

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

A Winter's Tale



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Published by Jigsaw Publications
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Published December 2016

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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

Cover designed by Alex Lydiate
Interior Design by Bob Furnell

Brief Encounters logo © 2009 Brian Taylor
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Typeset in Corbel

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In the console room of the TARDIS, the Doctor watched as the central time rotor slowed and finally stopped. He brushed at the frills on his shirt and looked across to his companion. Jo looked up at him, her large trusting eyes clouded with doubt, remembering the Doctor's promise to take her home to Earth.

"Where have we landed?" she asked nervously.

"The co-ordinates were set for Earth, and they are still the same." The Doctor studied the instruments in front of him, and frowned at a reading on one of the meters, tapping it in the hope that it would change. "Strange," he muttered.

"What's wrong?"

"The temperature outside seems to be below zero, and there's a strong magnetic force operating from nearby."

"Why don't we have a look?" Jo suggested. The Doctor flicked a switch and the scanner buzzed on, the picture obscured by a blanket of white particles flying across the screen. The Doctor turned to Jo.

"It appears to be snowing." He looked slightly bemused. "The magnetic force must have drawn us off course."

"Where are we then?" Jo asked worriedly.

"Well, the co-ordinates say Earth, but they could have been affected by the magnetic pull." He looked down for a moment. "I don't know where we are."

Jo looked to him for an answer. "What are we going to do then?"

The Doctor paused. "Well, before we go anywhere else, I need to find out where we've landed, and when we've arrived." He looked down at Jo's short costume. "You'll need to put on something warmer." As Jo left the console room to change, the Doctor looked at the screen, wondering what was out there.

The landscape looked like something out of a weatherman's nightmare. Driving snow obscured visibility, reducing forward vision to only a few scant metres. The ground was covered with pack ice, overlaid by a powdery layer of fresh snow. Though the clouds blocked out the sunlight, there was a white glow as the myriad colours reflected in the snow. There was no vegetation to be seen. The only shape in sight was the TARDIS, which was rapidly acquiring a coating of snow.

The door opened, and the Doctor and Jo emerged. The Doctor was dressed in a woollen overcoat over his dinner jacket, whilst Jo had changed into a white snowsuit and hat. She looked around without enthusiasm.

"Looks like we've left one planet of ice for another," she moaned, recalling her narrow escape from the icecano on Spiridon.

"This is Earth," the Doctor assured her. "We may have landed in one of the polar regions, which would also explain the magnetic field."

Jo peered through the onslaught. "I can't see any penguins or polar bears."

The Doctor smiled. "Would you come out in weather like this?"

Jo shivered. "Then what are we doing out here? There's no one about to ask where we are."

The Doctor peered into the distance. His keen eyes had spotted a plume of smoke rising into the air. "It looks as though there's a building over there. We can go and ask for directions." He set off at a brisk pace. Jo looked longingly at the warmth of the TARDIS, and then followed, wishing, not for the first time, that the Doctor could sometimes curb his insatiable curiosity.

The room was large and cosy, with a roaring fire on the far wall, and a silver box of logs to its side. A work bench occupied the main part of the room. It was littered with pieces of wood and plastic, glue and paints, and a selection of woodworking tools. To the outsider it was a mess, a hopeless jumble of materials. To its owner, the bench was in a state of ordered chaos – a place for everything and everything in its place.

The owner was sitting at the bench, studiously painting a small wooden boat. The expression on his face reflected the care he was taking. He was a tall man, even when seated. His greying hair was a tangle of curls, and he had a small neat beard. He was so involved with his work that at first he did not hear the quiet chatter of voices outside. He paused to listen, and this time heard voices more clearly. He rose to his feet and went over to the door.

Outside, the Doctor and Jo looked around the small homestead. Despite the biting cold, Jo noticed that there was a smaller shed to one side of the main building. She crossed to peer into the gloom within, and could hear the soft breathing of animals. She turned back.

"Doctor, there's something in here."

The Doctor came over to her side. Inside the shed were eight animals, not unlike horses, but larger and with horns.

"Reindeer," he told her. "They use them in icy regions to transport people and materials across the tundra."

