

LIGHTNING SPRITES

A Seventh Doctor short story
by
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“Peru...” mused the Doctor, resting the handle of his umbrella against the point of his chin. “Why Peru, I wonder?”

“Why *not* Peru?” Ace queried.

“Tends to be a place where things don’t happen,” the Doctor sniffed, somewhat dismissively. “Not in my experience. Not *my* sort of things.”

“Perhaps you’re in for a new experience, Professor. Pretty spectacular view, you’ve got to admit that. The lightning’s going crazy! And listen to that thunder – talk about nature’s kettledrums!”

The Doctor surveyed their surroundings thoughtfully. He couldn’t argue with Ace’s description; ‘spectacular’ was indeed the word. The snow-enshrouded peaks of the Andes marched away both north and south of the small plateau on the edge of which the TARDIS had come to rest, their sharply defined tips like jagged white teeth tearing at the storm clouds above, which were being rent every few seconds by lightning and reverberating with thunder. No rain, though...

“The view won’t be the reason for *that* being here,” he observed, turning to face in the other direction. “Wonder why they chose this place to construct a radio telescope? Think of the logistics of getting all the components up to somewhere as remote as this, let alone constructing it...”

Ace followed the direction of his gaze, taking in the huge white concave disc suspended by massive cables from a circle of enormous pillars, utterly dwarfing the complex of flat-roofed buildings beyond. The plateau on which they stood was so extensive that it must have been artificially extended to accommodate the entire group of structures. The three arms of the antenna rose to unite at an apex above the centre of the disc, like an arrowhead pointing at the sky.

“Bit strange-looking for a radio telescope. How do they steer it when they want to point it at something?” she enquired.

“Mmm – someone seems to have come up with an interesting design for that,” the Doctor observed. “Those pillars and cables – they don’t just provide support. They act as pulleys, raising one side and lowering the other as required. Aligning it in any direction, any angle they need.”

“Looks like an enormous dish,” Ace commented facetiously.

“That’s because it *is* an enormous dish,” said the Doctor, with more than a hint of sarcasm. “The question is, what’s it doing *here*?”

Ace looked beyond the dish to the buildings. A vehicle had appeared from somewhere among them and was speeding toward herself and the Doctor – a jeep, with two occupants. “Looks like you’re going to get to ask someone who knows,” she said.

“Oh, I can smell the uniforms from here,” said the Doctor with a curl of his lip. “Always such a joy dealing with the military.”

Ace was staring intently at the nearing vehicle. Something about the occupant of the front passenger seat looked familiar. Was that who she thought it was? Her mouth dropped open.

“Professor! That’s – !”

“Yes,” said the Doctor. “I know.”

They watched as the soldier driving the jeep stopped it a few yards from where they stood, but their attention was focused on the senior officer regarding them with a slight twitch of the familiar moustache.

“Ah, there you are, Doctor. You got my signal, then?”

“Brigadier Sir Alastair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart,” the Doctor acknowledged expansively, dexterously doffing his hat. “What are you doing in deepest Peru? Or maybe I should say ‘highest’ Peru... I thought you’d retired from UNIT? Oh – oh – no – don’t tell me! There’s only one possible explanation.”

The Brigadier cocked a sardonic eyebrow at him.

“What are you talking about, Professor?” Ace asked, puzzled.

“He’s become a consultant,” the Doctor announced in a stage whisper. “It’s what people do. Retire, then come straight back to work as a consultant.”

“Well, this time I’m consulting *you*,” said the Brigadier. “I need your help, Doctor.”

“Why?” the Doctor demanded.

“Because people have died here. And I need you to find out why.”

“What is this place, exactly?” the Doctor asked, regarding the frontage of the largest of the buildings, outside which Sergeant Coleman, the driver of the jeep, had deposited them before departing to fulfil the Brigadier’s request to “bring Major Redford to join us in my office, will you?”

“A top secret facility for detecting alien incursions in our solar system,” said the Brigadier.

“Only been operating for a few months. A DEW system with detectors that reach as far out into the space surrounding our solar system as our current technology is capable of.”

“What’s a dew system?” Ace enquired. “Sounds a bit wet!”

