

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

This Is How The World Ends



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A soft, salt-laden breeze wafted over the two men sitting at a rough table on a wide veranda. The rhythmic hiss of water foaming and bubbling up and down the ragged shore tugged at the Doctor's hearts. His face, lost in shadow, grimaced at a thought. He sat his wine glass down and feigned enthusiasm for his host, who was obsessively searching the chessboard sitting between them. Frowning, the Doctor built a brittle smile, piece by crumbling piece.

"The last shuttle will be ready for lift-off in two days. Thanks to your foresight and my genius for organization, the evacuation has gone better than I'd hoped."

His opponent chuckled, a deep throb that sent a shiver of remembrance down the Doctor's spine.

"You wouldn't be trying to distract me, Valentine?" There was a hint of acid in his voice. Valentine lifted one hand, unfurling it over his collection of captured pieces.

"I suspect your imminent capitulation is distraction enough, Doctor."

"We'll see, Valentine, we shall see." Plucking his Knight off the board, the Doctor hefted it in his hand, locked gazes with Valentine, then placed the opposing King in check. He slumped his shoulders and looked away, unable to feel any satisfaction at his approaching victory.

Contemplating the board, Valentine smiled wolfishly. The Doctor knew that smile of old, and a chill gripped him. Sparing a glance at the rapidly gathering gloom which had doused the glittering waves pounding the coast, Valentine tilted his head at the silvery laughter echoing inside the house.

"I'm grateful for the companionship your ward has given Aurora. I take it you've travelled together for some time?"

"Mmm? Long enough, I suppose. Relatively speaking." The Doctor's voice trailed away as he examined a Pawn.

"You're fond of her, then?" Valentine hid his exasperation with difficulty.

"Fond?" Pondering the word as he would a rare and fabulous beast that had jumped onto the table, the Doctor's eyes widened with unexpected delight.

"Why yes, I suppose I am." His voice carried a hint of wonder. Setting the Pawn down the Doctor considered the twilight.

"When are the final evacuees due?"

"A transport ship arrives later tonight. A few of the more distant farmers proved obstinate."

"Really? I can't imagine how you persuaded them."

"A silver tongue, perhaps," Valentine smirked.

"Or an iron fist?" Valentine's smile slipped. Setting his glass aside, he returned to the board, surveying it with predatory zeal. The Doctor watched him carefully, noting the way his eyes flicked from side to side, watching, analyzing.

The move, when it came, was devastatingly simple. Valentine sprung his King free of the Doctor's carefully constructed trap, leaving his position dangerously exposed. The Doctor watched the move through disbelieving eyes.

Relaxing, Valentine lifted his glass of wine to his lips and observed the Doctor's reaction with ill-disguised glee.

Surveying the wreckage, the Doctor felt a surge of anger build. Steady, a voice in his head hissed. *Steady.*

His carefully constructed trap ruined and his King exposed on all sides, the Doctor toppled the piece with one blunt finger and returned to his wine with a heavy sigh. Insects chirruped softly in the dark while the two men contemplated one another.

"Those farmers of yours are cutting it fine, I must say," the Doctor remarked absently. "Still, the planet's break up isn't due for another couple of days. Give or take."

The sound of the ocean was a distant murmur. Valentine was the first to break the silence.

"Doctor, I..." Valentine swallowed, and then continued. "Would you do me a favour?" He leaned

forward, his strong, broad hands knotted, each knuckle white with tension. The Doctor nodded cautiously, guarding his thoughts with a bland smile. He was conscious of the dark pressing at his back.

"All my daughter knows is this house and the farm. Her mother is buried here and to be frank, she has her father's pigheadedness."

"That pigheadedness had ensured the colonists on this world aren't reduced to their component molecules in the next forty-eight hours."

Valentine inclined his head impatiently.

"We, both of us, are too old for compliments, Doctor. What I want to ensure is that Aurora boards the last shuttle. Will you do that as a favour to me?" The earnestness in his voice belied his earlier confidence.

"You sound like you won't be there to make sure she does. After all, staying would be suicide."

Valentine let his hands fall open. "You're right, of course. She is young and can be impulsive. The young are so blinded by romantic notions they sometimes fail to see the consequences of their decisions."

"The young don't have a monopoly on stupidity," the Doctor murmured. He could see how agitated Valentine was. The Doctor softened his tone.

"Don't worry, Valentine," he said, his voice low and soothing. "Peri and I will make sure that-"
The table trembled.

