonetheless grew aggravated by the man's impulsive behavior and constant departures from the squad. Such disruptions could be both unsettling to the men and perilous as well. And despite the Captain's repeated reassurances that Mr. Smith knew exactly what he was doing, Saunders ordered him to retrieve the SAS agent each and every time, and return him to the squad.

Beneath the shade of the thick fall foliage, the squad bunched together and dug out their rations, while the Captain settled himself on the ground slightly to one side and opened his rucksack. Smith momentarily lagged back, beside the road, his gaze focused intently on the horizon.

"Come on," Captain Harkness urged, holding out a food tin to him, "time for some chow. Relax, Mr. Smith, I promise you, the road will still be there a half hour from now."

The taller man ignored his companion as he left the road and approached the tree where the Cajun and Kirby sat cross-legged, their backpacks open in front of them. His expression changed to one of curiosity, as he leaned forward and eyed their contents. "What's on the menu then?"

"Same as always," Cajé answered, lifting one of his food tins and opening it deftly with a small can opener. "C-Rations."

"Genuine Army issue." Kirby wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Worst crap in the world. But, it's all they give us out here, Mr. Smith." Winking at Cajé, he held out one of his ration tins to the agent. "Wanna try one?"

Smith took the nondescript container and turned it over and over in his hand. "What's inside?"

"Canned meat and vegetable hash." It was one of the private's least favorite meals, and he was only too happy to part with it.

"All right, why not?" Smith said cheerfully, handing it back to Kirby and squatting down beside him; balancing effortlessly on the bent toes of his sneakers, he waited for the soldier to open the tin. When the container was returned, the SAS advisor briefly sniffed at the contents before scooping up a portion with two fingers, and sticking the sample into his mouth. He chewed slowly at first, as if testing the flavor. Then his eyes widened with delight. "Ummmm, this is good. Very, very good. I have to hand it to your military. They supply you well."

The two soldiers looked at one other and burst out laughing, their mirth echoed by others in the group.

"What?" Smith looked puzzled.

"You're not supposed to like it," Harkness informed, gently. "It's sustenance, that's all. It's a well-known fact, no one likes Army grub."

"Really? I find this has an incredible flavor. Completely irresistible." As he crammed the rest of the canned food into his mouth, he added, "Sweet, sour, spicy, and salty -- all at the same time. Positively delicious." Amid murmurs of disbelief from the other soldiers, Smith set the empty tin down on the ground, and eyed Kirby's ration kit with a sideways grin. "What else have you got?"

Kirby stared at the other man. He didn't want to share *all* his rations. Besides, it wasn't his fault the taller man hadn't brought a supply pack with him. Then he remembered something and dug down into the pack, retrieving a palm-sized packet about one inch thick, wrapped in brown butcher paper. "I've been saving this. Found it about a week back at a grocer's store in an abandoned village south of here."

Little John laughed. "You still hanging on to those things, Kirby?"

"He's been trying to pawn them off for days," Cajé revealed with a smirk.

Nelson looked honestly surprised. "They *can't* be good anymore."

"They are so," Kirby insisted. "I've kept 'em wrapped. Besides, my old granny once told me these things last forever. And I ain't been tryin' to pawn 'em off. I tried to share, but you guys didn't want any."

"With good reason," Saunders countered wryly, as he moved off to check the perimeter of their rest area.

Kirby was insistent. "These are still good, Mr. Smith, honest."

"I'd be careful if I was you, Mr. Smith," Doc Carter cautioned. "Old food can be deadly."

"Yeah, especially Kirby's 'old' food," Littlejohn snorted derisively.

"Don't you listen to these lugs, Mr. Smith," Kirby defended. "This is fresh stuff. Fresh as you'll find anywhere. I wouldn't offer you bad food. They ain't got pits in 'em either. But if you don't want 'em, that's okay, too. My feelins' ain't gonna be hurt."

"I'd be honored to accept your kind offer, Private." Smith responded, without hesitation. "Even if it is 'old' food."

As the others watched, the SAS advisor took the packet and carefully peeled back the butcher paper to reveal the contents within. He lifted a shriveled dark brown lump, eyed it suspiciously, and brought it slowly to his tongue. As he licked it, Smith's expression softened and he popped it into his mouth whole, chewing vigorously, while nodding his pleasure. He tried to speak, but the words were a bit muffled. "Oh, this is good, too...really, really good." Within seconds, he had completely consumed everything in the packet, and ended his repast by licking each finger in turn, smiling with contentment. It wasn't long before he noticed no one else was eating; they were all staring at him. Smith looked first to Captain Harkness, who simply shrugged in ignorance. Turning back to his food benefactor, the lanky agent eyed the soldier inquisitively. "So, Private Kirby, enlighten me, what did I just eat?"

Barely containing his own amusement, Kirby looked around the circle of staring faces. No one dared speak; Nelson and Littlejohn struggled to stifle their urges to laugh by looking down at their boots. He noticed Caje's tight-lipped expression and Doc's barely contained grin. Kirby swelled with pride at his own cleverness and, with as much of a poker face as he could muster, he willingly provided the information Smith requested.

"Prunes."



If the squad expected to witness the usual consequences of Kirby's meal trick on the SAS advisor, they were sorely disappointed. John Smith appeared to experience no adverse affects whatsoever from his hastily devoured dessert. In fact, he actually seemed rejuvenated by the food he'd consumed to such a degree that, at one point, he began running the length of the column and back again, speaking enthusiastically to each soldier as he passed and urging everyone to proceed a bit faster. But, when he impatiently broke away from the group once more to run ahead, Saunders finally let it be known to Captain Harkness that he'd had his fill and tersely requested the officer bring his compatriot back or he'd have Smith hog-tied for the duration of that day's journey. All too familiar with the potential dangers they now faced at this stage of their journey, the sergeant had no guarantee they wouldn't run into an enemy patrol, even while still on the Allied side of the line. Without a second's hesitation, Harkness went in pursuit of the prodigal agent. After what the squad perceived to be a rather animated exchange between the two men, the Captain somehow convinced a clearly annoyed Mr. Smith to return to his place in the column. The squad proceeded again as a single unit, but the pace did marginally increase, and for a while Smith appeared satisfied.

By mid-afternoon 1st Squad and their charges reached the no man's land between Allied and German lines and slipped undetected into enemy territory. But now, with several hours of daylight still remaining, their progress would require a more measured strategy than before. Proceeding swiftly, but cautiously through the densely forested landscape, they made better time than the sergeant planned or expected, probably because Mr. Smith had earlier kept them moving along at a more hurried pace.

Now, from the sheltering concealment of thick undergrowth at the edge of the forest, Saunders scrutinized the wide clearing beyond. So far, there had been no sign of enemy patrols, and it seemed at first they might make significantly further progress before nightfall. But the unexpected emergence of a twenty man German patrol from a nearby brace of trees told him that option was not going to be as easy or simple as it first seemed. As his squad instinctively ducked down into the underbrush, the sergeant quickly assessed each member's position around him. The two agents were kneeling on either side of him, both watching with keen interest as the enemy moved slowly across the clearing.

"They don't appear to have spotted us," Captain Harkness whispered optimistically.

"We're lucky this time," came the non-com's response.

"Disorganized lot, aren't they?" the Captain observed, watching the scattered enemy soldiers trudge wearily across the clearing, their guard relaxed, weapons slung across their shoulders. "Looks more like a school outing than a patrol, which tells me they're very confident no Allied forces would dare challenge them this close to the front lines."

"Maybe." But Saunders felt uneasy, his solemn expression betraying his growing concern.

"Why not just go round?" came Smith's whispered suggestion. "Stay in the brush and skirt this line of trees to the other side."

"It's not that simple. We're in Kraut territory now. We have to keep low and move slowly from here on out."

"I understand the need for caution, Sergeant. But time is of the essence here. We can't afford to waste any more of it now."

"And I can't afford to lose a single man to recklessness, Mr. Smith, not even you."

"I'm never reckless—well, maybe once...or twice—but you won't lose any men, if I have anything to say about it. That's a promise."

Not particularly reassured by the other man's words, Saunders simply stared ahead and offered nothing in response.

Nearly fifteen minutes elapsed while the enemy patrol made its way leisurely across the huge clearing to the opposite side to finally enter the forest beyond. As the last German soldier disappeared, Saunders ordered Caje and Kirby to reconnoiter the direction of their movement and report back as soon as possible. When they returned with confirmation that the enemy was heading well away from them, the squad once again resumed its journey. This time they maneuvered more slowly among the thick security of the trees, and maintained silence. While each man spaced himself some distance from the man in front and behind him, they all kept watchful eyes on the surrounding woods as they progressed. Inwardly, Saunders was relieved their mission wasn't taking place later in the season, when the protection of the surrounding fall foliage would be completely gone, and the squad's movements much more difficult to conceal from unwelcome scrutiny.

When dusk descended, the sergeant ordered everyone to bunk down for the night within the relative safety of a particularly thick grove of oak trees. They couldn't risk a fire, but there was just enough light filtering through the trees from the rising full moon for each soldier to deal adequately with their meager rations, as well as recognize the shadowy outline of his nearest compatriot. Everyone quickly consumed his meal, with the exception of Mr. Smith, who didn't seem the slightest bit hungry. As Nelson and Littlejohn took the first watch, and the other squad members bedded down to catch some sleep, Saunders approached the two agents, now sitting apart from the squad on a nearby fallen tree, clearly engaged in a somewhat animated, but indiscernible, exchange of words. The sergeant did not wait for the two men to finish before he spoke up.

"Captain Harkness, Mr. Smith, I think it's time you told me why we're here."

"Please, just call me 'Doctor'." Smith said matter-of-factly, unfazed by the interruption. Beside him, Harkness' welcoming smile faded.

The sergeant barely hesitated. "All right, Doctor Smith—"

"Not 'Doctor Smith'. Just 'Doctor'."

"Mr. Smith doesn't stand on formality, Sergeant," the Captain quickly interjected. "He often uses 'Doctor' on our missions."

"I *always* use 'Doctor.'" Smith corrected firmly, with just a touch of annoyance in his tone. "I don't need another name."

"I was simply trying to—."

"Well, don't. Just don't. I told you before I didn't want disguises. All of this is pointless."

"Please Doctor—"

"Not to mention irresponsible."

"That's unwarranted."

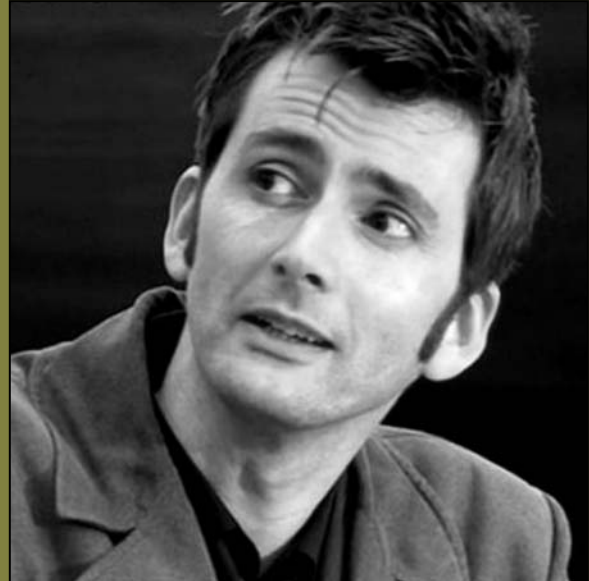
"Is it? I think not." The Doctor's eyes flashed brightly, as if he'd just thought of something new to add to the conversation. "You just had to go to Rouen, didn't you?"

"Can I help it if you got the date wrong?"

"Well, you didn't give me enough information, did you?"

"Who's the expert here? I thought you'd be able to figure it out. Besides, if you'd let me use the vortex manipulator, everything would have gone without a hitch."

"Oh, right, and have even more things go wrong? I wasn't about to take that risk, Jack."



Confused by their exchange, Saunders' own irritation increased, while the question of just who was in command of this operation briefly crossed his mind. He really did not care anything about their previous missions or what names these men used. It was his experience OSS and SAS rarely used real names anyway. He wanted answers and felt he was purposely being distracted. He leveled his gaze on Harkness, and raised his voice. "*Captain Harkness!* Sir, before I lead my men any further, I require some explanation of this mission."

John Smith stood up, dusting off his long coat. "Yes, by all means, *please* explain it all to the good sergeant, Jack. After all, 'rationalization' is your forte, isn't it?" Turning away, he disappeared among the trees.

A few seconds of awkward silence passed before Harkness spoke. "He gets that way occasionally. But he'll be fine. Don't concern yourself unduly with him."

"I'm not, Captain. I'm concerned for my men. I need to know where we're going and what we can expect to find when we get there."

