

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

It's Behind You



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It's Behind You!

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The gun - which resembled a washing-up liquid bottle sprayed silver - was levelled more or less at the Doctor's head. He stood firm and shielded the cowering young woman behind him from the monstrosity before them. To one side, a guard dressed in baggy silver spandex gazed with wonder in her eyes.

"At last! Not even *you* can evade the Panzaoids' mighty clutches!" roared the six-foot blue lizard wielding the fearsome weapon.

The Doctor's chest swelled in his tasteless coat. "Don't worry," he said to his blonde companion, Cindy. "Once I've finished telling people how brilliant I am, I shall easily defeat this menace!"

"I'm not sure we have that long, Doctor," said Cindy.

"Good point. I'll send you my notes later." And with a well-rehearsed flourish, he whipped out a small tube with a green light on the end. "I'm sure my sonic screwdriver will make short work of that electro-discombobulator!"

"Fizz, fizz, argh," said the lizard and carefully put the gun on the floor.

The Doctor frowned and grasped a handful of his brown curls. "Shouldn't the gun explode or something?"

There was a patient sigh from the guard. "The gun can't explode because that would hurt Vorkaloid."

"Well, he *is* planning to enslave the human race."

"That is true, actually," said Vorkaloid.

The guard, Louise, clutched the bridge of her nose and grimaced. "The gun can't explode because that would mean you're using the sonic screwdriver as a weapon. You're the Doctor and you don't carry weapons."

"It is a bit unspectacular, though," said the Doctor.

Louise rolled her eyes and pulled the sagging polyester out of her armpit. "OK, let's have a breather. Stretch your legs and come back in ten minutes. Cindy, stop picking your nose"

She watched them put down their scripts and mill about the hall of the scout hut, with

the Doctor nipping off for a swift smoke. The show was in only a few hours - why were the four of them still so uninspired?

* * * * *

The *real* Vorkaloid trudged to the newsagent's; leaving a trail of ichor that faintly luminesced under the autumn sunshine. He crossed the village green, his blue scales richly contrasted against the orange leaves. A young family played with a Yorkshire terrier but Vorkaloid's practised timing meant he avoided the creature's attention.

He pushed the shop's glass door open with carefully subdued strength; firmly enough to ring the bell but gently enough that he didn't shatter the frame again. Mrs. Scribbins looked over her half-moon specs and gave a gummy smile.

"Morning, Mr. Vorkaloid! You've brought the sun with you!"

The lizard rested his elbow on the counter and his head on his palm. "This sun is weak and pale next to the mighty suns of Panza. I long to bask in their resplendent golden rays!"

Mrs. Scribbins chuckled. "Not to worry. It'll be raining soon enough. Mind out, Gary" she called to the paperboy, as he entered and negotiated the glowing slime trail. "It's a bit slippery there."

As the shopkeeper handed over his bag of papers, Gary gleefully hopped from foot to foot and bobbed his ginger head. "Good morning, Mrs. Scribbins. Good morning, Mr. Vorkaloid."

"Good morning, human. Why do you fidget so?"

"Today is going to be the best day *ever!* I'm going paintballing this afternoon for Simon's birthday and then I'm going to see *The Frangeford Terror* this evening!"

Seeing the furrowed reptilian brow, he continued. "It's a science fiction play that the amateur dramatic society is putting on. It's been my favourite story since we did it in school in first year. Imagine Frangeford being involved in something so exciting!"

Mrs. Scribbins smiled indulgently. "Now, Gary, you know that story is just something somebody made up to make our village sound more interesting, don't you?"

Vorkaloid snorted a cloud of oily steam from his ear-holes. "Science is not fiction! *Fiction!* This human obsession with pretence and lies is yet more proof that you deserve to be subjugated! Humanity will be our slaves!"

There was a moment's silence as Mrs. Scribbins and Gary gazed in puzzlement at him. Vorkaloid quickly spluttered and withdrew his claw from where he'd pounded it into the counter.

"Err... I mean, two sacks of charcoal, a bottle of oven cleaner and a Gazette, please."