"Here we go again." The Doctor stood abruptly, his chair scraping across the rough planks. "Peri? Aurora? Outside. Now!" The Doctor had to shout to be heard above the rising guttural roar of shifting earth and cracking rock.

The door flew open, two figures limned in the light. They were breathless with excitement tinged by panic. The shorter of the two, a young, slim woman with blonde hair, hurried over to Valentine.

"Father, are you well?" Smiling tightly, he patted her arm.

"Is this it, Doctor?" Peri asked, her eyes round

"No, not ton-" The house was rocked by a thunderous explosion, its concussive blast echoing for miles about. Dull orange light lit the sky, a false dawn illuminating large chunks of white hot rock flaring overhead. Dull thuds sounded all around the house, dirt fountaining into the air under the bombardment. On the harbour, the rumbling grew into a loud, bubbling hiss which reminded Peri of an enormous kettle.

"Look," Peri cried, pointing towards the harbour.

Under the rising ochre light, molten rock spewed through a hissing cloud of steam billowing upwards in twisting banners. The initial blast of heat was a hammer blow, a dry, scouring wind that sucked the moisture from their exposed, prickling skin. Birds took flight, quickly forming a great cawing circle above the bubbling cauldron.

"Now that's something you don't see every day," the Doctor remarked, his eyes alive with avid curiosity. "The white dwarf is making its closest orbit of this system's star. The build-up of stresses has been gradual, but the fault lines across the planet have finally begun to open up."

To Peri's disbelieving ears it sounded like he was commenting on some dull subject like the weather. "Shouldn't we be evacuating the last of the colonists tonight?"

The Doctor mopped his brow with a green, spotted handkerchief. "And miss all this?" Peri thought he looked like a child let loose in a toy store, all greed and no consequences.

"I mean, Pompeii was but a town, this...this is an entire planet. Tremors lead to magma bursts with fault lines unstitching the mantle across the planet. The crust will slough off like the rind from an orange then a final, devastating release of gases leaving little more than..."

"I think that's enough, Doctor," Peri snapped, seeing the blood drain from Aurora's face.

"Well. Yes. Of course." He poured more wine for himself then noticed the others watching him;

Valentine with cold calculation, Aurora with open fear and Peri, her amazement at his usual cavalier behaviour given fresh impetus. Valentine embraced his daughter and the Doctor felt a shiver of doubt. Distracted, he waved his hand towards the open door.

"How's dessert coming along?"

Peri stabbed at the cake, splattering cream across the bench. Behind her, Aurora tipped the last of the shattered crockery into a bin, then joined her.

"Your friend's quite a character," she said, setting out the remaining plates. Peri saw how her hands trembled.

"Oh yeah." Peri's lip curled. "He's definitely a character." She stabbed at the cake again, carving out a smaller piece than the rest.

"Make sure the Doctor gets that," she said, instantly regretting the sharpness in her voice. She scooped some extra cream, piling it on the Doctor's plate. Watching, Aurora smiled to herself.

"So, where will you go when you leave?"

Her smile faded and Aurora looked away, blinking. "Some of Mother's family live on Kantaras Major. Father says he's made arrangements with them." She sighed.

"It can't be easy losing..." Peri struggled to find the right word. "Everything?"

"Oh, I still have Father." Aurora brightened a little.

"And your Mom?" Peri asked gently. The *crick crick crick* of insects filled the silence between them.

"Memories." Aurora smiled sadly. "Memories and more memories. It will be harder for Father, though. He and Mother built this. To lose it all..." Aurora shook her head then looked across the bench. "What about you, Peri? What about your family?"

Peri's face clouded and she set the knife aside. "Absent Dad. Absentee step-dad, for that matter. It seems all the men in my life are footless and fancy free." She looked through the open door, where the Doctor's silhouette bulked large.

"I've been away so long I can't really remember their faces. Perhaps...perhaps it's time to go home."

Aurora nodded, but remembered Peri's reaction to the magma burst. She felt no shame at her fear, but she had seen the thrill of excitement that crossed Peri's face when the first of the horrible, flickering orange light cast long shadows in the kitchen. Peri talked of home, but Aurora thought her heart lay elsewhere. It would be a while yet, if ever, before she saw her family again.

"Hullo? Where's that cake? A man could starve out here for lack of food."

Raising her eyebrows, Peri gathered up two of the plates. "Sometimes, home seems more and more attractive."

Outside, they ate in silence, lost in their own thoughts.