"Well, you see, Sergeant—I can trust you to be discrete, can't I?" Harkness lowered his voice. "How do I explain this? Um, something extremely valuable to all our survival has inadvertently fallen into the hands of the Nazi SS. Mr. Smith—the Doctor—feels personally responsible, even though losing this irreplaceable 'item' was not his fault. It was mine. But that's a complicated matter and really quite irrelevant at this point." He took a deep breath, as if carefully considering which words he should say next. "This is a highly classified device, something the Allies would definitely not want to fall into the hands of the Nazi leadership. Trust me, should Hitler ever get hold of it, and he lets loose his top scientists to study it, every last one of us could be in imminent danger."

Saunders frowned. "Are we talking some sort of 'super bomb,' here, Captain?"

"Far more destructive, Sergeant, if it is accessed, which I doubt it can be—but there *is* cause for concern. The Doctor is still quite anxious about—" The OSS officer stopped suddenly, then quickly added, "Forgive me, but I'm not at liberty to reveal everything. Let me just say this device could easily be used to determine the outcome of the war. Its power can literally change the course of history on this planet. That's all I'm prepared to tell you at this time. It's all I really can tell you."

Saunders considered the Captain's words. Although shadows from the branches overhead obscured the man's features, his voice sounded sincere. And, despite the somewhat melodramatic delivery, it was the initial hesitancy, and the disquiet evident in the tone, that most concerned the non-com. What was it Harkness was *not* telling him? Obviously, this mission was far more complicated than they had been led to believe. It was now not only extremely dangerous, but also one from which none of them might return.

As if reading Saunders' thoughts, Harkness added, "Sergeant, you're not lambs going to the slaughter, I assure you. Your squad has a reputation for quick thinking and an uncanny knack for getting out of tough spots. I'm certain that has a lot to do with its leadership, but you and your men were chosen for this operation because command believed you are the best the Army's got. So I have absolute confidence in your ability to get the job done. And so does the Doctor, even if he may sometimes seem a bit skeptical."

"Don't speak for me, Jack," Smith ordered matter-of-factly, emerging from the darkness. "I am dubious from time to time, but my confidence is not yours, and I'm growing impatient. Look here, Sergeant, I have no doubt your men are quite capable and unwavering in their duty, but, trust me, no offense, you're totally out of your element here. I know what we're dealing with, and I do not want you or your men endangered unnecessarily. Please, take them home, Sergeant. You've gotten us through enemy lines, and we're grateful. But we need to make much faster progress, and since time is of the essence now, we can best do that alone. You needn't concern yourself any further."

Harkness jumped to his feet. "Doctor, you can't just dis—"

"Sorry, no go," Saunders interrupted, without apology to the Captain, and faced Smith, his tone uncompromising. "My orders are to get you and Captain Harkness to the assigned target, and that's



exactly what this squad is going to do. If you've got objections, take them up with HQ when we get back. I'm in charge and for now, I suggest both of you get some shut-eye. We move out at first light."

Nobody moved. Both Saunders and the Doctor held each other's gaze. Harkness held his breath. Members of the squad, still awake, wrapped in their bedrolls, waited out the silence.

Suddenly the Doctor smiled crookedly. "Jack, you heard the Sergeant. Time to get some *shut-eye*—that was the word you used, wasn't it?" He began to back away, then stopped. "One last thing, Sergeant Saunders. Would it be asking too much for us to pick up the pace just a bit tomorrow?"

"Without compromising our position or the safety of this operation," the non-com began, "I believe we can do that, yes, sir."

"That's all I ask. Thank you. Come on, Jack. Good night, Sergeant."

"Good night, Mr. Smi—*Doctor*."



DAY TWO: The Browning Automatic Sonic Screwdriver

After battling another cold autumn morning, miserably complicated by heavy rainfall and two barely averted encounters with enemy patrols, the squad and its two charges took temporary shelter in an abandoned barn, dilapidated from long neglect and disuse. For the time being, Cajé remained on watch beside the barn, while Nelson and Littlejohn were dispatched twenty yards away, closer to the road, beneath the remnants of a small feeding shed. Everyone else retreated inside the barn to keep dry, with the exception of the Doctor, who had ventured off alone, for the second time that morning, both against Saunders' explicit warning and the Captain's repeated pleas. With the entire squad out of sorts by this time and a bit edgy, Harkness opted to stay on the side of caution where his companion's movements were concerned, and alerted the guard outside not to mistake the roaming prodigal for the enemy and accidentally shoot him when he returned.

Inside the barn itself, Saunders and Doc Carter talked quietly together as they moved to the far end and discarded their rain gear. Captain Harkness hastily removed his waterlogged overcoat and draped it carefully over a broken stall railing, hoping it would dry somewhat before the squad moved out again. He detested being wet, but accepted it as another consequence of their current situation. Still, he maneuvered carefully around the numerous roof leaks to locate the driest section of the hay-strewn floor he could find. Settling cross-legged, he braced his back as comfortably as he could against an upright support, and began jotting notes in a small field journal.

Watching from the half-open barn door, Kirby's curiosity got the better of him, and he approached the Captain, all of his earlier reticence and suspicions about the two agents now completely gone. They were definitely oddballs, but he decided there was nothing he couldn't handle at this point, and Harkness seemed friendly enough. He pulled his cigarette pack from his jacket pocket and held it out to the officer. "Excuse me, Captain, would you care for a smoke?"

Jack looked up, considered the offer, and shook his head, smiling. "No thanks."

"Man, I couldn't live without these," the private remarked, lighting one for himself. "They're my life-line. Take away the tension."

"Sometimes they do."

"If I'm disturbing you, sir, I apologize."

"You're not disturbing me at all, Private—*Kirby*, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," the BAR man responded, surprised the man remembered his name.

"Care to join me?"

"Really, sir? You don't mind? Cuz if you're busy—"

"Not at all. Mind the leaks and pull up a piece of floor. It may be hard, but it's heaven after all that walking through mud and rain this morning."

"I agree, sir. Thank you, sir." Kirby placed his rifle on the ground and eased himself to the floor, facing Harkness. Again he held out the pack of cigarettes. "You sure you won't join me in a smoke?"

"Maybe later. Again, thanks."

"Does Mr. Smith—I mean, the Doctor—smoke?"

"Ha!" The other man scoffed. He looked suddenly as if he was trying to envision his companion with a cigarette in his mouth. *"Definitely not."*

"If you don't mind my saying so, sir, you and Mr. Smith don't seem exactly equipped for this mission. You only carry a sidearm, and he doesn't even have a knife, much less a gun."

"No, he doesn't," Harkness, confirmed adjusting one of his suspenders. "The Doctor has an aversion to them bordering on obsession."

"Wow! Really? I thought all you spies came armed."

"Well, if you count intelligence, cleverness, and fearlessness as weapons, then the Doctor has those in spades. Actually, he isn't really a spy at all, Private Kirby. He's more of a scientist, a very special kind of scientist. His expertise goes way beyond ordinary weapons and warfare."

"You and him sorta seem like friends, sir, but then you don't, either."

The Captain stopped writing. "Well, we are, and we aren't. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'd die for him if I had to," he admitted, then, as if recalling something, added, "which on occasion I—" Harkness didn't finish.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Let's just say, the Doctor tolerates me more than he'd like. That didn't sound right, did it? In any case, I consider him a trusted friend."

"How'd you two hook up, anyway?"

"THAT is a very long story."

"I got time," Kirby boldly volunteered, his curiosity clearly aroused now.

"I'm afraid it would take far more time than we have now for me to tell you everything. Besides, the Doctor doesn't like people talking about him." Harkness flashed Kirby an awkward smile. "And I have just done that, haven't I?"

"I won't breathe a word to another living soul," the private vowed, now. "Honest, sir. My lips are sealed."

Captain Harkness studied Kirby's eager expression. "I will tell you this. Even the Doctor's status in certain circles is kept under wraps, militarily and otherwise."

"Really? 'Hush-hush' then, sir?"

"Very highly classified, yes. To the point of 'non-existence'."

"Can they really do that? Make a person 'disappear'?"

"You'd be surprised what the OSS and SAS can do."

"I've heard stories."

"I assure you, the reality is much, much worse."

A minute elapsed while Kirby watched the officer turn back to the unfinished entry in his journal. The private's curiosity had completely overwhelmed him. He had to know more. "You known the Doctor long?"

"Seems like centuries." Harkness smiled ironically. Then, as if recalling some private joke, he laughed aloud.

"What's so funny, sir?"

"Nothing. Let's just say, from time to time, the good Doctor and I have—we've travelled quite a lot over the years."

"Excuse me, sir, but you and him don't look old enough to me to have 'travelled' that much at all. You can't be much older than the rest of the squad."

"We're both a lot older than we look, I assure—"

"Kirby." It was Saunders. Neither man had been aware of his approach.

The private stiffened, recognizing the tone with dread. He was in trouble now. He knew hob-knobbing wasn't exactly regulation, and the non-com had already made it clear he was none too happy



with the two agents in their charge. Any association during the operation was strictly limited. Kirby looked up. "Yeah, Sarge?"

"I want to see you outside." His words were uncompromising.

"Don't be too hard on Private Kirby, Sergeant," Harkness advised, "I'm entirely to blame. I lured him into our conversation."

Saunders threw the Captain a cursory glance, before turning his attention once more on his BAR man. "Outside, Kirby. *Now*." Without waiting for a reply, the sergeant headed for the open door and waited.

"Uh-oh," Harkness whispered, under his breath. "I hope I haven't gotten you into any trouble."

"You and me both," Kirby responded, as he rose to his feet and retrieved his rifle. "Here," he added, tossing the officer his cigarette pack. "There's one left. You take it. I got a feeling I'm gonna be pullin' some guard duty in the rain for a while."

"Thanks, I'll save it for later." The Captain put the pack in his shirt pocket. "Good luck, Private," he added, sympathetically, just loudly enough for the sergeant to hear.

Kirby heaved a sigh. "Yeah, thanks."

Captain Harkness offered his most disarming smile, but his expression quickly altered when Saunders threw another disapproving glance his way before following Kirby through the barn door.

Beneath the meager overhang outside, Saunders wheeled on his BAR man. "What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"I was just makin' small talk, Sarge."

"What do you think this is, a church social? This whole operation stinks to high-heaven as it is, so the less we know about those two, the better. They've got a job to do and so do we. Do you think they care what happens to any of us? We're their bodyguard and their escort until we get them to their destination, nothing more. Then we're finished. That's all I care about right now, getting the job done. That and keeping *them* from getting us all killed. We don't need to know anything else about them"

"I was only—."

"You keep your distance, right? Just stay clear of them."

"Okay, Sarge. Okay."

"You stand post out here for the time being. Patrol the entire perimeter, from here to the shed, over to the road and back again. You got that?" As Saunders spotted the Cajun coming around the corner of the barn, he added, "Caje, take a break. Kirby's on watch." Turning away, the non-com headed in the direction of the shed, where Littlejohn and Nelson stood watch. He barely noticed the rain had become little more than a fine mist.

Shouldering his rifle, Cage eyed Kirby, inquisitively. "Sarge doesn't seem too happy."

"Jeezus, but he's touchy. Ever since we started this mission, he's been jumpy and irritable. I was only talkin' to the Captain for a minute and Sarge jumps down my throat."

Caje wiped the dampness from his face with the back of one hand. "He's got a lot on his mind, Kirby. Smith isn't back yet, so that may have something to do with it. Cut him some slack."

"Well, the Captain ain't Mr. Smith. Besides, what's wrong with havin' a friendly conversation?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's as plain as the nose on your face. The guy's an officer, and a spy, on a mission that doesn't have anything to do with us. Their operation is all they care about. We don't matter. *We're* expendable. Just let it go, Kirby. It's not worth your worry or your sweat."

"Dammit, I can't seem to do nothin' right in this man's army."

Rounding the corner of the barn, the Doctor appeared slightly distracted, but he halted suddenly, a quizzical expression crossing his face. "Why are you *in* 'this man's army' then?"

"I ain't suppose to be talking to *you* either," Kirby barked angrily. 'Scuse me, I gotta walk a post."

As Kirby marched off, his rifle at the ready, Caje offered his own brief explanation, before quickly following after. "Like most of us over here, Mr. Smith, he had no choice. He was drafted."



"Ah," the Doctor responded, unfazed, barely noticing as the man departed. Suddenly his body tensed. Fully alert, he tilted his head to one side, as though hearing something through the light rain no one else could. His curiosity aroused, he crossed round to the back of the barn, carefully scrutinizing the dirt road winding away down the hillside. He sniffed the air once, twice, then quickly ran back to the front entrance, surveying the surrounding hills to the tree line. He started into the barn, almost knocking over the exiting Doc Carter as he did so. "Sorry."

Barely shaken, Carter nodded, "No harm done."

As the medic passed, the Doctor ran inside. "Jack, time to go."

"What's wrong, Doctor?"