And equanimity was restored, as if he had just politely apologised for some casual *faux pas*. Vorkaloid exhaled in relief and hurriedly left with his purchases. After so many years, it was becoming more and more difficult to maintain the Normality Field. He knew it was at full power – he'd charged it only the previous night. In theory, a community living with a subconscious acceptance of the bizarre should have become inured to it by now. It shouldn't require any effort at all to convince them that everything was fine and that there *wasn't* a blue alien lizard dwelling among them. Instead, they seemed to see the strange in their own shadows and were fearful of everything from dentists to household spiders.

The Normality Field didn't work on non-sentient creatures and to Vorkaloid this was further evidence that humans were little more than animals. Lost in his thoughts, he had forgotten about the terrier on the village green and was pursued all the way home by the yapping beast, while its owners cheerfully apologised and whistled for it to behave.

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Louise joined the Doctor – Hugh - as he puffed on a cigarette around the back of the scout hut.

"Nervous?"

"I am a bit," he replied. "People around here seem very hard to impress."

"That's why I pushed for *Frangemouth Terror*. It's a local story which everyone around here knows. That was the only reason I managed to get the Council agreed to open up Wiggins Park." Louise leaned against the wall and pondered the ends of her brown hair. "Mind you, I can see why you might worry about the ending being a bit of a damp squib. 'The Doctor talks to the aliens and they run off' is hardly the stuff of action movies."

Hugh gave her a lop-sided smile. "You're going to tell me that's the point, though, aren't you?"

Louise nodded with an apologetic smile "That's the story everyone loves around here."

"Ah, but if it's not real, we can change it how we like, can't we?" Hugh flung his stub away and adjusted his bow tie.

"And make it just like every other story? Come on - it's too late in the day to be changing the script, and we couldn't afford to do convincing explosions anyway."

She pulled open the fire exit doors that led back into the hut. With a smile and a wink, she added, "Besides. *It is* a true story."

Hugh chuckled. "OK. It was either this or *The Pajama Game*. At least we're not doing a musical."

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Vorkaloid wearily dumped his shopping on the kitchen table and filled a pan of water to boil. (His claws were too large for puny human kettles.) He idly opened the Frangeford Gazette and read with scorn that the village fête had been a success despite the overcast weather, a local policeman had made it to the semi-finals of a TV quiz show and that a hurt dog had recovered from falling off a wall. Little wonder that humans should turn to fantasy when their lives were so trivial!

The two hundred years he'd spent in Frangeford had only intensified his desire to complete his mission: for the Panzaoids to activate a planet-wide Normality Field and establish their base here. It had been slow work as he was the only one left behind but very soon the Total Normality Field would be ready to fully activate! All of Earth would be unaware of the Panzaoid fleet landing; perhaps they would imagine it as unusually heavy hail or at most a meteor shower. And then it would be too late! The years of radio silence and isolation would be justified and he would return to Panza bathed in triumph!

He flopped into a plastic-covered armchair and stirred a spoonful of oven cleaner into the bowl of boiling water he'd made. He sipped it pensively as he flicked through the rest of the newspaper.

Under a photo of a six-year old dressed as a pirate, he saw the half-page advert for *The Frangeford Terror. Presented by The Frangeford Amateur Dramatic Society. A colourfully-dressed man grinned, waving his sonic tool as he was menaced by a blue lizard. 8pm this evening! One night only! Our local legend brought to life! Re-enacted where it all happened – Wiggins Park!*

Uh oh.

* * * * *

Louise Ethers was Frangemouth's librarian and unofficial historian. She too had been inspired by the tale of her village's very own alien invasion when she first heard it thirty years ago at school. She knew that what was not embellishment was probably largely conjecture. But she did believe that there was a core of truth and, despite the country's refusal to take the village's claims seriously, something really remarkable really did happen in their little home two hundred years before. A benevolent and enigmatic alien really did force a group of malign monsters to retreat, abandoning their plans to enslave humanity.