“Not that type of dew. Dee – ee –double-yew. Distant Early Warning,” said the Doctor. “So they can be hospitable to their visitors by getting the missiles ready to fire in good time,” he added snidely. Then, to the Brigadier, “And what is it about this place that makes it so dangerous?”

He gestured at the two UNIT soldiers standing stiffly on guard on either side of the entrance, the door between them displaying a large and emphatic “DANGER – NO ENTRY” sign. Similar signs were positioned at regular intervals along the barrier of razor wire that stretched out in either direction, clearly surrounding not just the building at which they were looking, but the entire complex.

“We don’t know,” said the Brigadier shortly. “We’ve had to evacuate the entire staff for their own safety. Only the most essential personnel remain, and we’re operating out of temporary headquarters erected at a safe distance from the base. Until we find out what we’re dealing with, we can’t risk anyone, authorized or not, gaining entry. Major Redford can give you more of the details than I can. So if you’d like to come with me, Doctor, hopefully we’ll be able to satisfy your curiosity.”

Major Simon Redford was a tall, angular man with intense eyes, a ramrod-stiff stance, and a rather sour expression on his face as the Brigadier introduced the Doctor and Ace.

“I should perhaps tell you,” the Brigadier added in a deliberately neutral tone of voice, “that Major Redford didn’t agree with my decision to call you in on this, Doctor.”

Redford straightened still further. “That’s because I was – and still am – of the opinion that we can deal with this ourselves, sir. I know the Doctor” – he didn’t so much as glance in the Doctor’s direction – “has historically been of some assistance –”

“*Some* assistance!” Ace snorted.

“That was, however, a long time ago,” Redford continued evenly. “In the intervening period things have, I would suggest, moved on very successfully without him. But while I can, just about, concede the value of his presence, I’m unclear about the status, and usefulness, of *this* person.” His eyes flicked over Ace and both appraised and dismissed her in the same instant.

Ace bristled. “Hey! Who do you think you’re talking to, you toffee-nosed – !”

“It’s all right, Ace,” said the Doctor, reaching out to hold his umbrella in front of her, as if to prevent her charging at Redford. “I’m sure there are quite a number of things that will become clear to the Major in the fullness of time.” He treated Redford to a subtly disturbing smile. That is, it had the *appearance* of a smile. But the effect was not that of a smile at all.

The Brigadier was regarding both of them with the look of a man who knows perfectly well that potassium and water brought into contact will result in pyrotechnics, but is forced to work with what he has.

“Your reservations are noted, Major, but given that the Doctor *is* here, perhaps you’d oblige me by briefing him on the situation?” he suggested with deceptive gentleness.

“Sir,” Redford acknowledged stiffly. He turned slightly to face the Doctor. “A month ago there was a particularly violent thunderstorm,” he began, “during which the dish of the radio telescope

was struck by lightning. More specifically, the apex of the antenna. Obviously it's built to withstand that sort of thing, and there was no apparent physical damage to the structure. However, from that moment all our software systems, including the one that operates the dish, began to malfunction. Within minutes every screen had blacked out, and there began to be random power surges throughout the whole base. Whenever there's a surge the screens temporarily come to life, but all they display is meaningless binary coding."

The Doctor was listening with attention, despite the fact that he had clearly taken as great a dislike to Redford as Redford had to him. "Did you try turning them all off and on again?" he enquired sweetly.

"No, Doctor, we did not," said Redford stiffly. "And for a very good reason. The power surges affect not only the radio telescope, but every electrical system and every device that is powered by electricity and that is connected to our main power supply. That includes all our security cameras, all landline telephones, all desk computers, all light switches, and so on. No-one was harmed by the initial lightning strike. But within a very few minutes twelve people were dead, including some of my men. Subsequent analysis revealed every one of them had been in physical contact with a device powered by the mains electricity at the time of the first surge. As soon as the situation was realized we evacuated the base. A specialist IT team was flown in. We took every possible precaution, but even so two of the team also died because of unexpected surges. As did one of their replacements."

"Can't you disconnect the main power supply?"

"Attempting that was how two of my men died."

"You've tried accessing the systems remotely?" The Doctor was clearly intrigued by the problem.