"We're not safe here." Tossing Harkness the long gray overcoat, he hauled the man to his feet and began steering him toward the door.

"What is it?" Jack queried, juggling coat, field journal, pencil, and rucksack in his hands.

"Just trust me," the taller man insisted, "we need to go." At the open doorway, he pointed to the hill beyond, "Be as quiet as you can, don't panic anyone, but tell the sergeant to move his men up past those trees. And tell everyone to scatter well beyond the ridge and find someplace to hide. *NOW!*"

"What about *you*?"

"Don't worry about me. Just get *them* to safety."

"What are *you* going to do?"

"I'll catch up."

"It's the convoy, isn't it? You've seen it?"

"Yes. And I'm not letting it out of my sight this time."

"Then let me go with you."

"This is no time for histrionics, Jack. And there's not a moment to waste. Just do as I say. *Go!*" Harkness recognized the urgency and finality in the Doctor's tone, even if the 'histrionic' remark did sting a bit. "Right. Don't do anything stupid."

"That's *your* specialty, Jack, not mine."

"Just be cautious, Doctor."

"Always."

"I mean it. *Be* careful."

"Careful as ever. I want my TARDIS back. Remember?"

Without another word, both men burst from the barn. Still trying to struggle into his rain-soaked overcoat, the Captain headed quickly to rejoin the squad, while the Doctor raced off in the opposite direction, toward the open road.



"Something's wrong with the radio, Sarge," Nelson reported, his voice tremulous with guilt. "It must have happened when I fell against the tree back there." His hands shook as he lowered the leather radio pack to the ground and raised the flap.

"Hold still, Billy," Doc Carter ordered, dabbing at an ugly cut on the private's forehead.

"That's just great!" Kirby spat derisively. "We're stuck here, with no way to get help. Now what in hell do we do? If you want my opinion—"

"Shut up, Kirby," Saunders snapped. "No one asked for your opinion."

Everyone was out of breath and more than a little on edge. They had only momentarily regrouped after eluding detection by the unusually massive German convoy. Several tanks and command vehicles, accompanied by numerous munitions and supply trucks, and at least four-dozen infantry made their way down the road running near the deserted barn. Following the Captain's instructions, 1st Squad had swiftly dispersed in different directions through the trees on the ridge only seconds before the enemy arrival. After twenty minutes in hiding, giving the convoy ample time to move a substantial distance down the road, they reformed once more beneath the cover of trees on the same ridge overlooking the barn, alert and prepared for anything. Except for the radio malfunction.

"It's my fault," Nelson confessed, holding open the Doc's med kit, while the medic carefully bandaged the younger man's injury. "I'm sorry, Sarge."

"It's nobody's fault, son," Harkness declared. "Here, let me have a look at that radio." Pushing past the others to assess the damage, he carefully removed the EE-8 phone and pried open the side

panel to examine the contents. He reacted with a low whistle. "You have several problems: first, the handset chord is disconnected, second, one of the transmitter wires is loose, and third, the battery's completely drained. That's some damage, son. I guess even the trees are working with the enemy, eh?" He was hoping humor would ease the tension hanging in the air, but no one reacted. Seeing the look of dejection on Nelson's face, he continued, "No matter, accidents happen. It's not your fault. How'd the battery get drained anyway?"

"I don't know, sir. It wasn't cranked up, I swear."

"I believe you. It's definitely non-operational for now, but I think I know someone who can fix it." Harkness looked around the squad. "Anyone seen the Doctor?"

A collective shaking of heads was the only response, before Saunders observed, "I thought you and he had a plan to meet."

"No, not since we separated at the barn. I know he was keeping an eye on that convoy." He frowned. Jack had tried to search for his companion once the soldiers were all safely out of harm's way, but he was unable to find him. He saw his own growing concern mirrored in the circle of exhausted faces around him.

"Maybe the Krauts got him," Kirby offered, voicing what every other member of the squad was already thinking.

"You remind me of a pessimist I once knew, Private. I hope everything isn't 'doom and gloom' with you."

"Well, sir, the way he's been runnin' around here—"

"The Doctor's not stupid," Jack declared resolutely. "He's reckless sometimes, and he can definitely be frustrating, but he is far too clever to let himself get caught, unless—" Harkness stopped suddenly. Part of him wasn't quite so sure the Doctor wouldn't let himself be taken, under the circumstances, especially when it came to the object of their search; the Doctor might very well risk everything and everyone to retrieve it from the Nazis. "No, he would never let himself be taken willingly," he asserted, musing over the dark images forming in his mind and deftly concealing the fact that his own confidence in the mission was starting to unravel.

Saunders' eyes narrowed. "Is this stolen item we're looking for in that convoy, Captain?"

It was no use trying to conceal every piece of information from the squad. Harkness felt the soldiers' place in this operation would soon become far more apparent and essential than even the Doctor realized. "Yes, I believe it is," Jack said quietly, and looked up at the sky. The rain had finally stopped and sunlight flickered through the rapidly dissipating cloud cover, gracing the surrounding fall landscape with shafts of brilliance and welcome warmth. The Captain shifted his gaze and stared intently down the road. He was absolutely certain the Doctor had followed after the convoy. He turned toward the sergeant, about to suggest a course of action, when Caje called out.

"There he is, Captain," The Cajun pointed toward the road. "He's coming from the same direction that convoy was headed."

Jack breathed a sigh of relief.

Expression intense, long coat billowing behind him as he ran, the man once called Smith quickly left the road and climbed the hill to rejoin the waiting squad.

"Welcome back, Doctor," Jack hailed, without smiling, when the taller man reached their position. "Nice of you to join us. You had us all worried there for a while."

Saunders was visibly angry. "Where were you, Doctor?"

"Following the convoy," the taller man replied, barely out of breath after his climb. "Which is what we all need to do now."

"You were told not to leave the squad, Doctor."

"I wasn't spotted, Sergeant, if that's what you're worried about."

"You disobeyed my direct orders."

"Yes, and I'll probably do it again before this is over," the Doctor responded irritably before turning his attention to Harkness. "Look, Jack, we really need to follow that convoy."

"We will, Doctor, but since things appear to have escalated a bit more than anyone anticipated, the squad is required to notify command headquarters. But the radio is not functioning."

The Doctor stared in disbelief. "Radio? We don't need a radio. We need to follow the convoy."

"And these men *need* to report back to their superiors. Please, just take a quick look."

"If we lose this convoy a third time, Jack, I'll never forgive you."

"Duly noted, Doctor." Harkness briefly made eye contact with Saunders, and knew immediately the Doctor's remark had not gone unnoticed. If anything it seemed the sergeant's anger had markedly increased. *Oh well, here's another genie out of the bottle. Can't be helped.* Jack grabbed the Doctor's arm. "A few seconds only. It's over here. I promise, it'll be a cakewalk for you. Unless, of course, you don't think you *can* fix it."

Annoyed, the Doctor glared at the Captain. It was obvious Harkness knew exactly what to say. Without verbally responding to the challenge, the Doctor approached the phone, and for several seconds stared down at it, studying the contents. Frowning, he extracted a pair of dark horn-rimmed glasses from inside his jacket, slipped them on, and dropped to one knee to more closely examine the damage. "This is a relic," he observed, casually.

"That's no relic, sir," Nelson protested defensively. "It's Grade-A Army issue, fresh off the factory floor last year."

"Where I come from, Private, this is a relic. Mind you, it's quite practical and impressive for its time, but a relic, nonetheless."

"Can you fix it or not, Doctor?" Saunders snapped impatiently.

"Of course I can. I was simply making an observation."

"Fine, it's a relic," Saunders smirked. "Get on with it."

From his coat pocket, the Doctor produced the same silver cylindrical tool he had used earlier on his unpredictable forays away from the squad. He quickly adjusted something on its surface, before pointing it directly at the battery contents of the open phone box. A brilliant blue light illuminated the tip of the instrument, accompanied by a combination hum and high-pitched whirring noise.

Kirby was first to react, wincing. "What in heck *is* that?" he queried, putting his hands to his ears.

"*That?*" The Captain's face brightened and his response to Kirby was swift, the delivery obviously meant for everyone. "That, Private, is a Browning Automatic Sonic Screwdriver. Series Ten.

"*A what?*" The BAR soldier stared in disbelief.

"Don't answer that," the Doctor glared up at Harkness over the top of his glasses.

"It's the latest thing in high-grade military electronic hardware."

"Jack—"

"Fixes almost anything in a flash."

"Jack—"

"Never heard of one of *those* before," Kirby admitted. "Have you, Sarge?" A collective curiosity quickly drew the rest of the squad over to watch.

"No, I haven't" Saunders replied, suspiciously looking from the Captain to the Doctor. Something at the back of his mind convinced him that quite a few things having to do with these two men had never been heard of before. Intrigued nonetheless, he watched the Doctor recharge the battery.

Doc Carter craned over the squad leader's shoulder for a closer look. "Can't say as I have either. What's it made of?"

Harkness put a finger to his lips and lowered his voice.

"Ssssh. *Very Top Secret material—*"

"Jack, stop it," the Doctor countered, his already obvious irritation increasing.

"*Extremely hush-hush—*"

"Jaaaack—"

"—totally under the radar, of course—"

"Stop it."

"Let me tell you, boys, not even Ike, or Bradley, or 'Old Blood 'n Guts' Patton himself has one of these babies."

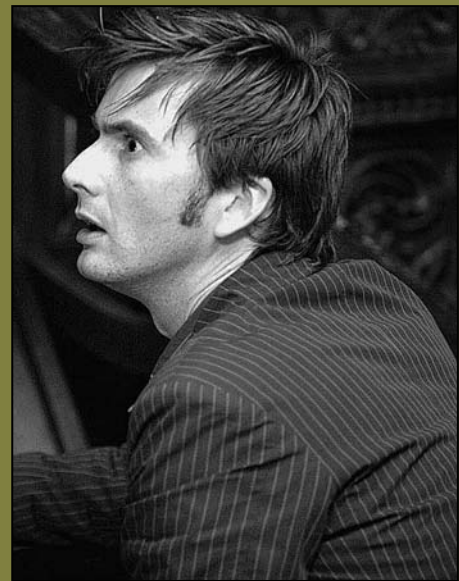
"You're not helping." The Doctor stated emphatically.

Littlejohn leaned over the wide-eyed Nelson, his expression, like the others', alive with a mixture of curiosity and awe. "How's it work?"

"*Definitely* don't answer that!" The Doctor's tone was edgy now, the words clearly meant to be a warning.

Too involved now to stop, Harkness grinned proudly and answered, "Uses sonic sound waves."

"*JACK!!*"



"*WHAT?*" The expression on the Captain's face seemed one of total innocence. "I'm just trying to make small talk."

"Well, don't. Just don't." The Doctor cast a hard and disapproving glance in his companion's direction. "Anyway, what happened to 'top secret'?"

"These guys are on *our* side, remember?"

Saunders had had enough. "All right, knock it off, both of you. We have a mission to complete. Will this take much longer, Doctor?"

The taller man aimed the screwdriver directly at the chord connection and the brilliant blue light enveloped it and the socket. "Almost got it—a few seconds more—*there!* Should be good as new—well, almost as good as new." As he replaced the handset in its cradle, he rose to his feet. "Good enough for one call. Maybe two. Care to give it a try, Private?"

Nelson eagerly turned the crank, put the handset to his ear, and listened. His eyes widened in amazement. "It's working, Sarge!"

"Good. Get on the horn and tell HQ we've encountered heavy enemy troop movement and our forward progress is compromised for the time being. From now on, we proceed with extreme caution."

"Yes sir." The private dutifully made the call.

Saunders eyed both agents with a mixture of anger and mounting dread. "Tell command the *cargo* is on track and will reach its destination as planned, come Hell or high water." As he pushed through the surrounding squad members, he roughly brushed against the Doctor's shoulder without apology, adding, "And not a moment too soon."



DAY THREE: Conduct Unbecoming

When no one could locate the Doctor at dawn the next morning, there was hell to pay, and Harkness bore the brunt of the sergeant's extreme displeasure. The Captain knew at this point that no apologies or excuses would help, and instead immediately offered to initiate a one-man search. Some of the squad volunteered to help, but Saunders would have none of it.

"Let him find his own way back. I'm not risking any of my men on a fool's errand."

Harkness shook his head. "The Doctor is many things, Sergeant, but I assure you, he's no 'fool'. There's a sensible and logical explanation for everything he does, whether you understand it or—"

"*Sensible?* Is it sane to just wander off alone in enemy territory crawling with Krauts, and openly risk the lives of every man assigned to protect him? That makes him a fool in my book, Captain Harkness. Not too mention dangerous."

"I agree, the Doctor has his eccentricities—"

"Don't justify his actions to me. He's dangerous, sir, and he's a fool. *A damned fool.*"

"Who's a fool?" The Doctor inquired affably, emerging into the camp, casually munching on a piece of fresh fruit.