Even if it was a local in-joke, a quaint thing to justify the blue lizard novelty key-fobs and the Menacing Lizard pub sign, it was still at heart an inspiring story of when the mundane was visited by the wondrous. But she had found that lately the tale seemed to amuse and excite people less than before. It wasn't just the loss of local pride that came with the homogenisation of Britain over the years; people really seemed to have become more prosaic and even cynical.

So she'd encouraged the amateur dramatic society to perform the story. She'd even been granted permission to use the reputed site of the invasion, which had been fenced off, locked and forgotten about for so long. But due to a lack of enthusiasm, she'd ended up writing, directing and acting in the production, and continually having to jolly everyone along.

It didn't occur to her that it was very unusual for a piece of land to be cordoned off for almost two hundred years.

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The reason it didn't occur to her was the Normality Field. It conferred on the Panzaoids their chief advantage against their foes - effective invisibility. Anyone looking for them would simply explain away anything anomalous they saw in mundane and everyday terms. An alien base would become an overgrown park. And an extra-terrestrial reptile would be seen as a harmless DIY enthusiast. Such it was that after the Doctor tricked his people into leaving, Vorkaloid stayed behind to complete the mission.

In his more morose moments, he reminded himself that the engines on his escape module had been deliberately disabled by his superiors. He had been chosen for this mission. After all, competition among the Panzaoids was fierce and his senior officers sometimes pretended to find his keen adherence to duty tiresome, doubtless as a cover for their resentment and fear of his ambition. More mendacity – they'd clearly been among the humans

too long. And for two hundred years he'd been stealing into the 'park', nursing the Total Normality Field back to full power, ready to broadcast it across the entire planet.

And now, just when it was almost ready to activate, the humans were to parade their lies on the very heart of the machine! He had to stop them!

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Gary disregarded the bruises from his afternoon's paintballing to scan the rest of the crowd gathered at Wiggins Park. In his head, he'd thought how thrilling it would be to see a whole new part of the village, locked away for so long, like a painted over door finally being opened. He was a little surprised at how detached he felt. The overgrown foliage and shadowy groves were the kinds of places he would ordinarily have delighted in exploring, if only in his mind. Perhaps it was simply that the place was so exactly like he'd pictured. Still, it was a moment to remember, with over a hundred people sitting in the natural amphitheatre, chatting away, eating candy floss and hot dogs. The deep greens of the untended foliage were starkly highlighted by the unnatural electric lights attached to a rattling generator.

Sucking noisily on a carton of orange juice, Gary wondered if the Doctor would also be like he'd imagined. Bombastic yet sly, arrogant yet vulnerable, brilliant yet reckless, otherworldly yet unworldly. He should be unpredictable and dangerous but somehow familiar and reassuring too. Gary was relieved to feel that tingle of anticipation building up after all; it was like the late arrival of a friend. He knew it was going to be a great show.

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The cramped caravan that housed the pre-show actors was not conducive to a group hug and hand-holding pep talk but Louise tried her best anyway.

"Energy, energy, energy, people, and keep the ad libbing and nose picking to a minimum. It's a wonderful local story and we're going to make the most of this fabulous chance to do something unique that Frangeford will remember. Make them feel like they're back at school, hearing this story for the first time. But more than that – remember it's *not* a story; this is something that's really happening right here, right now, for the first time. And people will tell stories about the remarkable things they're seeing!"

Hugh smiled. Everyone knew it was a silly fable but Louise could somehow broadcast her enthusiasm almost like a radio signal. He shut his eyes and for a moment he *was* the Doctor, the man who made wondrous things ripple around him in a banal universe. The blue lizard awkwardly holding his hand wasn't a middle-aged greengrocer in a tatty repurposed duvet; he was really Vorkaloid, malign alien lizard, enemy of free thought. Cindy really *was* a good-looking but somewhat vacant lass in her early twenties; but then, she actually was. Still, at least she was feisty.

Louise finished her spiel with a hopeful grin and an encouraging clenched fist. Vorkaloid tilted his masked head and somehow conveyed a roll of his eyes and a desire for a smoke. Hugh chuckled as the lumpy reptile manoeuvred his way through the narrow door of the caravan. Then he closed his eyes and tried to recapture that feeling of wonder. He *was* the Doctor, he *was* the Doctor!

