

TAROT

Geneva: January 11. 1969

Saturday, 09:29

Softly, it began to snow.

The Doctor watched the base slowly disappear beneath the cold, thinking. He tapped his umbrella absentmindedly, a pattern it would take a squadron of genii a fortnight's solid work to predict: behind him and the squat concrete buildings, a Cyber-army was massing. Five minutes ago, Ace had got herself captured and was probably already being interrogated by the Cyber-leader. Most of the UNIT troops were dead, or being converted into fresh Cybermen. But despite all of that, something didn't feel right about the base.

He checked his pocket watch: he still had twenty minutes before he would save the world. Plenty of time for a quick look round.

Opening his umbrella, his soft grey eyes scanned the base. Most of the blocky grey buildings were slowly turning white under the snow. It would slow UNIT down a fraction of a second, but not the Cybermen: he adjusted his timing suitably. Most of the base was empty now: the troops in hiding, the rest evacuated. Only the fatalities remained, islands of crimson khaki, some still warm enough to melt the falling snow.

Out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor saw something move. He checked his watch: no, not them, yet.

Sitting with his back against the accounts department was a soldier. He wore the simple khaki uniform of the regulars and a slim brown beret perched at a jaunty angle on his head. At first, the Doctor had taken him for just another of the casualties, until he'd seen him move. He was shuffling an outsized pack of cards with delicate pianist's fingers, then dealing them out on the snow to some unknown pattern of his own design.

Quietly, the Doctor paced over, leaving a trail of frozen footprints marring the unbroken snowfall around him.

'Good game?' he asked.

The soldier looked up calmly. A pair of crystal blue eyes drained the colour from the rest of his face, sparkling fire in the morning sun. The Doctor found himself transfixed by them: the soldier reminded him of somebody, but he couldn't think who.

'You could say that,' the soldier replied, slowly turning the top card over.

The Doctor looked at it: a picture of a pale rider holding out a cup. The

Doctor knew he recognised him. His horse's hooves rested gently on the words *Chevalier des Coupes*. The Cavalier of Cups.

'Tarot?' he asked, an eyebrow raised. The soldier merely nodded.

The Doctor tried to remember just what the cavalier symbolised. Wasn't it an invitation? A challenge? But the card was upside down - no, reversed. Didn't that change the meaning?

'Would you like a reading?' the soldier asked.

Subtlety. Cunning. That was what the card meant.

'I don't know,' the Doctor said. 'It's not safe here.'

The soldier smiled: 'Surely you've got all of that in hand by now?'

So the Doctor sat opposite him on the snow-strewn concrete, because in that instant he'd realised just who it was the soldier reminded him of: himself. The soldier smiled and handed him the cards.

The snow kept falling.

The Doctor handed back the shuffled cards, and the soldier took them with a grave face. He started laying them down on the snow. Face up, they started to form a pattern. The Doctor was sure he recognised it: perhaps if he tipped his head, or squinted maybe, it would come to him.

'Any specific question you want to ask?' the soldier asked.

The Doctor shook his head.

'Too late now anyway.'

The last card went down, and the Doctor tipped his head and squinted. The pattern remained illusive. He rested his elbows on his knees, dropping his umbrella to the floor, and scrutinised the six cards again.

‘All Major Arcana,’ the soldier commented, impressed. ‘You’ve got a powerful future, Doctor.’

The Doctor had to admit defeat.

‘What do they mean?’

The soldier calmly slid the first card out with a slender digit. It was a picture of a couple sitting under a full moon.

‘This is the present,’ he explained. ‘The moon. Nasty card, the moon. Most of yours are nasty cards. She stands for deceit, danger, that sort of thing. Unknown enemies, and unforeseen dangers. Ring any bells?’

‘Perhaps,’ answered the Time Lord.

‘Well, the chariot here, he’s telling you what your immediate obstacles are. He says there’s trouble in store, some great ordeal to overcome. It doesn’t look good, does it?’

The Doctor said nothing, his eyes on the cards.

‘This is a good one: this says you’re looking for justice. You want to be a good person. I mean you can see that from your past here: the Magician and Junon. That’s a good combination: resolution and wisdom. Looks like you used to know what you were doing.’ The soldier paused, his finger tapping gently on the final card. ‘And then there’s this. The major influence on your immediate future.’

The Doctor looked down at the card. The snow was starting to obscure

it, and he wiped it off with a single warm finger. The over-riding influence on his future: a skeleton reaping at barren ground. *La Mort*. Death.

‘It doesn’t necessarily mean death,’ the soldier said quietly. ‘It could just mean change: the death of the old, the birth of the new, that sort of thing.’

The Doctor made as if to move, but the soldier rested a hand on his knee.

‘Not yet. It’s not over.’

The Doctor stayed where he was. He couldn’t leave.

The soldier dealt out four more cards onto the frozen concrete, one above the other in a straight line. The Doctor’s eyes stayed on the death card.

‘I wouldn’t worry about it too much,’ the soldier said, then stopped to examine the other cards. ‘Then again . . .’

The Doctor shifted his gaze. Four new cards: an angel with an urn, upside down,

(Reversed, a small part of his mind told him.)

an ancient tower being struck by lightning, a devil wielding a pitchfork gazing down on destruction, and finally a man hanging upside down from a tree by one leg.

‘Temperance reversed,’ the soldier read, ‘the house of God, the Devil, the Hanged Man.’

‘What . . .’ the Doctor’s voice cracked. ‘What do they mean.’

The soldier looked from him, to the cards. His finger pointed them out one by one.

'Temperance is you now. Normally she's a good card to have - harmony, friendship, that sort of thing. Not for you, though. She's reversed. You're at conflict with yourself, a discord. That's not good.'

'No,' said the Doctor, but whether he was agreeing or protesting, he wasn't sure.

'And the tower, that's the things you can't control about your future. Looks like you're going to have a turbulent time: evil influences, terrible danger, collapse of the old, ruin and misery, that sort of thing. And him here, he's how you'll feel about all of this. *// Diable*: bondage, shock, violence, self-punishment. It doesn't look like your going to have a good time of it, Doctor.'

The Doctor looked down at the cards spelling his life out in the falling snow. He shook his head and told himself he didn't believe a word of it.

'What about that?' he asked, pointing at the final card.

The soldier picked it up.

'The Hanging Man. He's the outcome of all this torment,' softly he pushed the card into the Doctor's hand. He took it meekly. 'He's not as bad as he looks, really. He stands for sacrifice, improvement, rebirth . . .'

The Doctor looked up from the card and into the soldier's eyes.

'He stands for regeneration,' the soldier said.

The Doctor stood, slipping the oversized card into his coat pocket. The soldier remained seated, gathering up the rest of the pack. The Doctor checked his watch: four minutes left.

'I'd better be going,' the Doctor told him.

The soldier didn't look up.

'Off to face those unknown enemies?'

'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'I know these of old.'

The snow fell. Neither of them moved. Eventually, the Doctor turned to head back to the Cybermen. The soldier stopped him quietly.

'Doctor?' the Doctor stopped, turned. 'Good luck.'

The Doctor looked down into the soldier's burning blue eyes, said:

'Thank you.'

And with those words, he opened his umbrella and walked away around the side of the building. He walked casually and calmly, his piercing grey eyes drinking every detail of the snow covered buildings, his mind ticking off the seconds. If he was going to face his future, he would do it on his own terms. After all, he was the Doctor. Something was wrong here, and it was up to him to put it right