"*Where the hell have you been?*" Saunders was livid.

"I've been tracking the convoy, making certain it's not deviating from its course. It's not, by the way. Oh! I've brought fresh fruit for everyone." As the Doctor emptied the pockets of his overcoat onto the ground, the squad gathered round. "Let's see, there are figs, grapes, apples, even pears." He wrinkled his nose, and held two pears out, away from his body. "Someone please take these, quickly. I hate pears." He seemed pleased when the squad eagerly took what was offered and divided the fruit amongst them, moving away to enjoy their spoils. Handing an apple and some figs to the Captain, the Doctor became defensive, "Don't pout, Jack. No one spotted me. By the way, the vineyard and orchard where I got these look as if they've been neglected for a very long time. A real pity, too. I hope the owner is still alive out there somewhere." He offered Saunders one of the apples, and was mildly disappointed when the non-com didn't accept it. Shrugging, he dropped it back into his pocket and unceremoniously tossed a grape into his mouth. "I believe you were saying something about 'fools,' Sergeant?"

"I order you to stay with the squad from now on, Doctor. We're too deep inside enemy territory for you to endanger everyone by wandering off."

"I rarely wander, and I won't endanger anyone, if I can help it, which is precisely why I do wander off on my own. Keep it simple, I say. No one is placed at risk but me."

"You really don't get the seriousness of this situation, do you?"

"I understand perfectly, Sergeant, more than you know, and I promise you I will not to do anything foolish, or ask anyone to risk their life. I really do know what I'm doing."

"So do I. I have a mission to complete. This squad is here to protect you and Captain Harkness in the interim. You don't take any more chances on my watch. From now on, you stick with the squad. Don't make me post a guard on you, Doctor, but I'll do it, if that's the only way to make you stay put."

"I understand your position, Sergeant, but—"

"If you did, you wouldn't argue with me."

Annoyed, the Doctor ran his hand impatiently through his already unkempt hair. "This conversation is going nowhere. Let's be absolutely straightforward, shall we? Something very important to me is in that convoy. I have to get it back. I appreciate you and your squad bringing us this far, but Jack and I can handle things from here on. Your services are at an end. Do yourself and your men a favor and go back to your regiment while you still can."

"No sir, we complete the mission first. My orders were quite clear."

"And I am trying to make *myself* clear. We have found what we're looking for. What part of 'mission completed' don't you understand?"

"This operation will be complete when I say it's complete, and it won't be until we've gotten you safely to your target."

"Oh, for—" The Doctor stopped, clearly frustrated. His expression hardened as he attempted to drive home a point. "The 'target' is just down the road, less than two miles. But it's getting farther and farther away, while we stand here and argue. Look around you, Sergeant, Jack and I will not be any safer than we are right at this very minute."

"I have my orders, Doctor. Nobody leaves."

The Doctor stared in utter disbelief for several seconds. When he spoke his voice was flat, the words matter-of-fact. "I cannot be held responsible for what happens from here on out."

"Suit yourself. *Littlejohn!*"

"Yes Sergeant?" Recognizing the urgency in Saunders' tone, the big private quickly approached, finishing up what remained of a pear.

Saunders met him halfway. "I want you to guard the Doctor and make sure he doesn't wander off again. If he so much as twitches, tie him up. When we move out, stick to him like glue. You got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Keep a very close watch." Glaring back at the Doctor, the sergeant added, "And if he protests, knock him out. That's an order."

"Okay, Sarge." Littlejohn replied, trying not to show his discomfort, while wishing he'd been given any other responsibility but this one.

A few yards away, Harkness sat down on an outcropping of rocks and watched as Saunders strode past Littlejohn. He cocked one eyebrow and smiled sideways at the Doctor. "You know, the sergeant's really quite attractive when he's angry."

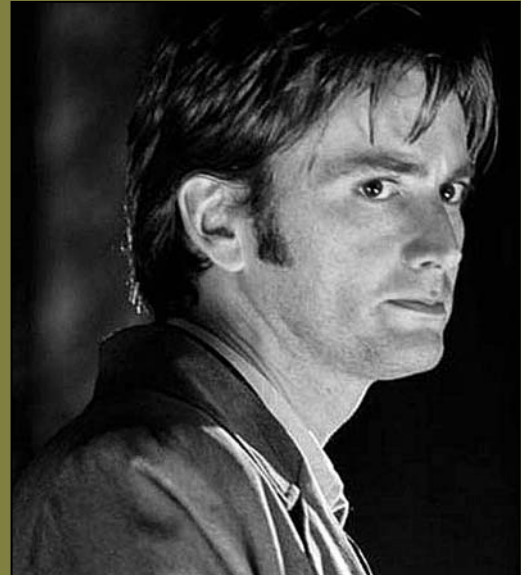
"Stop it, don't start, just...don't," the Doctor admonished, sulking.

"You spoil everybody's fun, Doctor. But you're stuck here now, along with the rest of us. Make the most of it," Jack suggested, chomping hungrily on one of the figs. "At least we got some real food out of it. Thanks. I was getting tired of C-rations."

The Doctor ignored Harkness and instead smiled at Littlejohn before tossing Saunders' rejected apple in his direction. The big private caught it easily, and nodded his thanks.

"Save that for later, Private." The Doctor called out, as he saluted with two fingers and moved closer to Harkness. Bending slightly, his words were barely a whisper. "The convoy has split in two."

The Captain's expression sobered. "How do you know?"



"Call it an educated guess—I watched it divide. The majority of the convoy turned south, the rest headed northeast with only one command vehicle, one tank, a dozen or so foot soldiers, and a flatbed lorry with its *cargo* intact. With those odds, I'm betting you could take them single-handedly, Jack."

"Flatterer. Why didn't you tell Saunders?"

"Haven't you been listening? I want no one else involved now. We have to get closer. I have to get closer. And you're going to help me, Jack. Give me your rucksack."

Harkness reluctantly removed the pack and handed it over. "Doctor, I don't think it's such a good idea to—"

"Remember, you owe me."

Jack hesitated only a second, then exhaled wearily. "Okay, what do you want me to do?"

"Distract the guard."

"He's taller than I am."

"You'll manage. You always do."

"Right." Harkness nodded, studying Littlejohn over the Doctor's shoulder. He took a deep breath, slowly counted to three and stood up, raising his voice contentiously as he spoke. "I'm sorry, Doctor. This time you need to follow the sergeant's orders. Things are a bit dicey right now and no one should go off alone. Besides, you're the civilian and I out-rank you, so I'm calling the shots. Just stay put! That's an order!"

The Captain walked quickly toward the vigilant Littlejohn, who cautiously tightened his grip on his rifle. The officer gave the private a reassuring smile, as he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out Kirby's pack of cigarettes. "Sometimes the Doctor can be so hard-headed, I think I need a smoke. Private, do you have a light? I seem to have mislaid my matches."

"I think so, sir," Littlejohn responded smartly. Still keeping his gaze fully on the Doctor, he searched awkwardly through his pockets. "I had some matches earlier."

"You know, I really should know better. These damn things will kill you."

"Cigarettes, sir? I don't think so, sir."

"Trust me. One day, you'll know the truth. Take my advice, quit now, while you still can."

Harkness started to put the cigarette in his mouth, then let it slip through his fingers to the ground.

"Here sir, let me, sir." Littlejohn bent down, taking his gaze off his prisoner for only two seconds, but it was enough. As he handed the cigarette back to the Captain, he looked toward spot where the Doctor had been standing and saw only rocks and grass and trees. He eyed Harkness with a mixture of anger and disappointment, and panic enveloped him. "*Dammit! SARGE!* The Doctor's gone again!"

Watching the disgruntled Littlejohn head off in pursuit of his escaped prisoner, Captain Jack Harkness nonchalantly replaced the cigarette in its pack and returned both to his shirt pocket. "I'm sorry, Private," he muttered, regretfully, "but you should never trust a man who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain. And believe me, the Doctor is everything."



When the squad finally caught sight of the Doctor, he had already been captured by the enemy, a small seven-man patrol, obviously left behind as a rear guard to sweep the surrounding countryside for any potential threats to the convoy. Roughly shoving their captive ahead of them down the road, the German soldiers maintained a hurried pace, but gave no indication by their demeanor that they suspected their prisoner might have accomplices in the area.

Harkness immediately suspected the Doctor had intentionally allowed himself to be taken prisoner. Of course, he kept his conclusions to himself, although he imagined the sergeant by now had probably come up with the same assessment. There was little point in making a rapidly deteriorating situation worse than it was by revealing what he thought had happened since the Doctor's escape. There had already been an explosion of rage when Saunders realized he must order his entire squad to join Littlejohn in pursuit of the insubordinate agent. The Captain bore the non-com's tirade calmly, as he joined the others in their reluctant pursuit, but he never apologized for his actions. He was only doing what the Doctor requested and would have done so a million times over without regrets. Still, as Harkness mulled over their options in his head from the squad's safe vantage point among the trees, he grew deeply annoyed with both the Doctor and himself for trying to outsmart such a seasoned band of soldiers in the first place. He felt an old familiar feeling of betrayal of trust creeping into his thoughts, and

it sickened him. He liked these men; more than that, he respected them. As he considered what might be done to right all wrongs, he realized there was only one solution now to get the Doctor back, and he knew the man would not like it one bit. At this point, there was nothing else to be done. Very soon, the enemy would have in their hands the most valuable prisoner in the world, a prisoner who would willingly destroy himself to prevent evil from using him for its own ends. That, the Captain could not allow. He just hoped his own actions would buy Saunders and his men the time they needed to act and rescue the Doctor. Without a word, Harkness quietly slipped away from the squad, and circled around behind, skirting diagonally along the line of trees, in an attempt to get ahead of the German patrol. Then, drawing his pistol, he stepped out onto the road and began walking back toward the approaching enemy and their prisoner.

The Captain was about one hundred yards from the patrol, when the lone tank came out of nowhere, bearing down on him. He heard the Doctor's urgent cry of warning before he actually caught sight of him frantically waving his arms in the distance.

"Jack! Behind you! Run!"

Everything seemed to happen in the blink of an eye. Harkness watched helplessly as one of the German soldiers brought the butt of his rifle down hard against the back of Doctor's head. Wheeling round, Jack stared in utter disbelief, unable to explain why he hadn't heard the sound of the huge tank's approach before it was almost on top of him. Perhaps in his single-minded determination to rescue the Doctor, his senses shut down and he allowed himself to hear and see nothing except the object of his quest. Whatever the reason, the Captain knew instantly it was too late to get out of the path of the on-coming tank. Frozen with a fear he had never experienced before, he stared directly into the metal treads, and suddenly imagined what it would be like to have his head and body crushed beneath them. Jack almost laughed aloud at the impossibility of it all, when he suddenly felt himself tackled and being propelled sideways, the sergeant's voice shouting in his ear. What the words were, Jack couldn't make out in the din of the tank engine, but he was aware that both he and Saunders were rolling clear of the behemoth, tumbling into an open ditch beyond the road.

Dazed, confused, his head throbbing, Harkness found himself suddenly alone again. He must have lost consciousness for a few seconds, because he gradually became aware of the fading in and out of sporadic rifle and machine gun fire around him. The choking stench of cordite enveloped the scene, as he forced himself to his feet, staggering unsteadily up from the ditch. He could barely make out the figure of Littlejohn emerging from the surrounding smoke, obviously running toward him, but it seemed to Jack as if the soldier's movements were all in slow motion. The big Nebraskan passed him by, circled round the tank and tossed a grenade into the open turret, yelling back at him to get down. At the same moment, Jack thought he heard the Doctor screaming desperately for everyone to stop firing. But within seconds the familiar voice was engulfed in the deafening roar of the exploding grenade and Harkness was hurled violently back onto the ground, stunned into unconsciousness by the impact.

When Jack finally opened his eyes, a thick cover of black smoke hung ominously over him, like a shroud; all around there was an eerie silence. Then he heard a cry of pain coming from somewhere close by. *Some poor bastard isn't long for this world*, he thought. There was a groan and an intake of breath before he realized the cry had been his own. Though he felt as if every bone in his body was broken, every organ pulverized, he willed himself to move. Cursing, he fought against the stabbing pain and attempted to pull himself along the ground. He had to find the Doctor.

A muffled voice reached him out of the smoke and strong hands gripped his arms, hauling him to his feet. Littlejohn towered beside him, supporting the weight of the Captain's aching body. Was that genuine concern on the private's face, or a disapproving frown? Harkness couldn't be sure; his vision was too blurred. He managed only a few faltering words, "Is...the Doctor...*is everyone*...all right?" If there was a response, he didn't hear it, wincing as he found himself alternately dragged and carried beyond the thick cover of smoke, out of the ditch and onto the road.

