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Contents

Prologue	1
Chapter One	7
Chapter Two	17
Chapter Three	25
Chapter Four	37
Chapter Five	49
Chapter Six	61
Chapter Seven	73
Chapter Eight	79
Chapter Nine	87
Chapter Ten	99
Chapter Eleven	105
Chapter Twelve	117
Chapter Thirteen	127
Chapter Fourteen	141
Chapter Fifteen	149
Chapter Sixteen	157
Chapter Seventeen	165
Chapter Eighteen	173
Chapter Nineteen	183
Chapter Twenty	193

To Mum and Dad.
And also to Lewis and Fio, for the ice puns.

Prologue

It was the coldest winter she had ever known.

Ranavere suppressed a shiver, her breath misting out ahead of her like smoke from some great fire-breathing beast. Even the fur cloaks and padded tunics of the Novgorodian army only did so much to keep out the chill, and away from the fires of camp the cold was biting.

Out here, the pine forests went on forever. Snow fell in clumps, coating the world in unblemished white, swallowing the sun and making visibility all but impossible. Added to the shadow-soft darkness of the forest, walking in any direction became an exercise in daring.

Ranavere had snuck away from camp just before dawn, hurrying into the woods before anyone could spot and question her. Prince Alexander was too preoccupied with repelling the Estonian forces to worry about one lone mercenary, and the sentries were looking for people coming in, not out. If she was stopped as a deserter, she'd simply say she was a scout, searching the forest by orders of the Prince.

Ranavere burrowed deeper into her furs, suppressing a groan. What was she *doing* here?

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What had made her think she was ever going to find where she'd buried the spheres? Out here, in all this? No time to draw a map, no time to construct a marker ...

She *had* to find it.

And now ...

Now she was lost.

Ranavere slumped against a tree trunk, wiping her eyes with the back of a gloved hand. Her legs ached, her side twinged with a blossoming stitch, she had no idea how far she was from camp. She'd been walking almost the entire morning, judging by the angle of the shadows seeping across the snow. Except for her water skin and a hunk of salted meat she'd managed to scavenge, the satchel at her side hung empty of supplies.

Ranavere paused, slowly lifting her head. Beyond the fringe of pine needles, the trees ahead opened onto a tiny clearing, muffled from the rest of the forest by a ring of branches. Something about the clearing struck Ranavere as familiar. Hope stirred in her chest. Slowly, she emerged into the sunlight.

There, in the corner of the clearing, something glinted ruby-red beneath the snow. Ranavere's eyes widened. Was that ...?

She scrambled forward and fell to her knees, scrabbling in the snowbank for the source of the glinting. Ice wormed through her gloves, freezing her already numbed fingertips, but she didn't care. Slowly, she sat back up again.

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There, covered by a fresh layer of snowfall, a ball of metal the size of a helmet lay concealed in the snow. With shaking hands, Ranavere brushed it clean; a round contraption, clumsily forged from a hodgepodge of metal parts, welded in place and thick with frost. Ranavere turned it over, hardly daring to hope ...

Embedded in the middle of the ball, a bright red light flashed on and off, bathing Ranavere's face and hands in scarlet – the only glint of colour in this snow-bound world. Ranavere let out a desperate little laugh.

Someone had found her! Someone had answered the signal!

She clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the laugh, mindful of the sound.

Too late.

Ranavere's ears pricked. A new sound had begun, far off between the trees; a low throbbing, rushing sound, like wind sweeping down a mountainside. It howled through the clearing, bringing a flush of warm air that ruffled Ranavere's cloak and hat, melting the top layer of snow around her knees. She froze, her grip tightening on the metal ball.

She knew that sound. Knew it all too well

The wind subsided, only to be replaced moments later by the sound of thundering footsteps from somewhere behind her. The vibrations shook the clearing, sending fresh snow tumbling from the branches above.

'Ranavere!' a voice bellowed from that same direction.

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Ranavere shoved the device into her satchel and scrambled to her feet, casting about in terror. She couldn't go back the way she'd come, but she barely even knew which direction she was facing. One wrong turn and she'd be scrambling deeper into the forest, towards wolves and bears and enemy troops.

As if making the decision for her, the trees around her shuddered, then two heavy armoured figures barrelled into the clearing.

Both stood as tall as war chargers, their faces hidden behind angular metal helmets. The swords in their hands pulsed with a yellow glow, lighting the clearing like miniature suns.

The gaze of the nearest settled on Ranavere. Its eyes narrowed. It lifted a gauntleted hand to point at her.

'There you are!' it bellowed.

Ranavere turned and ran, stumbling through the unyielding snow, pushing past branches laden with icicles, tripping on roots concealed beneath her feet, hardly caring which direction she picked now, as long as it was far, far away from here. She'd even take the wolves.

She shot a glance over her shoulder, almost ran head-first into a tree trunk, stumbled, ducked to avoid a hanging branch, and kept going. The satchel clattered against her leg, a constant reminder of its heavy new cargo.

Behind her, the thundering footsteps were in pursuit. The surrounding trees shuddered with each new thud, making it seem as if the entire forest were charging after her.