He was brought back to earth with a bump and a muttered curse. A few moments later, Vorkaloid was squashing his bulky frame back through the door. Hugh was pleased that at first glance he truly saw an alien with iridescent blue scales and a writhing tail. Then reality set back in and he was joined by a grumpy jobsworth in a badly-stitched and overstuffed costume.

Louise briskly fussed around, making last-second changes as if she were tuning up an engine for a race. She assessed Vorkaloid.

"You've certainly got that lumbering gait! Great stuff!"

Vorkaloid swung around with distinct menace. The air was thick with his soapy breath as he fixed a claw in her direction.

"This must end now, human! Cease this travesty immediately!"

Louise squealed with delight and clapped her hands together.

"Oh, that's just your pre-show nerves talking. Don't worry! You're marvellous! You've got the voice right and everything! Now, stay in that moment, keep that gurgling anger and let's scare 'em to death!"

And before he could think, Vorkaloid found himself being pushed along, out of the caravan and towards the lights and the crowd. Towards the stage.

He considered his options. Attempting to attack any of the humans would be a mistake; he was only able to subdue the stuffed cloth imitation of himself because he was unobserved. At least some of the large body of humans in the crowd would question it too much and disrupt the Normality Field. Would simply leaving work? Without their Panzaoid, the staged mockery of history would surely stop. Ruefully, he remembered that humanity was never short of people ready to debase themselves and so there might well be a replacement actor.

Any overt disruption might raise suspicions and draw attention to the equipment he'd guarded for so long (and which was so near completion). He steeled himself. His only choice was to undermine the horrid ritual from within.

What a pity killing people was wrong.

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Louise felt the applause that greeted the players as they took the stage would best have been described as 'cautious'. Past the glare of the harsh lights, she could see a hundred and twenty expectant faces. They seemed almost bored. What was wrong with people? When she was a girl, an evening at the theatre was magical! For an hour and a half, she was gazing through a window into another world. And in those moments when she remembered it were just actors pretending she would still feel gleeful that being a grown-up didn't mean that you had to leave dressing up and make-believe behind. Yet despite the treat she'd arranged for the village her audience seemed bored, or even cynical. She shook her head firmly and reassured herself that, like Vorkaloid, she was just having pre-show doubts. It was a wonderful story and the audience *would* be thoroughly transported. She promised herself that every one of those blank faces would soon have a huge grin and would experience a night to remember.

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As he watched the play, Gary wasn't sure what to make of it all. At times it was like having an epic tale of adventure enacted by sock puppets. The Doctor was certainly how Gary had imagined him; eccentric, imperious, benevolent and witty. Cindy was sweet but hopeless, needing even the simplest things explained. And although the decoration on stage was minimal – just a box covered in tinfoil serving as a control panel – it sufficed to tell the story. And yet, and yet... Well, for one thing, the alien lizard seemed to be something of a joke. His costume was lumpy and threadbare and his performance was weary and half-hearted, with spluttered non-sequiturs that the rest of the cast were gamely working around.

Despite all this, it was the same incredible story that had captivated him all his life. Every so often it was given form on the stage in front of him. The sensation was fleeting, but now and again he could believe it was all real. And then a cardboard prop would break the spell. It was like seeing shapes in smoke.

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What was wrong with Vorkaloid? Louise gazed at him with confusion. All the realism he'd displayed had dissolved the second he'd emerged on stage. His anger now seemed less like alien fury and more like drunken self-loathing. He'd blown his big reveal – the Doctor and Cindy had gasped in horror as he'd advanced with shambling hostility, but then the giant lizard had grumbled incoherently and flopped into a chair. It was as if he'd forgotten every line of the script they'd rehearsed so thoroughly. Fortunately, until the big speech where he explained the Panzaoids' plan, his dialogue wasn't that crucial, and Hugh was out-doing himself being the centre of attention. At least the Doctor's unpredictability was consistent with the erratic direction the play was going in. Louise really didn't know what he was going to do next but Hugh did seem to blossom being let off the leash. It was all that was stopping the murmurs of the crowd becoming full-blown chatter. Why couldn't they see how inspiring this story was?