The first thing Harkness saw was what remained of his would-be assassin. The tank had been completely obliterated; shattered from the inside out, it was now nothing more than a mangled mass of smoldering, scorched and twisted metal. At the front end of the wreckage, Kirby stood assessing the damage, an unlit cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, the BAR slung casually across the back of his shoulders.

"Nice job, Littlejohn," Kirby remarked through the dissipating smoke. He never looked at the Captain.

A little way back up the road, six of the seven-man German patrol lay strewn like rag dolls on the ground, bloodied and lifeless. Jack saw Doc Carter bending over one of the fallen, while Cajé and Nelson stood guard nearby. A little further beyond them, Saunders knelt beside the body of the seventh enemy soldier. The Captain's heart skipped a beat. *Where's the Doctor?* He forced his eyes to focus and looked around. Finally, he located the familiar brown overcoat and breathed a sigh of relief. The Doctor was sitting on one side of the road, his head in his hands, Jack's rucksack crumpled on the ground beside him.

Harkness could feel his strength returning and he was soon able to stand on his own.

"Are you *sure* you're all right sir?" Littlejohn queried, concern evident in his tone. "You took quite a hit back there, and you don't look so good. You should have Doc check you over."

"Guess you haven't heard the news, Private. Nothing can kill *me*," the Captain scoffed with a quick laugh. But when he perceived the big man's obvious discomfort at the remark, he quickly added, "Really, Private, I'm fine. Just got the wind knocked out of me, is all." To prove he could maneuver on his own, Harkness walked a few yards away from the soldier, adding a quick one-two step for good measure. "See, good as new."

"I still think Doc should take a look—"

"Doc Carter has more important things to do right now, Private. Don't bother him. You can see for yourself, I'm fit as a fiddle. It takes more than a tank and an explosion to bring me down, I promise you."

"Okay, sir," Littlejohn was still eyeing him doubtfully as he began to walk up the road to rejoin the others.

"Thank you for your help back there, Private," the Captain called after him. "I guess I owe you one."

Littlejohn turned. His response was swift and unexpected, the words delivered like a challenge. "I think you owe us all, sir."

Jack's smile disappeared, but his voice was apologetic. "I stand corrected, Private Littlejohn. I do indeed."

As Littlejohn left, Harkness turned his attention to the Doctor, who had not moved from his place on the side of the road. Quickly closing the distance between them, Harkness settled nearby on the ground.

"How's the head?"

There was no response.

"I wasn't expecting a tank," Jack confessed quietly, with a self-deprecating grin.

The Doctor raised his head, repositioning his hands on either side of his face, the long fingers spread like a mask along his cheeks and nose. He stared straight ahead, but still said nothing. He seemed deep in thought.

Jack shifted uncomfortably. "I couldn't just let the Germans take you, could I?"

Silence.

"Doctor, I—"

"Let it go, Jack."

"Look—"

"What's done is done. It's over."

"I'm—"

"Just don't say another word. Don't...just... don't."

Harkness studied the man for several seconds before turning away and staring straight ahead as well. Whether he spotted the sergeant coming toward them first, he didn't know. But he was certain the Doctor had clearly discerned the rage on Saunders' face too, because they both rose together as one to face the soldier's anticipated onslaught.

Beyond furious, Saunders stormed down the road to stop only inches away from the taller man's face. Their gazes locked, steely blue boring without mercy into impenetrable brown. The sergeant's voice was husky, his words savage. "What the *hell* were you trying to do? Get us all killed?"

"I'm really very sorry," the Doctor replied, "but you should have listened—"

"Sorry isn't good enough. And *you* listen to me, Doctor 'John Smith', or whatever the hell your name really is, if you pull something stupid like that again, if you endanger the lives of my men one more time, I will personally put a bullet through your head, mission or no mission. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear, Sergeant," came the Doctor's calm, unflinching response.

Whatever lay behind the man's eyes was as unreadable to Saunders as the expression on his face, but the words he spoke betrayed no sarcasm. Both men held each other's gaze, seemingly forever. Then the Doctor spoke again.

"Was it necessary to kill those men?"

Saunders stared in disbelief. "Would you rather I let them kill us, or you, or Captain Harkness, or better yet, run back to their convoy for help? We'd be surrounded and taken down faster than you could pull that 'very top secret' screwdriver out of your pocket, Doctor. *Yes, it was necessary.*"

"Uh, Sergeant—" Jack interrupted.

"*And you!*" Saunders shifted his attention to Harkness. "I thought you were supposed to be in charge of this operation. Who is *he* that you let him get away with this crap?"

"I thought that was obvious. I answer to *him*, not the other way around."

"Great. That's just great." Saunders exclaimed, utterly exasperated. "Well, what I said to him goes double for you. Bullet in the head, and I won't miss. I don't have to remind you that until you reach your destination, I give the orders. I'm supposed to get you there alive, but that doesn't mean I can't make your lives hell in the meantime. If either of you steps out of line again, I swear you'll live to regret it. Now pick up your gear and fall in with the others."

He started to turn away, but quickly wheeled back around, pointing his finger from one man to the other. "I don't know what game you're playing at, either of you, but this is a war, goddammit, and I don't need any more liabilities on my back. From now on we move as a unit, you stand where you're told to stand, keep your heads down, don't get out of line unless I tell you to, and shut the hell up! You got that?"

"Aye-aye," was the Doctor's rapid-fire reply.

"Don't be holier-than-thou with me, Doctor."

"I assure you, that thought never entered my mind, Sergeant."

"I'm warning you," His anger beyond the boiling point, Saunders inched very close to the other man's face. "Watch your step, mister, or you'll regret you ever asked for this mission."

"I do, and I didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Ask for this mission." The Doctor's gaze rested momentarily on Captain Jack. "I never wanted any of you risking your lives for a negligent blunder."

Saunders frowned and looked from one man to the other. "*Blunder?* Explain it to me, Doctor."

"That's a long story, Sergeant, and neither of us has time now for explanations. As you stated before, we finish the mission. We need to keep tracking that convoy."

"You won't get off that easy. We'll talk again."

"Oh, I'm certain of that."

Neither man blinked. Then, with his gaze still holding the Doctor's, Saunders shouted loudly for even the squad on the other side of the road to hear. "Let's move out!" The words exploded in the air, despite his efforts to bring his considerable rage under control. Without a look back, or waiting for the two men to say anything more, the non-com hurriedly rejoined his squad.

Frowning thoughtfully, the Doctor dropped his gaze to the ground. Then, slowly, he bent down to retrieve Jack's backpack from the dirt, gripping it tightly in one hand.

"Well, we've been thoroughly chastised. Still, *bullet through the head*," Jack mocked half-heartedly, trying to ease the obvious tension in the air. "I'd like to see him try that. Think it'll make a difference if I tell him it never works?"

"Shut up, Jack," the Doctor enjoined wearily, without looking at him, "Just shut up." Tossing the pack sideways to his companion, he thrust his hands into his pockets, and marched obediently across the road. An astonished Jack Harkness wasted no time following after him.



DAY FOUR: A Sacrifice of One

It took 1st Squad the better part of the next day to catch up to the Doctor's convoy. They hung back at a safe distance, off road, well concealed among the trees, keeping the target in sight at all times, while matching its progress step for step, without detection. As the squad closed the distance between them, it soon became clear, and a great relief to all, that the enemy patrol and tank they had encountered the day before had apparently never been a part of this particular convoy, otherwise someone would have been sent out to find the missing squad. Nevertheless, everyone remained on high alert and most communications were exchanged by hand signals. Even the Doctor dutifully followed instructions, while never taking his eyes off the tarp-covered object strapped to the open bed of the solitary transport. The convoy's weapon strength was much greater than they anticipated and Saunders soon slowed the squad's progress to reevaluate their own strategy. The convoy was extremely well guarded by at least two dozen infantry soldiers, weapons at the ready, all positioned equally on either side of the command vehicle, tank, an artillery caisson, and the transport. They were taking no chances.

Shortly before nightfall, the convoy took refuge in an abandoned farmhouse, concealing the transport in the huge barn nearby, while the tank was positioned between the two structures, along with a dozen soldiers on guard at key points around the perimeter.

It was at this point, the Doctor decided he needed to strike out on his own again, but before he could make a move, he found his way blocked by Captain Harkness.

"I think we should wait this time, Doctor."

"We'll never have a better chance than now, Jack. Get out of my way."

Harkness shook his head. "The transport's well-guarded. If we move too quickly, we'll be like sitting ducks down there. We're only six armed men. Surely even you can see that caution is the best option now?"

"If you had used caution two weeks ago, we wouldn't be having this conversation now, would we?" The Doctor pushed past the Captain, who grabbed his arm and held fast.

"Let go of me, Jack."

"No. We're not taking any more chances."

"Jack," the Doctor warned, "remember, I'm stronger than you."

"I doubt that very much, Doctor," Saunders countered, drawing back the bolt of his Thompson machine gun, and pointing it at the taller man's head. "And I agree with the Captain. We use caution and we wait."

The Doctor wrenched from Jack's grasp, sullenly staring at the sergeant. "You really have no idea what you're dealing with."

"I know this: There's a twenty-four man armed escort down there, Doctor, a tank, and some heavy artillery. If this object you seek is as valuable as you say it is, then the Krauts aren't going to take chances or let their guard down for one second, so neither should we. At this point, we rethink our options."

"Then what? Go in there blasting away with your tommy guns and superior firepower anyway? That's your idea of 'options'?"

"No. But going in unprepared would be suicide."

"Not going in would be much worse, I promise you. Listen to me, Sergeant. There are things out there far more dangerous, things far more frightening than you can possibly imagine. I've seen more death and destruction than you will ever know, and I know from experience it just breeds more death and more destruction. It never ends. Believe me, I've confronted worse enemies than the ones you're facing now, and I've known more horror than anything the Third Reich could envision. There are entire planets out there gone now because of tin gods like Adolf Hitler. Worlds just as deserving of preservation as—" He paused, shaking his head in disgust. "What's the use? You'll just keep on killing each other in war



after war after bloody war. It'll never end. Oh, you'll win this one, but another conflagration will crop up to take its place. You may even end up fighting in that one and survive, but someday your descendents will make the ultimate sacrifice of your immortality and eradicate the immortality of their own progeny. There is a point here, but you'll never learn what it is, because, for all your remarkable endurance, your moments of sheer brilliance, and your unstoppable indomitability, you still fail to grasp the fragility of life and your place in the universe around you. If you could only realize what an extraordinary gift you've been given, you might learn to use it to stop killing each other off." The Doctor studied the faces of the men gathered around him. "But I doubt it." Without another word, he turned away from the squad and walked back to watch the convoy from a different vantage point, but he did not attempt to leave.

For a while no one said anything. Then Kirby looked around the faces of his comrades. "Did he say 'worlds'? He meant 'countries', didn't he?"

"The Doctor likes metaphors." Jack volunteered.

"Meta—*what?*"

"'Metaphors'. Clever words used in place of other words. It's a quirk of his."

Caje looked at Doc Carter and winked. "Didn't I tell you, Doc? *Cracked egg.*"

Saunders ordered everyone back to their posts. "All of you stay sharp."

Harkness chose to remain off away from the squad, trying to figure out how best he could handle the Doctor from here on out. Suddenly, he became aware he was fumbling in his pocket for Kirby's discarded cigarette pack. His hand shook as he extracted the lone cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, and frantically searched his pockets for a match. Finding none, he almost laughed. *I don't smoke anymore! Why would I have matches? Damn!*

Coming up beside him, Saunders flipped back the top of his own lighter, igniting the flame, holding it out to the Captain. Jack's gaze met his with both gratitude and relief, as he leaned in to light the cigarette. The sergeant lit a cigarette of his own. Harkness took a long drag and inhaled deeply; when he exhaled, very little smoke escaped. Sighing his contentment, he offered the sergeant a weak smile.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"Nice lighter. Zippo, right? May I?"

Saunders nodded, leaned his Thompson against the nearby tree, and handed the lighter to him. Jack turned it over in his hand, as if trying to conjure a memory or a feeling long since forgotten. "I had one of these once—never missed a strike. Best damned lighter in the whole universe. Lost it at—" He hesitated, as if trying to find the right words, but suddenly giving Saunders an expression of total surprised. "*Huh.* You know I can't remember where I lost it. Maybe it was stolen."

The sergeant studied the other man. Beyond the boyish façade and the cocky grin, what lay inside the Captain's soul was difficult to discern. He certainly possessed the courage of his convictions, that much was evident; all that flamboyant bravado was not just smoke and mirrors. Harkness appeared to be the genuine article, and not simply a brass fixture know-it-all. Neither was the Doctor, but he seemed far too complex an individual for Saunders to read comfortably. He doubted he would ever crack that mind, or come to meet the real man behind the masks. He wasn't sure if he wanted to. But Harkness was different.

The Captain was asking about the lighter again. "How'd you come by it, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It belonged to my father." Saunders wondered the second he responded why it was so easy to reveal to this particular stranger something which had always been so private a thing for him.