A mug of coffee steaming between her clasped hands, Peri stood on the porch and contemplated the harbour. Fingers of cloud spread towards the horizon, chased in pink and red by the emerging sun.

"One last dawn," she murmured to herself, shivering. Taking a sip of coffee, she half turned at the creak of the front door opening and saw the Doctor emerge, his eager eyes wide and blue.

"Morning," he said, briskly rubbing his hands against the chill. Peri thought the colours of his coat were strangely muted, the sunlight filtered through a faint sulphurous haze which had settled over the harbour.

"Morning. Sleep well?"

"Like a baby, Peri, like a baby." She said nothing about the dark rings under his eyes. Seeing him glance at her mug, she nodded to the table.

"Your drink's over there, Doctor."

He smiled, a broad, dazzling display that pleased and infuriated her all at once. It faltered a little. "Chocolate, hopefully?" he said, clutching his mug in a beefy hand.

"Would I dare anything else?"

His smile returned and he breathed deeply of the curling steam, savouring the thick, rich aroma. "Lovely. Lovely indeed." Taking a sip, he smacked his lips in appreciation and set the mug down. "The magma burst seems to have settled. See how the release of sulphur has coloured the clouds?"

"Pretty it isn't," Peri answered. "Looks like the fault has lengthened."

The center of the harbour bubbled, the constant churning obscured by a hazy mist of steam. While not as ferocious, the effect had spread out passed the harbour mouth.

"This is the beginning of the end. The geology of this planet is on a knife's edge." He frowned, lapsing into silence.

Peri knew enough about the Doctor not to disturb him when he wore that expression. Something more than calculation clicked over behind the facade. Something above and beyond the plans he and Valentine had worked out over several weeks.

Peri hesitated, then spoke. "Don't worry, Doctor. Most of the work's done. We'll get those farmers rounded up and..."

"And?" The Doctor turned his head and Peri saw how troubled he looked. Oddly, it made her a little frightened. His usual swagger and overwhelming self-assurance were absent. In its place was...confusion?

"Peri, what did you think when we received that distress call?"

"What did I think? I thought, 'Oh no, here we go again.'"

"That aside," he muttered, flapping his hand as if he would bat an insect aside.

"What's this all about, Doctor? You look...spooked?"

"Spooked? Me? Never." He bristled, puffing his chest out.

"Then what's wrong?"

The Doctor remained silent, tilting his head up and examining the sky. "Somewhere up there, a white dwarf is beginning its final dance around this world's sun. The gravitational forces unleashed will pull this planet inside out and..."

"And?" Peri watched the Doctor, who seemed to visibly deflate.

"Peri, in the face of this planet's devastation, does anything else matter?"

"Everything matters, Doctor. You taught me that you can't ignore anything, no matter how small or large."

"And what if it is right to ignore?"

"Right?" Peri sensed she was near the heart of what troubled him.

"What's right should be pursued no matter what. That's another thing you taught me."

"No matter what, eh?" The Doctor's lips thinned into a wintry smile that chilled Peri. "Even in the teeth of utter ruin, right, not might, is what truly matters." He set aside his mug and turned on his heel. Standing at the door, he turned his head and smiled, this time warm and welcoming.

"After breakfast, Peri, could you keep Aurora occupied? There's something I need to speak to Valentine about."

"Sure." She looked troubled as he opened the door. The smell of bacon and eggs wafted out.

"Well come on, breakfast is served."

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Peri and Aurora stood in the study's doorway, watching the two men argue over the details for the final embarkation. The Doctor was all grand gestures and frowns, while Valentine emphasised his measured comments with small chopping motions of his hands. The chessboard lay between them once more, bare except for the Kings sitting at opposite ends.

Peri touched Aurora on the shoulder.

"Knowing the Doctor, this could take all day. How about we get some fresh air, eh?" A shadow crossed Aurora's face, but she nodded and led Peri outside. The sound of the argument followed them into the sunlight. Peri tugged her shawl close against the clean, fresh breeze cutting in from the bay.

"It really is a beautiful place," she said wistfully. Even the seething harbour, with wisps of yellow drifting into the sky, couldn't mar the view, dominated on the far side of the bay by rolling green hills dotted with tiny yellow flowers. She saw people bustling around the launch pad, the final shuttle upright, boosters strapped to its undercarriage.

"Father once said he and Mother lived in Dresnar for a time after they made planetfall. That was a few months before I was born. They moved here because they couldn't stand the isolation they felt in the city." Aurora's face grew solemn and she looked at Peri.

