

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The unpavelling



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Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart burst through the door to the Doctor's lab.

And then he paused, his hand lingering on the knob.

There was something about the door, something that bothered him ... but he pushed that thought aside. The mind, he felt, should be clear and uncluttered, as was his desk. A few file folders might lie open, but the remainder should be stacked in the inbox until he could deal with them as required. The door could wait.

The Doctor was hunched over the workbench, tinkering with some manner of electronic contraption. Its name was most likely unpronounceable and its purpose incomprehensible. The Brigadier cleared his throat and the Doctor looked up.

"Ah. Good morning, Brigadier. How was your evening?"

"How was my what?"

"Your evening. How was your evening? Weren't you having company last night?"

"Doctor, as long as I've known you, you have never asked about my personal time."

"Eh? Nonsense. I ask all the time."

With a sigh, the Brigadier elected to concede rather than belabour the point. "Very well, Doctor. I say, have you done something with the lighting in here?"

"Hmm?"

"The lighting, Doctor. It's off, don't you think?"

"I assure you, Brigadier, that the lights are most definitely on."

"What? No, I meant it's not right."

"If you say so, Brigadier. Hand me that wrench over there, would you? There's a good chap."

“Certainly, Doctor, I’ll just play lab assistant, shall I?”

The Doctor, his attention fixed upon his apparatus, replied with a grunt as he accepted the wrench and applied it to his work.

Raising an eyebrow, the Brigadier said, “Right then. Let’s see about these lights.”

After flicking the switch off and on, he muttered. “I’ll get the maintenance staff on this.”

“Was there a reason you dropped by, Brigadier,” said the Doctor, turning slightly, “or was this just a social call?”

“Ah yes. There are numerous reports of unusual seismic activity in Britain and Europe. I’d like you to investigate.”

With a sigh, the Doctor set down his sonic screwdriver. “You know, Brigadier, sometimes an earth tremor is just an earth tremor.”

Just then, the Doctor stood bolt upright and swiveled his head left and right. The Brigadier heard it a moment later. A deep base sound. A rumbling. The floor began to shake and small objects from the table clattered to the floor. It lasted just over half a minute.

“Great Scott!” said the Doctor, his eyes wide.

The Brigadier let himself smile, just barely. “You were saying, Doctor?”

The Doctor dropped his tools and dashed past the Brigadier and out of the lab. The Doctor, observed the Brigadier, was often slow to act but when he did it was best to stand clear.

The Brigadier found him outside, prostrate upon the ground, head turned so that his ear was flush against the earth. After a few moments, the Doctor stood, brushed himself off, and said, “That was no ordinary earth tremor, Brigadier. No, this was something else altogether.”

“Something alien?”

“Almost certainly.”

Hands on hips, the Brigadier digested the Doctor’s report and responded, “Right. Sergeant Benton!”

Benton had followed the two outside and was accompanied by a smattering of armed UNIT soldiers.

“Sir!” Benton acknowledged.

“Form up a squad and stand ready for hostile forces.”

“Yes *sir!*” Benton reached for his radio and issued orders to the troops on base.

The Brigadier, meanwhile, glanced up at the overcast sky, the grounds, and UNIT HQ itself. Finally, he said to the Doctor, “I tell you, there’s something not right about the light. It’s different outside than inside.”

“You surely don’t need me to remind you,” said the Doctor, “that the outdoors is illuminated by the sun and the indoors by incandescent bulbs.”

The Brigadier felt his bile rising. “Now see here, Doctor. I’m not some imbecile, whatever you may think of me. I insist you take me seriously or what is the use of retaining you as scientific advisor?”

The Brigadier turned and marched towards the main entrance.

The Doctor caught him up. “Forgive me, Brigadier, you’re quite right, of course. After all, your human eyes evolved on this planet, with this sun. They may be able to detect some phenomena that my Time Lord eyes cannot. But I suggest we focus on finding the cause of the earth tremors, shall we?”

“Very well.” The Brigadier took a breath and added, “Do you have a plan?”

“I’m going to build an apparatus to triangulate the origin of whatever is behind this. It should be ready within the hour.”

“Excellent. I’ll contact Geneva and meet you in your laboratory.”

The Doctor opened the door and beckoned the Brigadier to enter. Upon closing the door, however, the Doctor let his hand linger on the knob.

Turning, the Brigadier said, “What is it?”

The Doctor released the knob, knocked on the interior surface of the door, frowned, and repeated the action on the hallway wall. He gave the wall a push and the Brigadier let out a gasp as he saw the wall give.

“Those walls are reinforced.” The Brigadier gave the wall a push. “They’re meant to withstand anything but a direct nuclear attack.” Pressing against the opposite wall, he added, “Now they feel as if they’re made of thin plywood.”

“Oh dear,” said the Doctor, stroking his chin. “This is worse. Yes, this is much worse than I thought.”

“Well, go on, Doctor. What are we facing?”

“When you take it all together—the earth tremors, the light, the changes to these walls, we’re facing something that can cause the unravelling of reality itself. And that capability is extraordinarily rare in the cosmos. At the very least, this vastly narrows down the list of suspect races.”

“Can you counteract whatever this is?”

“I’m not altogether certain. I’ll need to take some measurements in the TARDIS to narrow down who and what we’re up against.”