"A hand-me-down," Harkness observed, "as it should be, from a loving father to his beloved son. He approved of your smoking then?"

Saunders shifted uncomfortably, but responded without hesitation. "Actually, he passed away before I ever took it up."



"Oh. I'm sorry," Harkness offered sympathetically, trying to envision the lonely, fatherless boy this man may once have been. He took another lengthy drag on the cigarette, and exhaled less slowly this time. "That must have been a difficult ordeal for you."

"Didn't have much time to think about it. I had my mother, sister, and my brothers to look after then. Seems like a long time ago."

Jack nodded and stared ahead at nothing in particular, still turning the lighter over and over in his hand. "Yeah, I promised my father I would look after *my* brother, but—that was a long time ago, too. Eons." Suddenly he coughed. "I guess I'm not as used to these things, after all."

The sound of rapid fire forced both men to fling themselves to the ground. Bullets whizzed past, just over their heads, as all hell broke loose. Saunders struggled to reach for his Thompson, only to watch helplessly as it fell to one side of the tree, just short of his grasp. The barrage of bullets was too intense for him to retrieve it. He moved closer to the Captain and rolled onto his back, shouting out to the others. "*Caje! Kirby! Doc! Littlejohn! Nelson! Sound off!*"

"*We're all over here, Sarge!*" It was Caje. Saunders could just see the silhouettes of his men hunkered down along the tree line as the hail of bullets rained down on them through the twilight.

"*Where's the Doctor?*" Jack called frantically, drawing his pistol and checking his rounds.

"*Gone off again, sir!*" squeaked Nelson, his voice shaking.

Simultaneously, two infuriated voices penetrated the din of enemy gunfire with an identical response. "*Damn him!*"



Hopelessly outnumbered, the squad surrendered within minutes of the assault. There was nothing else they could do. When Harkness saw the twelve man squad of soldiers approach, accompanied by a German SS Colonel holding a pistol to the Doctor's head, he quickly discarded his own gun and stood up, hands high above his head.

"Don't shoot, we surrender."

Saunders cursed under his breath, but stood up beside the Captain, and slowly raised his hands as well. The rest of 1st Squad followed their sergeant's lead, discarding their weapons and emerging from the protection of the trees. Three more SS officers appeared and the squad members were quickly forced into a line, which soon included the Doctor, shoved roughly into place by the first SS officer.

"Who is your commander?" the Colonel inquired, in halting English.

"I am. Captain Jack Harkness. And you are?"

"Colonel Schotzler. You and your men are a very long way from Allied lines, Captain. I think you are spies, disguised as soldiers."

"No one here is a spy, Colonel. We're Americans. We got separated from our unit, and got lost, that's all."

"And this one?" Schotzler pointed at the Doctor. "He is not in uniform. Therefore, he must be a spy. You know what happens to spies."

"This man's a civilian. We found him wandering on the road back there and asked for his help in finding food and shelter. He doesn't even speak our language."

"Really? I find that hard to believe, Captain. He was babbling in English all the way back here about a blue box and the soldiers who were helping him find it. He wanted to make a deal with us, 'his' blue box for all of you. But he is mistaken about two things. The Third Reich does not make deals with spies, and the blue box belongs to the Fuhrer."

Jack looked quickly at the Doctor, clearly sensing the wave of resentment and anger building among the squad. He knew that nothing of what the German had said was true; it was obviously some sort of ruse the Doctor had unfortunately chosen not to share with anyone else before striking off on his own again. "*What in Hell is he up to?*" Harkness turned back to the enemy officer. "He isn't one of us, Colonel. Let him go."

"Why would I do that? He knows about the blue box, and he admitted he has been following us. I suspect you know about the blue box as well. Am I correct?"

"We don't know what you're talking about. I tell you we're just trying to get back to our platoon."

"Well, you won't be going back there now, will you? Take them all to the barn, except for him," the Colonel commanded, pointing at the Doctor. "Take him out and shoot him."

"No, wait!" Harkness' voice barely cracked, but he was growing desperate. "In accordance with the Geneva Convention, I insist you release this man, or bring him with us. There is no need to kill him. He can't possibly harm any of you."

"You are correct, he cannot harm us now. But I think he might, if he could, which is precisely why he should be shot. Look at his face."

"I must protest, Colonel—"

"Jack, stop it, that's enough," the Doctor ordered. "Let it go."

"I should have all of you shot for bringing a spy into our midst. But I have my orders, Captain. Soldiers are prisoners. Spies are shot. I see no point in taking him to the farmhouse, when he can be disposed of here. Lieutenant, execute him."

"Hold on. You said this man claimed to know about the blue box. Then he must also know how the blue box works. Why else would he offer our lives in exchange for it?"

"*Jack!*" The Doctor was visibly annoyed now.

"Tit for tat, Doctor. Remember? I tell you my story, you tell me yours, later. Colonel, I promise, you will need this man when you get the blue box to Berlin. The Fuhrer will want to know how it functions, and he won't be pleased if you kill the one man who can make that blue box serve the ultimate needs of the Third Reich. I don't think you want to risk bringing the wrath of Adolf Hitler down on your head, do you?"

Schotzler frowned, but seemed to be considering the man's words. Then he shook his head. "I think this is another game you play with us, no? Kill the spy."

The SS officer stepped forward and leveled his Luger at the Doctor's chest, firing twice.

"*NO!!*" Harkness flung himself directly in the path of the bullets, taking the full force of the two shots in his own chest. Their impact spun him around. Blood splattered across the Doctor's face and onto a section of his overcoat, as the Captain collapsed against him and slumped heavily to the ground. The Doctor didn't move, and displayed no reaction when Jack fell. Instead, all of his attention had been focused on Colonel Schotzler, his expression betraying the obvious fury now seething inside him. But he said nothing.

The squad betrayed a range of emotions, from disbelief, to shock, to rage. Littlejohn even started toward the officer who fired the shots, but Caje and Kirby managed somehow to restrain him.

"Nobody move!" Schotzler ordered sharply, and machine gun bolts all around them were snapped into position. "All of you stay where you are."

"Please, I'm a medic," Doc Carter implored. "Let me look at him."

"Very well, but it will do you no good," Schotzler scoffed. "He was dead before he hit the ground. Lieutenant Faulkner is a very good shot."

As Doc knelt beside the fallen Captain, Saunders clenched and unclenched his fists in rage. "Is this how you honor the Geneva Convention? By murdering an American army officer?"

"It was never murder, Sergeant. Did you not see? He willingly sacrificed himself. I think he was a spy, too. But it matters not. No one will ever know. None of you are likely to live long enough to tell anyone. Our prisons are very harsh places, but, of course, the nearest one is a long way from here. Much can happen before we arrive."

Carter rose slowly to his feet. He glanced toward the Doctor and solemnly shook his head, "He's dead."

"You killed the wrong man, Colonel," the Doctor's deepened voice was clearly accusatory. "I'm the spy. Put *me* in front of a firing squad and shoot me. Let's just get it over with."

"Nein. I think the Captain was telling the truth about you. Otherwise, why should he put your life before his own and allow us to kill him so readily?" Schotzler sneered. "What did he call you? *Doctor?* I think you might just be very valuable to the Fuhrer after all, Herr Doctor."



"You won't get any help from me. And neither will your little tin-god tyrant."

Schotzler swiftly moved closer and struck the Doctor violently with the butt of his pistol, sending him reeling back against Saunders.

"Take them all to the barn. Tie *him* to the transport, apart from the others," the Colonel commanded. "We will decide what's to be done with the rest of them later."

His tennis shoes dragging along the ground, the semi-conscious Doctor was hauled away between two of the SS officers. The squad was lined up and quickly moved out single file. Bringing up the rear, Saunders looked back where the lifeless body of Jack Harkness lay sprawled on the grass; he was suddenly overwhelmed by a profound sense of regret and sadness.



DAY FIVE: The Blue Box

Dawn filtered through the open doorway of the barn, rousing the men of 1st Squad from an already restless sleep. They were bound with ropes tied securely around their ankles and their wrists, linked together by another thicker length of rope wrapped around a nearby support column. Sitting up as best they could, the soldiers leaned against the wall, and assessed their temporary prison in the dim light of the new day. Directly in front of them was the flatbed truck. At the rear end, tied to the side nearest them, slumped against the rear wheel, was the Doctor, seemingly out cold. He was bound as they were, but his hands were held taut over his head. Above him, strapped securely to the top of the flatbed itself, was some unknown cargo, partially concealed beneath a tarpaulin. It appeared to be vertically rectangular in shape and the exposed lower section was painted blue. The rest of the barn appeared to be empty. The only guards were posted just outside the barn itself, close by the open door.

Saunders studied the unconscious figure tied to the truck and called out, "Doctor, wake up!" But there was no response.

"Maybe he's dead," Nelson hesitantly suggested, the memories of the night before still haunting his vision. "That Colonel hit him pretty hard."

"No, he's alive. I can see him breathing," Cajé said.

The soldiers could also see Captain Harkness' dried blood still splattered on the Doctor's face. The bloody splotches on his overcoat had long ago soaked into the fabric, dried now to a dark red brown.

"Why did he do it?" Kirby asked, to no one in particular.

"Do what?" Doc Carter asked.

"Jump in front of the Doctor like that? He had to know he'd be killed."

Carter was introspective. "Maybe he thought the Colonel was bluffing."

"I don't think so," countered Saunders quietly, without judgment. "Captain Harkness knew what he was doing."

Littlejohn agreed. "He was trying to save the Doctor's life, just like he tried to do the other day on the road, when he went face to face with that patrol." There was a touch of sorrow in the big man's tone. "He hadn't counted on that tank."

"No, he didn't count on the tank," Saunders agreed.

Nelson nudged Littlejohn. "What do you think they'll do with us?"

"They don't want witnesses," Littlejohn declared, with growing pessimism, "so I imagine we'll be executed, like the Captain."

"They can't do that, can they? I mean, the Geneva Convention—"

"You think that Kraut Colonel's gonna want any witnesses after what he did to the Captain?" Kirby interjected. "No, we're all dead men."

"Knock it off, Kirby," Saunders ordered, testing his bonds for weaknesses, as he had for most of the night, but still found none. He emitted a low curse. Their German captors had been very thorough. No one could move more than a few inches in either direction.

"What time do you think it is, Sarge?" Nelson didn't want to hear any more talk about death.

"Early. Maybe seven hundred hours."

"Why'd they take our watches?" Nelson queried timidly, to no one in particular.

"Who knows," Kirby grouched. "Maybe they needed new ones, or they wanted to own something American to brag about to their families."

"How long do you think it'll be before the convoy moves out, Sarge?" Doc Carter asked.

"I don't know, but if the Colonel has a scheduled stop to make in Berlin, I doubt he'll stay here too much longer, or bother taking us along. We've got to find a way out of here before that happens."

"The Doctor's coming around, Sarge," Cajé announced.

Groggily peering out through half open eyes, the Doctor attempted to sit upright, but, apparently overcome by a sudden wave of nausea, he quickly eased back onto the tire. Waiting for the vertigo to pass, he stared at the squad. He did not seem surprised to see them, and offered no greeting. Instead he tried to reach for the inside breast pocket of his jacket, and winced as he realized his bound wrists had limited movement. Angrily, he twisted against the ropes holding him fast to the truck bed, straining with all his strength against the thick hemp, to no avail. Frustrated, he snarled angrily and rammed one shoulder against the tire.

"We've already tried, Doctor. No use fightin' ropes," Kirby imparted without emotion. "They're damned secure."

Ignoring the private's words, the other man doubled his efforts against his bonds. There was an element of desperation in his struggle that did not escape anyone's notice.

"Doctor, we're all very sorry for the loss of Captain Harkness," Doc Carter declared, feeling confident he spoke for the entire squad. "He was a very fine and brave man, sir."

"Huh? *What?* Oh yeah, I suppose he can be, yes. Wait. Did I just say 'can'? I meant 'was'. He 'was' very brave. Yes, he was."

"You don't seem too concerned about him," Saunders interjected. The disturbing remoteness of this man had always bothered him, despite the occasional flashes of humor and affability. While he had proven himself extremely intelligent and resourceful, the Doctor was arguably the most frustrating person he'd ever met. And he was definitely more complex than Saunders could either understand or explain. Whatever the man's agenda might be, his constant secretiveness had made him suspect in more ways than one.

"I'm never concerned about, Jack," came the flippant response. "Captain Harkness can take care of himself."

The sergeant frowned. "Harkness is dead, Doctor."

"I know. But he can still take care of himself."

Was the man completely mad? Saunders needed a way out of their current dilemma before they were all wantonly slaughtered and their bodies left scattered, forgotten in a field somewhere. He knew the Germans were not going to bother transporting prisoners when the urgency of this cargo was paramount. Now it looked as if the Doctor would be no help to them at all. But he decided to try a different tactic.