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Vorkaloid's found himself more confused than he'd ever been. His plan had been to simply address the audience but in a rare instance of historical accuracy, the Doctor had not shut up since setting foot on the stage. He'd pointed out all the unconvincing props and scenery before Vorkaloid had had a chance to – and those were the only times the audience seemed to approve, with that unpleasant clucking laughter they had. His lizard spirits drooped even further and he simply let the nonsense wash over him. Surely it had to finish soon?

He realised that there was a rare moment of silence. Everyone seemed to be looking at him. He awkwardly shifted his gaze from Louise, looking expectant, to the cowering Cindy, to Hugh, centre-stage in his ridiculous clothes.

"Although I do hate to repeat myself," said 'the Doctor', "you doubtless were about to explain your insidious plan?"

Now was his chance!

"Yes," growled Vorkaloid as he strode to the front of the stage. He raised his voice. "Yes! Listen to me, all of you!"

The audience were at last paying attention.

"We Panzaoids came to your benighted planet to civilise you! To give you a purpose! We offer you a world free from lies, free from deception! You seem to delight in shutting your eyes against the truth!" He took a breath to continue but that was enough of a pause to allow that witless buffoon to be by his side.

"What truth are *you* offering, then?" asked the Doctor.

Vorkaloid raised his voice further. "We will show you that your lives are pointless!" He was roaring now, a roar that had built up from two hundred years of living their intolerable lifestyle. "How can you live in a dream like this? Do you think you can escape the boredom of your lives by hiding in your own heads?"

He shouted louder still, as if to drown out every tedious conversation about the weather and holidays and sheds and food.

"All of you are going to die! Everything you do is a complete waste of time! You'll disappear from existence and be forgotten! Nothing you have said or done will ever matter!"

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At last they're quiet, thought Louise. He's finally found how to express the character and they're listening. And it's so real! He believes every word! Although some of it did seem incongruously specific, especially about Mrs. Scribbins.

She shivered as she watched his scales gleam in the stark light, his muscles tensed with rage. He screamed his vitriol at the crowd showing only contempt and hatred. Only when his voice was hoarse and his breath gone did he become silent.

But the awed silence continued just a little too long. Louise gazed at their faces again. Now, boredom had been replaced by despondence. They believed him too much. She urgently whispered for the Doctor to respond. But he'd turned his back on the audience and stood looking at her with an expression of empty bemusement.

The silence dragged on. And on. And grew from awkwardness to misery.

Louise looked around her at what the audience were seeing; tattered tinfoil and pitiful plastic. And then it wasn't Cindy on stage with her, it was a clueless young woman who she'd more or less bullied into humiliating herself in front of everyone she knew. It wasn't the Doctor; it was just a middle-aged man in a few mismatched clothes who wanted an excuse to show off. Louise herself wasn't a silver-clad guard but a workshy librarian who wanted the world to be as big and mysterious as it had been for her when she was a child in happy ignorance.

But the blue lizard seemed more real than ever. He turned and looked at her with what could have been pity. Behind him, she could see the crowd – not the audience, the *crowd* – standing up to go. She shuffled forward to address them, to apologise, to say *anything* to break the awful silence. She cleared her throat and they stopped shuffling. They looked at her expectantly.

"Before you go... Before you go, at least let me tell you how the story ends. You see, what happens is that the Doctor realises that the aliens are easy to outsmart, because they only see what's right in front of them."

When she stopped talking, there was more silence. So she kept talking.

"And... that's why I always liked the story. As a child, I always thought the world was very strange. I thought that I'd never be able to understand it all and it was frightening. But if I could come up with my own stories to explain things, it wouldn't be scary."

The people began to sit back down.