"Come with me, Peri. I want to show you something." Curious, Peri trailed Aurora around to the back of the house, which looked over an expanse of garden in full bloom.

Steps led down to a narrow path of crushed rock which zigzagged beneath the foliage. They emerged at the base of a hill looming above them. Crumbling fingers of rock poked from the long grass twitching back and forth in verdant waves under the capricious breeze. Halfway up, Peri looked out across the bay and found herself entranced by the water rippling like a carpet of silver pennies under the early morning sunlight. It was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen. Peri thought she might weep, then squared her shoulders and resumed climbing.

At the summit Peri saw a grave adorned with a simple marker. Kneeling beside it, Aurora plucked weeds from the sloping mound and murmured what sounded like a song. Peri hung back, feeling like an intruder. There was a distant rumble and she braced herself, but it quickly passed. Looking across the water, she saw the shuttle, steam wafting lazily from the boosters. When she turned back, Aurora stood gazing across the hill.

"When my parents first settled on the farm, Mother would often come here. After I was born and before she became ill, she would bring me with her. She would stay for hours, watching the harbour, singing songs from her home world." Aurora rubbed the worn marker fondly and smiled crookedly.

"After she was buried here, Father could never visit. But I came. And now...." Her voice trailed away and she hugged herself. Peri walked over and embraced her.

When stepped back, Aurora looked up, her eyes brimming. "I've often wanted a sister," Aurora sighed.

"Come on," Peri said briskly, around the lump in her throat. "We'd best be back before the Doctor decides shifting the planet into a new orbit is a better idea. He'd do that, you know, and what would become of the evacuees?"

Aurora touched Peri's arm.

"Thank you, Peri. Thank you for everything."

"Well, what are big sisters are for?" Hand in hand, the two women walked down the path, their long shadows reaching back towards the summit.

In the end, there was no surprise in his voice, only weary resignation.

"How did you find out?"

The Doctor shrugged. "Happenstance. As one of the cosmos's greatest bibliophiles I took the opportunity to inspect your library before you packed it away. I thought old Gaius' collection was second to none, but yours – well, it's certainly one of the finest collections of military history I've ever seen. Some real gems, particularly that twelve volume set of "On War" by General Valens Cavallo. All first editions. Very nice indeed."

"Your prattling grates, Doctor. What of them?"

"There was a thirteenth volume on your shelf, Valens. The only one in existence. A vanity printing, no doubt, but telling, nonetheless. I suppose even war criminals need a hobby to keep the little grey cells from atrophying while they spend their retirement years under a rock."

The beginnings of a sneer pulled at Valens' face before a wave of tiredness washed it away. He slumped in his chair and passed a trembling hand over his strained features.

"And now?"

Sighing, the Doctor shook his head.

"I was there, Valens. On the day you gave the orders. You looked away while your men carried them out. To the last word, they carried out your orders. Bad enough surrendering soldiers were executed, but their wives? Their *children*? You fled the battlefield and I stayed to bury the dead."

Valens' face blanched.

"How is it possible..? No." His voice carried some of the old fire the Doctor remembered so well.

"I won't go. Pride is a terrible thing, Doctor. And mine more terrible than you could imagine."

The Doctor's eyes flared with a cold, terrible rage. He stabbed a finger at Valens. "Twenty years Valens. Twenty years and still the old arrogance burns in you. I knew as soon as I laid eyes on you who you were. For the sake of the people of this benighted planet, I've kept my mouth shut about your dirty little secret while we planned this evacuation. I've tolerated sleeping under your roof, broken bread at your table, listened to your prattling on all things great and small just so your victims could have a measure of justice for the monstrous crimes you committed against them. You will go back and you will stand trial and you will spend the rest of your life rotting in a cell."

Valens smiled and shook his head. "Your face has changed but the vanity, the sheer arrogance is unchanged." He squared his shoulders, as if shifting under a great weight.

"But you needn't worry about having to drag me across the galaxy, Doctor."

"Oh, and why would that be, Valens? For some reason I can't see you doing me a favour and turning yourself in for my sake."

"I won't go back because I intend staying here."

The Doctor was stunned. After his tirade he had expected denunciations and denials, lurid justifications and a futile attempt to escape on the last shuttle. But this... A thought occurred to him.

"How many?"

"How many what, Doctor?"

"All told, how many colonists will have been evacuated off-world when the last shuttle lifts off tomorrow?"