"Why don't you tell us about the blue box, Doctor."

"What?"

"The *target* of this mission. The secret weapon the Nazis want so badly." He gestured as best he could to the bed of the truck. "Your blue box?"

The Doctor craned his head round to look. "Aw, there you are," he declared cheerfully and turned back. "Listen, all you need to know, Sergeant, is that *that blue box* is our way out of here."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Look, I haven't time to explain. I just need to get—I don't suppose anyone has a pocket knife or switchblade?"

Everyone exchanged glances.

"Those are in short supply right now, Doctor," Cajé reported flatly.

"Maybe you ain't noticed lately, but everyone's a little tied up here," came Kirby's sarcastic response. "And the Krauts took everything we had, even our cigarettes."

The Doctor looked positively crestfallen, but instantly his features brightened. "*Matches*. Did they take the matches?"

Kirby was baffled. "No. Why?"

"Just find me a match and I'll explain it."

As Kirby searched for his box of matches, the Doctor contorted himself just enough to bring his feet toward his head. Stretching and twisting his neck, he struggled to untie one of the shoelaces with his

teeth. He was surprisingly successful, and quickly loosened it from the sneaker. After freeing it completely, he re-positioned himself and smiled back at the squad, the lace dangling between his teeth.

"What's that for?" Saunders asked, unconvinced, but intrigued.

The Doctor spit the lace onto the ground beside him. "Nothing. My shoe was too tight. With the ropes cutting off circulation in my ankles already, I didn't need the shoe lace compounding things."

Saunders stared blankly at the man. *Definitely, the bricks are not all in one place, if they ever were.*

"Okay," Kirby announced. "I got a match, now what do I do with it?"

"Well, Private, apart from lighting nasty cigarettes, pipes, cigars, stoves and candles, a match burns things. Did you try setting fire to the ropes?"

Kirby's eyes widened with pleasure as he struck the first match.

The sound of a machine gun bolt and a thick German accent interrupted the task. "I'm afraid you won't have time to start any fires, Herr Doctor."

Accompanied by four infantry soldiers and two of his SS officers, Colonel Schotzler swaggered as he strode across the dirt floor to face the prisoners. "Very clever," he continued, a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "But the time has come for you to say farewell to your friends. We must depart soon." He turned to two of the soldiers. "Tie him up next to his blue box, but make certain he cannot move." He smiled at the Doctor. "As your dead Captain said, I wouldn't want to lose the man who knows so much about our Fuhrer's prized cargo."

Before anyone could touch the ropes binding the Doctor, gunfire erupted from outside, catching everyone off guard. The Germans wheeled around to witness a very much alive Captain Jack Harkness bursting through the barn door, Saunders' Thompson at hip level, firing round after rapid round. The two guards standing just inside the entrance went down before they could raise their own weapons. Next, the four soldiers who had come into the barn with Schotzler tumbled to the floor like bowling pins. Jack rolled once, came to a kneeling position and quickly brought down both SS officers. Without pausing, he leaped to his feet again and strode toward the Colonel, who now stood motionless, unable to speak, eyes wide with fear and incredulity.

"Shocked to see me, Herr Kraut?" Jack asked, his voice menacing, his features hard. "Don't feel singled out. You're not the first and you won't be the last. Happens to everyone." Spying his sidearm tucked in the officer's gun belt, he added, "I'll take that," and retrieved it. "Now, turn around," he commanded, and promptly knocked the man out with the butt of his rescued pistol. "Turnabout's fair play." Stepping over the crumpled figure, Jack smiled cryptically down at the Doctor. "Miss me?"

"Always," came the Doctor's wide-grinned response. "You're late."

"I had a little trouble with a tank driver." The Captain strode over to the squad, and bent down to cut Saunders' ropes, then handed him the knife to untie the others. He ignored how surprised they were to see him. "You know how tank men are. They just can't seem to keep their hands off me. By the way, Doctor, you look good tied up. Bondage. Cheeky."

"Untie me."

"Is that *my* blood? An unconventional look for you, Doctor—ropes and blood. *I* could get used to it."

"Jack, untie me."

The Captain looked thoughtful, as he handed Saunders back his Thompson. "I don't know if I should. Maybe the Sarge here would prefer to keep you hog-tied so you'll stay out of trouble."

"*Jack*," the Doctor growled impatiently.

"What do you think Sergeant, leave him trussed up or let him go?" Jack cast a quick glance at the squad and finally acknowledged their expressions of disbelief. "I'm not a ghost, I promise you. Not yet, anyway. I'm as real as you are."

Nelson was in shock. "But how—"

"Bullet-proof vest," Harkness imparted quickly. "Oldest trick in the book."

Kirby was skeptical. "What about the blood? We all saw that."

"Yeah," Caje concurred, "that was real enough."

"Minor flesh wound from the impact. No more than a scratch, really. Not enough to do any significant damage. Destroyed the vest though." The dubious faces looking back at him told Harkness his explanation was not convincing anyone. "Okay, so I'm a fast healer."

"Doc said you were dead," Nelson remarked.

"He was." Carter insisted. "Sarge, I swear, his heart had stopped."

"You were mistaken, Doc," the Captain countered calmly. "Confusion of circumstance, panic in the moment. Happens all the time in war, you should know that. Seriously, do I look dead to you?"

"*UNTIE ME NOW!*" The Doctor strained against his ropes, growing more and more irritated. "We don't have time to socialize."

"He never has any patience. Very well." He reached into his overcoat pocket and produced the sonic screwdriver. "Took it when I fell against you. Figured the Krauts would search you and confiscate it. I knew you wouldn't want to lose this." Grinning, he aimed the instrument at the Doctor's bound wrists; the ropes quickly frayed beneath the beam of blue light and fell apart.

Hands free, the Doctor took back the screwdriver, quickly undid the ropes around his ankles and jumped to his feet. Ignoring Jack's rather brusque "You're welcome," the Doctor leaped atop the flatbed and ran immediately to the cargo. He used the screwdriver to undo the straps, and pulled off the tarpaulin, flinging it hastily away like a magician revealing a mystery to his audience.

All eyes stared at the object on the truck. It was indeed a blue box. But this one had "Police Public Call Box" emblazoned in lights at the top edge, and helpful instructions about its use pasted on one of the two front doors.

"This is what we came all this way for?" Saunders was absolutely aghast. "A police box?"

"This is no ordinary police box, Sergeant," the Doctor explained as he carefully examined the outside for any damage. "This is freedom." Satisfied all was well, he turned back to the squad. All eyes were on him now. Before he could speak further, shouting and harsh commands from outside the barn told them all there was no more time to waste.

Saunders hoisted his Thompson, while Harkness shoved a fresh ammo clip into his own gun and aimed it at the barn door. Willing shields for the unarmed men behind them, they stood side by side between the truck and the encroaching enemy.

"Whatever it is you're going to do, Doctor, you'd better do it quick!" the sergeant shouted back over his shoulder.

"All of you," the Doctor shouted, "up on the truck. *Now!* Come on. No time to waste. Everyone, into the TARDIS."

"In that?" Kirby protested. "It's no bigger than an outhouse."

"Private, this 'outhouse', as you call it, is going to save your life."

"You're joking."

"I never joke when lives are at stake. *NOW RUN!*"

"He's not kidding." Harkness corroborated with urgency. "Trust me, Private, if you want to live, do as he says."

Outside, the sound of an approaching tank could be heard rumbling toward the barn. Without hesitation, first Caje, then Littlejohn, Nelson, and Doc Carter jumped onto the flatbed. Kirby only paused for a second, then reluctantly followed. The Doctor snapped his fingers and both doors of the blue box flung wide into the interior, revealing an enormous space beyond, far larger than the exterior dimensions of the structure itself.

"I don't believe it." Kirby's mouth hung open. "I think I've read one too many comic books."

"Don't think," the Doctor urged. "Just get inside. It's perfectly safe, I promise you. Just don't touch anything!"

There were only two choices for everyone: the unknown beyond, or certain death in this barn. There was no more hesitation. Every soldier flung himself quickly through the entrance, almost as one, Kirby only one step behind his comrades.

No sooner was the squad safely inside, then Harkness and Saunders quickly launched themselves onto the flatbed. As they raced toward the Doctor, Harkness saw Colonel Schotzler rise from the ground and aim his pistol at Saunders. With split second reflex, Harkness pushed the non-com forward toward the entryway, turned and brought his own gun level with the German's. "Oh, really?" he quipped coolly and squeezed the trigger. The bullet penetrated the SS officer's skull and the man dropped.

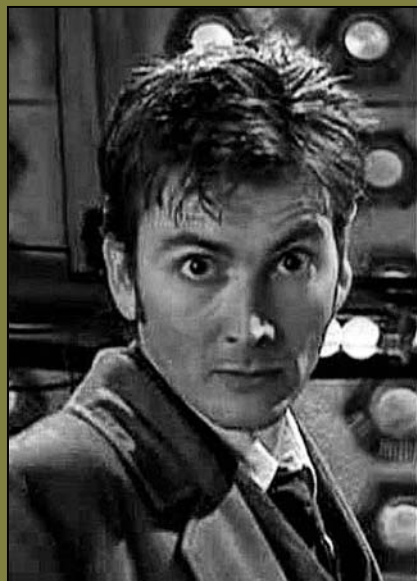
"That wasn't necessary," criticized the Doctor.

"Yes, Doctor, it was," Jack announced without apology.



At just that moment, the tank broke through the outer wall of the barn and both men dove through the entrance, slamming the doors shut behind them.

The Doctor quickly discarded his overcoat across one of the twisted y-shaped upright supports, shouting as he ran "Nobody touch anything!" He pushed past the dumfounded soldiers and headed for a hexagonal, glowing green console at the center of the improbably huge room. As he began flipping switches on the control panel, he called out, "Jack, I need your help!"



"Watch this bit," Harkness said, winking as he clapped Saunders on the shoulder. Removing his own coat, he tossed it aside, and moved quickly to join the Doctor.

Busily running around the console, the Doctor pulled down hard on a lever and spun one wheel-like protrusion in a counterclockwise direction. Then he dashed around to another section, punching buttons and turning dials. He looked up once or twice at a transparent cylindrical column extending upward from the center of the control panels and disappearing into the ceiling above. It began to pulsate, slowly at first, its interior crystal green color increasing in intensity to white hot; the entire unit began emitting an unrecognizably eerie sound. "Everyone!" the Doctor called out. "Hang onto something."

"Things are about to get bumpy," Harkness advised, cautiously, while turning several of the dials on the opposite side of the console, staying in sync with the Doctor's own actions. "Brace yourselves men!"

The room lurched uncontrollably one way then another, and the soldiers were flung sideways, then back. They tried unsuccessfully to grasp something solid to which they might anchor themselves, but their efforts were futile. Nelson went flying into one of the fantastical uprights, and Kirby rolled down the entrance ramp, landing hard against the door. Cajé, Littlejohn, Doc, and Saunders all managed momentarily to hang onto the entrance ramp railing, but could not keep their footing, and went tumbling against one of the interior walls.

After several minutes the room stabilized and everyone got back on their feet. Kirby rubbed his head and shoulder, looking around with as much wonder and disbelief as the others. The space was like something out of a fantastic story. Nothing they saw related to anything else from their own experience. The walls were indented with hexagonal light fixtures, all emitting a soft, dim light from some unknown source. The floor around the console was comprised of see-through metal grating; it, too, was illuminated from somewhere below. They could see thick cables and wires all jumbled together, snaking beneath them under the grates. But the central console was what interested them most, and whatever substance existed within the pulsating column at the center, it rose and fell steadily now, without much variation, humming softly as it did so. It seemed almost to be breathing.

Kirby gave a low whistle as he wandered around the room. "I've seen some odd places," he confessed, "but I've never seen nothin' like this. What's that control panel made of? Kryptonite?"

"You've been reading too many comic books," the Doctor remarked, his gaze fixed intently on a flashing screen protruding from the console, while carefully making adjustments with one of the nearby dials.

"More like something out of Edgar Rice Burroughs." Saunders observed, more than a little fascinated despite his own distrust of the situation. "Maybe *John Carter of Mars*."

"*You, too?*" Jack remarked. "Aren't those great books? I read all of them when I was a kid."

Kirby looked surprised, but he was genuinely impressed. "You read Edgar Rice Burroughs, Sarge? Now that's really somethin'."

"I recall having a real fondness for his 'Tarzan' series," Harkness added, with a sideways grin.

"This place is impossible." Cajé declared, with amazement, shaking his head.

"You're not the first to say that," the Doctor responded, with detachment, "and you won't be the last."

"I didn't know the military had anything like *this*," Kirby admitted, dutifully impressed by the surroundings.

"Your military *doesn't* have anything like this," the taller man imparted. "The TARDIS is mine, and mine alone."