"Sometimes I'd hear a story so incredible I knew it *couldn't* be true. But I'd want it to be true, so I'd make myself believe it for a while. I think we all do that – we all make-believe so the world is less frightening. I remember the first time I heard about the lizards who invaded our village, I thought 'if they don't have the power to make up stories, they must be scared *all the time*.' I didn't know if it really was a true story, but I wasn't sure it mattered. So I believed it anyway."

Louise gestured for the Doctor to come forward.

"And this was why I liked the Doctor in that story. He stopped the lizards from taking away our stories, just by being silly. The more the aliens threatened us, the more we had to use our imaginations."

Vorkaloid didn't like where this was going. "Stop! Submit to the Panzaoids' power!"

Louise smiled at him. "That's what they'd say! But all we had to do to send them away was fantasise a little. We just had to use our imaginations!"

For almost a minute, an odd panto was enacted in front of over a hundred people.

"Stop thinking!"

"Come on everyone! Use your imaginations!"

The more the blue reptile railed against dreaming, and fantasising, and making up stories, the more real he became. It was suddenly very easy to believe that he was an alien, bent on enslaving humanity. The deep shadows of the park could have been concealing anything; an alien base, perhaps, ready to launch an assault on human liberty. And the more people looked the more they could indeed see the flickering lights and sleek lines of alien technology. Until there was a ripple of pale blue light and the overgrown bushes transformed into control panels; the trees became shining girders; the stage itself a gleaming silver platform.

The audience gasped as one as more and more of the bizarre control centre popped into view. Everywhere they looked there were shining multi-coloured lights, pumping motors, and sparking wires. They were transfixed. And the centrepiece was a twenty feet tall glass cylinder, shimmering with purple light. The Normality Field itself – rapidly becoming overloaded as it vainly tried to keep up with the rising level of incredulity.

Vorkaloid shook his palms across his chest in agitation. "You can't see any of this! It's just a park! You're not inside our control room; you're just sitting on some grass!"

Louise thought that she must be dreaming. It was more marvellous than she'd ever imagined. She didn't realise that she was weeping. She wasn't thinking about how she'd feel the next day, or finding a way to justify believing it; right now, the story *was* true!

Vorkaloid was weeping too. All those years of waiting, for nothing. All that time sitting around, living a quiet life, not being noticed, and all of it suddenly pointless. He brought himself to his senses and looked around him. The humans were agog, staring open-mouthed at the Normality Field. He couldn't allow them to study this technology; his path was clear. Shoulders slumped; he climbed into his escape pod, waiting for him all those years. As the lid closed, he shook his fist at the crowd.

"We will return, humans! You have not heard the last of us!"

The motor started, a terrific throbbing sound began and the whole control room glowed... Light streamed from the walls and equipment, shining blue on the faces of the amazed throng.

As the pod began to fade away, the Doctor gleefully called out, "Next time, we'll make it a musical!"

Then there was *only* dazzling light and ear-shattering sound, and then the control room was gone. A hundred and twenty people sat in a park lit by electric lights, looking at three people standing on a stage made from mismatched planks of wood.

There was more silence. Then the applause began, and it went on and on. A man in a tatty duvet fashioned into a lizard costume staggered on up to the rest of the actors, rubbing his head. Cindy, Hugh and Louise took his hands and took their bows.

Cindy looked at Louise. "Thanks for this," she said. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. What's next?"

Hugh said, "I was kidding about the musical, by the way".

And Louise, beaming, said, "Don't worry There are plenty more stories".

* * * * *

Everyone who saw the show had an experience they'd remember for the rest of their lives. They found that there was a new sense of wonder in the village, too – even everyday things seemed to be just that little more magical than they were before. And the final words should belong to Gary, who found himself enjoying and re-telling the story as much as anybody. On the night of the show, while the lights were flashing, and the sound was blaring, he breathlessly whispered his appreciation. Unheard, except for us:

"This is the best show *ever!*"



The Panzaoids want to overtake the Earth starting with the village of Frangeford

The village of Frangeford has a quaint local legend: two hundred years ago
a benevolent alien foiled an invasion attempt by giant blue lizards.
Louise Ethers, the local librarian, plans to celebrate.
But not all of the locals want it remembered...

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