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Ranavere fixed her gaze ahead, her lungs already beginning to burn. Which way? Which way? In the snowbound shadows, everything looked the same. If she just kept running, surely eventually she'd reach—

Far off between the trees, something glistened; a flash of sunlight, an open space, blinding white, shining like a floor of diamond.

Ranavere's stomach hitched. She was almost there! She had a chance!

With all the strength she had in her, fuelled by terror and desperation, she ran.

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Chapter One

‘Might just be me,’ said Ruby, staring into the sleek white cup of dark steaming liquid the TARDIS console had just dispensed for her, ‘but this coffee tastes funny.’

The TARDIS only gave a low hum in reply.

‘Funny?’

The Doctor was leaning against the console, tinkering with his sonic screwdriver – which, being curved and high-tech, resembled no screwdriver Ruby had ever seen.

‘D’you mean normal funny, or temporally wonky funny?’ he asked. ‘You can tell the difference cos a Temporally Wonky Frappuccino leaves half of you frozen in last Tuesday.’

‘Normal funny, I think,’ said Ruby, leaning on the console beside him. ‘I asked for a latte, but it tastes ... I don’t know. Bit like ... I want to say roast potatoes?’ She offered her cup to him. ‘Try some?’

The Doctor took a sip, lifting his gaze skyward in contemplation. ‘Hm. Sunday roast in a cup!’ he said. ‘Classy!’ He shot Ruby a glance. ‘Could check the flavour gauges. But it’s a long climb to the sub-engines; we’d have to find a map, the vortex-sluicers haven’t been cleaned, and I like this jacket.’

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'You can just say you like the Sunday-Roast coffee flavour,' Ruby grinned. 'I won't mind.'

'You got me.' The Doctor grinned back. 'I'll make you a tea if you like. Just let me finish scattergraphing the spacelock hyperdrive.'

'You know, sometimes I think you make stuff up, just to see if I'll notice,' said Ruby. She motioned to a big red button in the middle of the twinkling lights and tantalising levers on the console, pulsing with an eerie crimson light. 'Is that the spacelock thingie?'

'No, but it does something very important.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. Flash ominously.'

'All right,' Ruby laughed, then pointed to a large yellow light next to her leg, which had begun to blink in rapid succession. 'What's that one mean?'

The Doctor pocketed the screwdriver and moved to stand beside her, his expression suddenly serious.

'That's a distress call,' he said.

Ruby jumped down from the console. 'Seriously?'

'Seriously seriously.'

'Where's it coming from?' she asked, as the Doctor hurried around to the other side of the console, pulling levers and pressing buttons, murmuring to himself.

'Thirteenth-century Earth,' he said, pulling one of the many central screens towards him. 'Estonia.'

'Thirteenth-century *Estonia*!' Ruby moved to stand behind him, as if the cluster of alien symbols and letters

might suddenly blossom into English and tell her the same things it told the Doctor. 'Like ... medieval times. That can't be right, can it?'

'Why not?' the Doctor asked, darting off again. 'Little tiny planet in the middle of nowhere? Practically the only populated thing for miles and miles? Basically a magnet for all kinds of things!'

'Yeah, but ... *medieval aliens*? Knights and horses and castles?'

'Ships've been landing on Earth for centuries, Rubes.'

'Really? Like what?'

The Doctor poked his head around the console. 'Well. Mine, for a start!'

Ruby laughed. 'So it's a crashed ship? On medieval Earth? That's got to be weird for everyone.'

'Weirder than weird,' the Doctor agreed. 'They're probably lost, frightened, need some help.' He paused, his hand resting on a lever. 'Ready to find out?'

She smiled. 'S'what we do, right?'

'Bingo!'

He pulled the lever. Ruby grabbed the console, her knees buckling as the TARDIS rumbled to life with a familiar screech. The shaking lasted only a few short seconds. Ruby pictured them whirling through a thousand different time periods, a million different possible places to land, bouncing through the vortex like a tiny cosmic ping pong ball. Time and time again she'd tried to imagine what lay beyond the TARDIS doors

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in moments like this, but sometimes it felt better not knowing.

Finally, the room juddered to a halt. The console stopped flashing, and Ruby let out a long breath, sweeping the hair out of her eyes with a laugh.

‘Right!’ The Doctor leapt back from the console and darted towards one of the corridors leading off through the TARDIS.

‘Where are you going?’ Ruby asked.

‘To grab a winter coat!’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Medieval Estonia! Not known for its rolling beaches and humid climes! D’you want anything?’

‘I’m good, thanks.’ Ruby rolled her shoulders and started towards the doors. ‘I could do with the fresh air!’ She pushed open the TARDIS doors.

A blast of freezing air streamed past her into the TARDIS. Ruby stepped back with a gasp, blinking in the blinding sunlight. Ahead of her lay a world of glittering white. She squinted, shielding her eyes with a hand.

‘How’s it looking?’ came the Doctor’s muffled voice.

Ruby found her voice again. ‘It’s freezing!’

‘I’ll grab you that coat, yeah?’

‘Please!’ Ruby hugged herself. ‘And some gloves?’