"You're not SAS," Saunders stated, voicing what he'd long ago suspected.

"No." The response was quiet, remote, but not at all apologetic.

"Then how—"

"Let *me* explain, Sergeant," Harkness offered. "The Doctor and I both come from somewhere very far away. We — *I* — wanted to visit a particular French town I knew—anyway, the TARDIS inadvertently fell into Nazi hands by accident. I convinced the Doctor to enlist the aid of the Allied forces in getting it back, figuring it would be less dangerous if we had the expert protection of a top-notch squad behind us. And we did. But it was never our intention for any of you to accompany us the entire way. You were supposed to return to your lines once we crossed into enemy territory. But you had other ideas."

"I had my orders, Captain," Saunders said, his voice hard.

"Yes, you did. I'm just relieved everyone made it out alive."

"So am I," Saunders' tone remained unyielding. But he decided to say nothing more. At this point, it wouldn't change anything.

Doc Carter, who had been as impressed as the others by everything around them, was even more curious now why the tall man behind the controls remained detached from the exchange. The Doctor's remote silence made the medic uncomfortable, yet there was something compelling in his clearly relaxed demeanor. He decided to speak out. "Who *are* you, Doctor?"

"Just a traveler."

"You're more than that," Caje conjectured, but inwardly he wasn't so certain he wanted to know anything further.

"Where are we going?" Billy Nelson innocently asked, confusion clouding his features.

"He's taking you back to Allied lines, son," Harkness replied gently, his voice calm and reassuring.

"You mean this 'box' flies?" Kirby exclaimed, eyes wide.

"Among other things," Jack smiled.

"Like a plane?" Littlejohn seemed apprehensive. "What if it crashes?"

"It won't," the Doctor defended frankly, without looking up from his screen.

"Don't be so shocked," Harkness enjoined. "You face the possibility of death every day, Private. I guarantee, right this minute, you're safer in here than anywhere else on earth. Think of it as a way of cheating death." He winked.

"But how's it work?" Kirby asked eagerly, approaching the Captain.

"Transdimensionally," The Doctor interjected, slowly pulling down one of the levers. Suddenly, all movement around them ceased, and the tall central column no longer pulsated up and down.

At first, no one moved. The space was too quiet.

"What happened?" Nelson inquired, nervously, looking around.

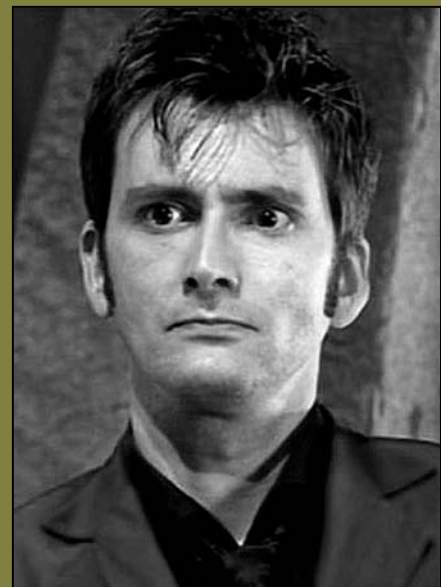
"End of the line," came the Doctor's matter-of-fact response. The faces of the soldiers all turned toward him, but his expression betrayed no emotion, as he added, "Time to go." He looked at Jack, who instantly snapped to attention.

Turning to the sergeant, Harkness gestured toward the ramp. "I'm afraid this is where we leave you."

Saunders thought he detected a note of regret in the man's tone. He nodded, shouldered his machine gun and said to the squad, "You heard the man. Let's move out." He followed Harkness down the ramp to the doors, where the Captain unlocked only one side and stepped through.

A cool, light breeze and the bright afternoon sun greeted the soldiers as they disembarked. The blue box had landed directly in the middle of a dirt road, stretching in front and behind for some considerable distance. The squad saw nothing but the colorful fall foliage of the trees, and heard only the faint call of birds nestling among the branches.

"Where are we?" Nelson inquired.



"Back where we started," the Doctor answered, emerging last from the doorway. He casually ran his hand through his hair. "Well, actually some two miles from where we started." He looked briefly up at the sun and pointed down the road. "The allied camp should lie somewhere in that direction."

"Why so far away?" Kirby grumbled. The prospect of walking when there was means handy to ride never attracted him in the least.

"Less attention that way," the Doctor imparted. "And no questions asked."

"Aren't you coming?" Littlejohn asked.

"Sorry, no. Time for us to move on."

"What do we tell the Lieutenant?"

"Nothing. We were never here," the Doctor explained, then saw the disgruntled looks on everyone's face. "Well, I suppose you have to make some sort of report, don't you? Just tell them we found what we were looking for and sent you back."

"Without our weapons?"

"You were captured, and you got away. Jack and I just ran in another direction, that's all."

"But I don't—."

"Kirby, just drop it," Saunders ordered, ending the discussion. He eyed the tall stranger at the open doorway of his TARDIS. "Doctor."

"Sergeant."

"Do me a favor. Don't come back here again."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Sergeant," the Doctor replied, and, saluting the squad with two fingers to his forehead, added, "Take care of yourselves. And thank you. Time to go, Jack."

Before any of the squad could respond, the Doctor had gone, disappearing back inside his TARDIS. They looked at one another, then turned their attention fully on Captain Harkness, who had already moved to the doorway.

Jack turned and offered the most sincere of smiles. "Guess this is 'goodbye', boys. Thanks for everything."

"Thank *you*, Captain," Saunders returned, his words echoed by others from the squad.

"Watch your backs out there." Harkness was serious now.

"Watch *your* back, sir," Kirby advised.

"How can I not," Jack replied, nodding toward the inside of the TARDIS. "I've got the Doctor."

"Stay out of trouble, huh," Littlejohn said, offering thumbs up. "Both of you."

"We'll do our best," Harkness promised. He lingered a few seconds, not knowing what more to say, but a voice from inside brought him back to the moment.

"Jack, we have to go."

The Captain slowly came to attention and saluted the squad. "Gentlemen, it's been an honor serving at your side."

"And with you, Captain Harkness," Saunders responded for all of them, returning the salute. "Safe journey."

"Thanks, Sergeant. Men." Harkness nodded once, then twice, turned and without looking back, entered the TARDIS and quietly closed the door behind him.

Within seconds, the light on top of the blue box began flashing, and an odd wheezing and pulsating sound emanated from the structure, increasing in volume as the squad watched. Suddenly alarmed, the soldiers hurriedly backed away some twenty feet and stared dumbstruck as the Doctor's TARDIS faded in and out several seconds before completely disappearing from sight.

"Where'd it go?" Nelson asked, in wide-eyed disbelief.

"Who knows," Doc Carter replied, shaking his head.

"What in hell just happened?" Kirby blurted out.

Caje took two steps toward the space the TARDIS had just occupied. "Two very brave men entered a blue police box and disappeared."

"I mean, what the hell are we supposed to do now?"

"Weren't you listening to the Doctor, Kirby?" Saunders resolutely slung his Thompson over one shoulder. "The Boe-Sigma operation was successfully completed. We were captured. We got away, and became separated. We found our own way back to Allied lines. As far as we know, the Doctor and Captain Harkness are still running. Sounds pretty cut and dried to me, how about the rest of you?"

"Fine with me, Sarge," Doc Carter said.

"Me too," Littlejohn concurred.

"You'll get no argument from me," Caje offered, wiping sweat from his face.

Billy Nelson barely managed to nod; unable to move, he was still staring at the empty space on the road where the police box had once stood.

"But, Sarge," Kirby protested "Command will probably ask a lot of questions, right? They're not just gonna take what we say without wanting to know all the details."

"Why not? I don't know about you, Kirby, but we can either give them the Doctor's version of the story, or we can tell the truth. I, for one, prefer the Doctor's version. No hassle, no unnecessary questions asked. Now, if you want to end up in a padded room for the rest of your life, then that's your choice."

"But this really happened," Kirby whined. "We didn't just dream it."

"And if we survive this war, we can laugh about it over drinks in a bar somewhere. Now that's something to look forward to." Sarge put one hand on his BAR man's shoulder. "Leave it alone Kirby. It's over and done. We still have a war to fight."

"Well, at least we know what we're facing," Doc Carter mused. "Somehow I doubt the Doctor or the Captain have that same advantage. I wonder where they came from."

"I doubt we'll ever know that," the non-com replied, pragmatically. "Just something else to talk about over those drinks, eh, Doc?"

"I guess so."

"Let's move out." He took one last look at the empty road behind them, and started walking in the opposite direction. After a few steps, he asked, to no one in particular, "Anyone hungry? I hate to admit this, but I wish now I'd taken that apple the Doctor offered me."

Littlejohn brightened. "This one, Sarge? He gave it to me, before he esc—" He stopped, suddenly embarrassed. "If I hadn't let the Captain distract me with that cigarette—"

"Shit," Kirby spat angrily. "I wish I had a damn cigarette right now. Lousy Krauts. All I got is these damned matches."

"We're all in the same shape, Kirby. All I have is my light—" Saunders suddenly stopped, searching his pockets. Realization soon dawned, and he dropped his gaze to the ground, a sinking feeling spreading into the pit of his stomach. "Dammit! I gave my lighter to the Captain. We were ambushed before he could give it back."

"You can get another one, Sarge," Billy's tone was optimistic.

Saunders' mood darkened. "Shit. It's probably lying on the ground back in that clearing." He shook his head sadly. His father's lighter, the last thing of his Saunders had left, was now lost forever.

Littlejohn handed the sergeant the Doctor's apple. "Since we don't have anything to cut this with, we'll have to pass it around. You take the first bite, Sarge. The Doctor offered it to you first."

Saunders looked at the big Nebraskan and accepted the offer, nodding his gratitude. "Thanks." He bit into the fruit and chewed hungrily, savoring the sweet taste. "That's good."

Everyone took turns until the apple was nothing more than a lump of seeds. Then Littlejohn made a toast, "Here's to the Doctor and Captain Jack Harkness," and tossed the remains deep into the trees lining the road. "Maybe someday a whole grove of apple trees will end up growing here. I'd like to see that."

"Me, too," Billy agreed, smiling, feeling a little less tense.

"I think we all would," Doc Carter nodded.

As the squad continued down the road, Kirby asked one final question. "Hey, Sarge, what should I say if someone at command asks if I know anything else about the mission?"

"Well, Kirby, you've got about a mile and a half to come up with something, don't you?"



EPILOGUE: *One Day in Peoria, Illinois, 1950*

Chip Saunders pulled into his driveway and got out of the old Ford pickup. He retrieved two bags of groceries from the truck bed and walked toward the front porch of his two-story white-frame home. When he saw his wife rounding the corner of the house, he flashed her a wide smile.

Dana Saunders, eight months pregnant, moved slowly, an expression of bewilderment on her face, but she quickly waved when she saw her husband. She met him on the front steps, brushing a strand of auburn hair from her face as she reached up to kiss him warmly on the lips. "Did you see your friend?"

"Friend?"

"You couldn't have missed him. He was just here on the porch. He came up to the door, and knocked. I figured he was one of your old army buddies. I told him you'd be back any minute, but he said he really couldn't wait. Anyway, I went back inside to get a piece of paper to write down his name, but when I came back he was walking around the side of the house. There was no car in front, so I followed him."

Saunders was puzzled. Who'd be visiting in Peoria? All the old squad members, with the exception of Kirby, resided far away, in other parts of the country. "What'd he look like?"

"He was quite charming, and very handsome." She blushed, then quickly added, "Not handsome like you, of course, but nothing to shake a stick at. He was in uniform, wearing a long blue-gray overcoat. He looked—" Dana stopped, noticing all the color draining from her husband's face. "What is it?"

"Where'd you say he was headed?" Saunders quickly set the groceries on the porch. Dana grew curious. "Around there, but—"

Saunders flew off the steps and raced around the side of the house. His wife followed as quickly as she could. By the time she reached the corner, her husband was already returning.

"I was trying to tell you, right after he went back here, I heard this very strange sound, like metal or engines grinding against each other. I don't know how to describe it. It was just odd. But, even as slow as I am right now, there is no way he could have gotten all the way round the house before I got here. And if he jumped the fence, it would have taken him time in that long coat."

"You don't know this man."

"Who is he?"

"Someone I met during the war. His name is Jack Harkness. Was anyone else with him, a man in a long brown overcoat perhaps?"

"No. There was no one else, just him. At least he was the only one I saw. Maybe he'll be back."

"I doubt it," Chip said, then smiled, more to himself than to his wife. "This'll be something to tell the guys at the next squad reunion. They'll never believe it. I wonder what he wanted."

"Oh, I almost forgot, he left something for you. He said to tell you he's so sorry he forgot to give it back." She reached into her apron pocket and placed in her husband's hand his father's bright silver Zippo lighter.

The End