“Splendid. I’m off to speak to Geneva.”

The meeting wasn’t going well, and the Brigadier pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off an on-coming headache.

“You are correct sir,” the Brigadier said with closed eyes as he tried—and likely failed—to sound respectful. “The Doctor is *not* human. With respect, no, he is not a threat. Not only is he not a threat, he has saved this planet more times than anyone knows.”

He paused, listening to the bluster from his colleague. “Again, with the utmost respect, we have covered this previously.”

After a few minutes of listening to a room full of men shouting over each other the Brigadier interjected. “Now see here. The Doctor has warned of a major threat. A major *global* threat. UNIT must stand ready. If not, then what in the blazes are we here for?”

There was more angry shouting on the other end of the receiver. But it was a different sound that caught the Brigadier’s attention—that of shots fired nearby.

“We have a situation here. Lethbridge Stewart out.”

Grabbing his walkie-talkie, the Brigadier strode towards the building entrance and said, "Benton. Report."

"We're under attack. Returning fire."

"Under attack from what, man?"

"I ... walking sponges?"

The Brigadier looked at his walkie-talkie in disgust and stowed it. The Doctor joined him in the corridor. They exchanged a glance and wordlessly agreed to jog to the scene of the attack.

Outside, soldiers were huddled behind barricades they had set up for cover. They were exchanging fire with, well, walking sponges, as Benton had said. They were blue-coloured, seemingly porous, with many claw-like appendages and a short protuberance on top that might have been a head. Their claw pincers emitted flashes of light that resulted in explosive detonations on the ground. Built-in energy weapons of some type?

The Brigadier and Doctor hunched down and joined the soldiers. "What do you make of them Doctor?" shouted the Brigadier over the din of gunfire and explosions.

"Hmm." The Doctor stood and scanned the creatures with his sonic.

"Get down, man," the Brigadier ordered. "You'll be killed."

"I should hardly think so," the Doctor said calmly. He scanned the nearest soldier's weapon with his sonic and asked the soldier to give it to him. The soldier cast his wide eyes to the Brigadier, who nodded.

After quickly disassembling the rifle, the Doctor said, "You might as well cease fire. You're shooting blanks."

"What did you say?" said the Brigadier. "Nonsense."

"I'm afraid he's right," said Sergeant Benton after examining some of the weapons. "I can't explain it, but he's right."

"And I think you'll find that these blue fellows are no threat whatsoever," said the Doctor.

Stepping around the barricade, the Doctor approached the closest alien, grabbed its head, and pulled. The head came off. Underneath was the head of a man. A human man. The same operation on another walking sponge yielded the same result.

"Must destroy all humans," the two men said together, their voices flat and trance-like.

"What in the blazes is going on?" spat out the Brigadier, furious at this point. "Some sort of prank?"

"No," said the Doctor, his hand resting on his chin. "No, a test, I should think. A trial run. Now, what have we got here?"

The Doctor approached the rear-most sponge. Unlike the others, it backed away from him.

"You're something else, aren't you? Using a holographic cloaking system. Let's see what's inside, shall we?"

The Doctor aimed his sonic at the sponge, causing the cloak to vanish.

“Of course it was you,” the Doctor said. “It had to be. Using your hypnotic abilities and Time Lord technology.”

“Curse you, Doctor!” said the Master. “We could rule this planet together. Rule the cosmos! Think of the good we could do.”

“The only good you care about,” said the Doctor, “is your own.”

“The Master,” muttered the Brigadier. “Sergeant Benton, arrest that man.”

“With pleasure, sir,” said Benton, and he beckoned two soldiers to accompany him.

At the last moment, however, the Master shoved the Doctor, causing him to collide with Benton. Both men tumbled to the ground. Taking advantage of the distraction, the Master ran towards a corner of the grounds.

“Hold your fire,” the Brigadier commanded. “There’s nowhere for him to go.”

“Are you sure about that, Brigadier?” said the Doctor as he dusted himself off.

“He’s headed for the industrial dust bins,” commented Benton. “What’s he playing at?”

The Master flipped open the lid of the left-most bin and dove inside.

“Has he lost his mind?” said the Brigadier.

“Not his mind I shouldn’t think,” said the Doctor with a smile. “He may have lost something else.”

The Master emerged almost immediately, shook his fist, and shouted, “You humans are disgusting!” He then lifted the lid of the second bin and jumped in. Within moments, the bin disappeared to the sound of wheezing and groaning.

The Brigadier raised an eyebrow at the Doctor.

“The Master’s TARDIS has a working chameleon circuit, you see. It took on the shape of an industrial bin to fit into its surroundings.”

“Well. At the very least, we now have a means of telling when he’s up to his old tricks.”

“Indeed,” said the Doctor. “If the lighting isn’t right and the walls are inexplicably thin, we’ll know he’s around somewhere. Now, speaking of dematerializing and chameleon circuits, it’s high time I got back to repairing my own TARDIS.”

The Brigadier’s mouth opened and closed as he watched the Doctor return to his lab. He’d been going to assign the Doctor another task. But then, he’d put the kibosh on the Master’s plans and saved the world. Again. Perhaps, just for today, he could cut the man a bit of slack.

Tomorrow though ... Yes, tomorrow will be a different story.

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