Valens watched him warily. "A little over twenty thousand. Why?"

The Doctor began chuckling, which quickly erupted into full throated laughter.

"Forgive me my little burst of humour, Valens. There's no need, no need at all to be so coy. It hurts to say it, but without you, the evacuation would never have proceeded. Did you seriously think that saving all these colonists could ever wash away your sins?"

Valens shook his head and smiled tiredly. "There's no removing the stains, Doctor. How could I hope to? You were at Cannil, after all. We both saw the slaughter that I ordered. A river of blood, of guilt, has followed me half way across the galaxy. Why else did I choose to live my life with my family on this backwater, if not to try escaping it? My only hope now is for a little peace. And even that brings its

own measure of guilt. Your justice won't bring all those murdered innocents back to life. No, I shall stay."

A heavy silence fell over the room. The Doctor crossed to the window and glared through it. "And what of your daughter? Will your stubbornness also drag her down?"

"Have you forgotten your promise to me, Doctor?" He turned and stared at Valens.

"My promise?"

"That Aurora would leave on the last shuttle."

The Doctor's face softened. "You think she won't go without you? Love, like guilt, has its burdens."

"She has my...stubbornness. You must make her."

"Me? She's your daughter, your responsibility. Convince her."

Valens suddenly looked old. There was a clatter of footsteps outside the window and the sound of laughter. The Doctor's gaze settled on Valens, who nodded.

"Very well. Could you ask her to come in?" Without a word, the Doctor left the room.

On the veranda, Peri and Aurora stood with their heads together, whispering and giggling.

"Aurora? Your father wants to see you." His voice was gentle, but the look on his face quickly evaporated Peri's good mood. Aurora hesitated until Peri tilted her head close and spoke a few, quiet words. She nodded once then hurried inside.

The Doctor stepped over to the rail and leaned against it, rubbing a hand over his face. After a moment's thought, Peri joined him.

"Is everything okay?"

He looked at her and smiled, a tired, exhausted effort that was answer enough. They stood listening to the lonely wailing of the gulls overhead, the bubbling and hiss of the harbour a constant presence. Peri started at a cry from inside the house and turned towards the door until, stopping only when the Doctor laid a hand on her arm.

"This is something only they can deal with."

Inside, Aurora stood with her arms wrapped around herself, tears streaking her face. Valens looked imploringly at her. "Must I lose you as well as your mother?"

Aurora flinched, and his heart cracked, but he drove on relentlessly.

"Your birth was a sign to us, a way to make amends for my sins." He moved closer. "We will never be lost to you, Aurora. Never. My time is almost done, but you have an entire life to make your own, away from me and the shadow that has followed all these years." He reached out and touched her temple. "What we were to you will always be there. Always."

She looked at him, fresh tears spilling from her steel gray eyes. She caught him in a fierce embrace and Valens felt her heart shuddering. Tears filled his eyes. He felt the faintest brush of her lips across his cheek and his daughter was gone, Peri following after, calling her name. Then he heard the ocean again, the ceaseless, heaving tumult crashing onto the shore. The sound had entranced him on the first night he and his wife had spent in their new home, so close to Aurora's birth. He shook his head, thinking its endless effort would soon be over and the sound lost with it. A shadow filled the door and he went to it.

"Her aunt will look after her. Make sure she reaches there safely."

"You have my word on it."

Valens held out his hand. After a moment's hesitation, the Doctor took it in his own. Then he was gone, leaving Valens with his thoughts.

A little while later, with the last shuttle's departure echoing across the sky, Valens picked his way along the garden path then climbed to the grave site. At the summit, the wind whipped his robes into a flapping banner. Placing a hand on the marker, he slowly rubbed the weathered stone, waiting.

After a time, the ground began to tremble and he squared his shoulders. Staring into the sun's glare, the light washed over him with a softly burning kiss. The ground rippled like water and Valens saw his wife, in the light, beckoning. Gladness swept over him. The tremor became a roar, the roar a monstrous cracking, but he gave it no heed, for now Aurora danced in the heart of that stellar fury. He held out a hand to them both and the light burned through it, through him and then...

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS



Answering a distress signal from a distant planet, the Doctor and Peri find themselves intertwined in the lives of two of the colonists who harbour great hopes for the future and a terrible secret from the past. With the planet slowly dying, the Doctor wrestles with a decision which will have a lasting impact on the lives of those he seeks to rescue. And himself.

This story features the Sixth Doctor

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