Before he could say more, the door to the main building opened, and light spilled out into the yard. A tall figure was silhouetted in the doorway. He looked at the Doctor and Jo, but said nothing. Ever the diplomat, the Doctor opened.

"We're sorry to disturb you, sir, but my friend and I appear to be lost. Our craft landed in the snow about a mile away, and our instruments aren't working properly. I wonder if you could give us some directions."

The man looked at Jo, standing there shivering.

"You'd better come in for a few minutes, rather than stay out there in the cold."

He moved inside, and the Doctor and Jo followed. She hurried over to the fire and slowly warmed her hands. The man watched her kindly for a moment, and then turned to the Doctor.

"You've picked a terrible night to be lost in the snow. Unfortunately, I have no telephone, and there is only me here. If your craft is bogged down, there is nothing I can do until the morning..."

"Our craft is safe in the snow, but we have no navigational information as to our location."

"You are at the North Pole..." He paused, realizing that he did not know either of their names.

"I am the Doctor, and this is Jo Grant."

Whilst they were talking, Jo had been looking around. She looked at the workbench full of materials, and then at the stranger himself. There was a thought nagging at the back of her mind, but it would not come. She remembered the reindeer, and suddenly knew what she was thinking – but it was not possible – was it?

She crossed to the Doctor, who was still talking. She jogged his arm to get his attention, and then motioned him to one side. She whispered in his ear, and then watched his reaction. The Doctor looked puzzled for a moment, and then his face cleared.

The Doctor spoke first.

"You must excuse my young friend. She thought she had seen you before."

The old man smiled knowingly at Jo.

"Really, my dear? And who do I remind you of?"

Jo paused awkwardly. Now that she had voiced her thoughts, she was reluctant to appear foolish in front of this stranger. But his amiable manner calmed her fears and before she realized what she was doing, she blurted out:

"Father Christmas!"

The old man smiled.

"I see that your young friend has discovered my secret. I am indeed..."

Before he could continue, Jo interrupted.

"But it's not possible. Father Christmas is a legend, a character invented for the benefit of children. There's no such person." She did not seem to realize that her manner could have been construed as rude.

The old man explained:

"Many legends and myths are based on reality. Is there not a story of a person called St Nicholas, on whom the character was supposed to be based?"

Jo nodded.

"But he lived hundreds of years ago. No human could live that long – I mean, you don't look more than sixty."

"Thank you. There is a simple explanation - I am not human. Some three thousand years ago, I visited this planet and was treated by the inhabitants of Greenland as a god, a guardian spirit. Over the years, I have visited these people occasionally, and on one occasion heard of the legend of St Nicholas, who brought gifts to children. The idea appealed to me, and so, each year since then, I have looked for those people who are especially deserving of rewards, and have given them something. With the passing of time, the two have become intertwined, and so it is that my figure has become associated with that of Father Christmas."

He looked at a clock on the wall, and sighed. "I'm afraid that I must go. I have a long way to travel, and I must be there by midnight."

The Doctor remembered the reason that they had come. "Can you tell me the exact date and time? I need them to reset our instruments so that we can continue on our journey."

The old man smiled. "It is December 24th 1977, and it is just after seven o'clock in the evening." He paused. "It has been nice to meet you. It is so rare that I get to see anyone to speak to properly. Who knows – one day I may come to visit you."

They shook hands, and turned once more to face the elements. He watched them go, a smile still on his face. It was nice to know that he was remembered by people both old and young.

Back in the TARDIS, the Doctor programmed the co-ordinates, and turned to Jo, who was looking sadly at the screen.

"What makes a person come to Earth and help people like that?" she asked quietly.

The Doctor looked wistful. "My reasons for returning to Earth are not so different. I arrive on planets, and often get caught up with their events. Some people just find themselves drawn into such situations – others don't. As long as there are people like that on Earth, there's hope for the future of the human race."

He pressed a switch on the console, and the TARDIS dematerialized from the snowy landscape, on its way – where...?



The TARDIS is pulled off course by a strong magnetic field.
Exploring the icy landscape, the Third Doctor and Jo Grant
meet a strangely familiar character and discover the truth behind
one of Earth's most enduring legends.

This story features the Third Doctor & Jo Grant



This is another in a series of original fan authored
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project