‘Coming up!’

Ruby poked her head back outside the TARDIS. Now the shock of arrival had passed, the true shape of the landscape presented itself in shades of blue and grey and glaring white. This wasn’t some strange alien world

or dimensional anomaly; the TARDIS had landed in the middle of a vast frozen lake.

Ice stretched out in all directions, glistening with frost, lanced through with miniature cracks that could almost have been veins. It wasn't flat, but seemed to fall and rise in peaks and swirls, on and on into the distance, as if frozen on the cusp of heavy currents. Far on the horizon rose hills and mountains bristling with fir trees, rising to a sky as white as milk.

Ruby reached out with a tentative foot and prodded the ice directly outside the TARDIS door. It felt stable enough. If they'd been able to land the TARDIS without difficulty, surely that meant the ice would take her weight. She leaned forward, teeth gritted, steeling herself to leap back in case the ground beneath her began to crack.

The ice held firm.

Ruby let out a long slow breath and stepped out fully, turning her attention to the landscape. It was even more breathtaking outside the TARDIS; a rolling vista of ice and snow and glittering peaks, curving unbroken across the horizon, so clearly a thing of Earth, and yet like nothing Ruby had ever witnessed.

'What do you see?' called the Doctor's voice from the TARDIS.

Ruby blinked. 'Nothing!' she called back. 'It's all just ... ice!'

'Lake Peipus in early spring!' the Doctor called back. 'Brilliant, isn't it?'

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Ruby turned, her breath misting in the frosty air. 'Couldn't you have put us somewhere a bit more... I don't know, populated?'

'It's the twelve-hundreds!' came the exasperated reply. '*Populated* means a decent-sized high street compared to your time. Now give me a minute, cos I've got to choose between scarves.'

Ruby grinned to herself. She was about to step back inside the TARDIS, when a flash of movement from the shoreline made her turn. A figure had emerged from a patch of trees surrounding the lake. It stumbled as it hit the ice, regained its balance, then started forward towards the TARDIS at a staggering run.

'Uh ... Doctor ...' said Ruby, stepping back towards the doorway.

Even at a distance, there was something desperate about the figure's movements. It ran without considering the ice beneath it, frequently slipping, bounding upwards on its hands and knees the moment it hit the ice. Dressed in a fur cloak and hat, a leather satchel as its side thudding against its leg as it ran, it cut a strange silhouette in this desolate, empty place.

About halfway between the forest and the TARDIS, the figure seemed to notice Ruby's presence. It froze. Ruby could sense the tension in its body, as if it couldn't quite process another person standing there.

Hesitantly, Ruby lifted a hand and waved.

The figure paused a moment longer, then unfroze in a

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sudden burst of energy. It jolted forward, waving its arms above its head.

Ruby stepped back against the TARDIS, immediately regretting her decision to wave. The figure didn't look threatening; if anything, it looked no taller than Ruby herself. But it was dressed in armour, and running full pelt towards her, which didn't strike Ruby as Entirely Harmless Activity.

'Doctor!' she whispered.

No reply. Ruby looked back at the running figure. As it drew nearer, it resolved into the shape of a young girl; short, with a mass of gingery hair poking out from beneath her fur hat. She shouted something, but it was snatched away by the wind. Ruby shook her head in mute uncertainty.

Something was wrong. The girl's eyes were wide with fear, her face pale against her curls. She skidded suddenly, righted herself, and shouted again, this time loud enough for Ruby to hear:

'You came!' she yelled, breathless with relief.

Ruby took a step back, putting out her hands as the girl scrambled the final few feet to the TARDIS then lurched forward.

'Hey! what are you—' Ruby began.

The girl made to grab Ruby's hand, slipped on a section of ice, and fell into her arms instead.

'Whoa!' Ruby staggered against the TARDIS, her feet skidding.

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The girl clasped her arms, laughing with delight. 'You came!' she gasped again. 'You actually came!' There were tears in her eyes, glistening on her cheeks like fallen frost. Her nose was red from the cold.

'Uh ... Hi!' Ruby managed. 'Yeah, we came. Erm, what's going on?'

A shout cut through the air behind them. The girl twisted back the way she'd come, letting out a moan of despair.

Two more figures had emerged from the trees around the lake. They were tall, dressed in armour that glinted in the sunlight, their faces shadowed by narrow helmets.

The girl spun back to Ruby. 'You have to get me out of here!' she pleaded, struggling to stand. 'Right now!'

With a finesse the girl had lacked, the two figures started across the ice towards the TARDIS. They reminded Ruby of illustrations she'd seen of ancient Valkyries, all muscular arms and flashing eyes. The weapons in their hands emitted a bright sunlight glow.

Ruby stumbled to her feet. 'Leaving! Right, yes!' she said, dragging the girl towards the doors. 'Doctor!'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just a minute!' came the voice from inside.

'Doctor! Something's happening!'

The Doctor emerged from the TARDIS at a run, dressed in a grey fur coat and fluffy boots, clutching an equally fluffy bundle to his chest. He paused at the unfolding scene, letting the doors swing shut behind him.

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