"Yes, of course we have!" Redford snapped.

"What about using robots instead of people? Like for bomb disposal," Ace suggested.

"We've tried that, too." Redford did not deign to so much as look at her. "Despite the highest standard of insulation, physical contact with the affected devices during power surges resulted in the destruction of the robots. Wireless technology has proved ineffective. We have – so far – failed..." The expression on his face showed how distasteful the use of that word was to him.

The Doctor tapped the handle of his umbrella thoughtfully against his chin while he considered the problem. Then he turned to the Brigadier, who, though he had remained silent throughout, had clearly not missed any nuance of the exchange. "I think I'd better have a look inside this base of yours," he pronounced.

"That could be dangerous, Doctor."

"I haven't got a magic wand I can just wave from here to make it all go away," the Doctor retorted. "I need to make my own appraisal of what we're dealing with."

The Brigadier accepted the inevitable. "Very well. Major Redford will escort you. But remember - do *not* touch *anything* that is powered by electricity. No equipment, no light switches, no telephones, nothing. Nothing at all."

"Don't worry, we won't," said Ace cheerfully.

"*You*, young woman, are not coming," Redford instantly contradicted her. "I'm not putting a civilian female into such a dangerous environment."

Ace made a derisive noise. "Are you from the Jurassic or the Cretaceous?" she jeered.

"Now, now, Ace," the Doctor chided her gently. "This is one of those moments I was talking about earlier. Where things become clear to the Major. Such as the fact that where I go, you go."

"It's too dangerous!" Redford protested.

"Then don't come, if you're too scared!" Ace retorted.

"Sir...!" Redford appealed angrily to the Brigadier, but the latter shook his head.

"The Doctor knows what he's doing. Carry out your orders, Major Redford. Take Sergeant Coleman along with you, and report back to me once the Doctor's made his assessment."

"Sir," Redford acquiesced, but the twisting of his lips made him look as if he was chewing on acid.

As they turned to go, the Brigadier stopped them. "Doctor, there's something else you should know. Within a few hours of the storm during which the strike on the dish took place, another storm materialized. And this one didn't disperse. It's still going on. The same one you saw outside."

"A thunderstorm that's been going on for a *month*?" The Doctor's eyes widened, then narrowed thoughtfully. "That's interesting. Very interesting indeed..." He seemed lost in contemplation for a moment.

"The meteorologists are entirely unable to account for it," the Brigadier continued.

"Something's badly wrong here, Doctor. Whatever happened, it started with that first lightning strike and it's still going on now. I need you to find out what it is, before any more lives are lost. And all the while the problem continues, the primary function of this facility, to detect alien incursions, is compromised. I'm relying on you."

The Doctor looked at him, suddenly beaming. "What a very sensible thing for you to do," he said approvingly.

As Redford led the way from the temporary HQ toward the base, stalking ahead of the rest of the group, the Doctor regarded Sergeant Coleman, who was accompanying him and Ace, with interest.

"You look familiar, Sergeant," he said. "Have we met somewhere?"

"No, sir," said Coleman respectfully. "But you might be remembering my father. I look very like him. He served with UNIT back in the seventies. You might have seen him then."

“That’s right!” The Doctor’s face lit up. “Captain Coleman! Yes, I remember him. Like father, like son, eh?”

“I hope so, sir.” Coleman hesitated, then spoke in a lowered voice. “About Major Redford, Doctor...”

“Ye-e-es...?” prompted the Doctor, matching him for volume.

“He’s a very efficient officer, sir, but – er...” Coleman was picking his words with extreme care. “Well, let’s just say, if you need anything doing, and you have any – er – problems... well, you let *me* know. I’ll see you get what you need.”

“Why, Sergeant, how very subversive of you!” the Doctor teased, with a wicked smile.

“Subversive, sir? Me?” Coleman raised innocent eyebrows. “I just want to make sure everything that can be done, is done.” His face abruptly set in grim lines. “I’ve lost not just colleagues but friends with what’s happened here. I don’t want anyone else dying that doesn’t have to. And from what my father told me, if anyone can stop that from happening, it’s you, Doctor.”

Before the Doctor could respond to this expression of trust they were interrupted by Redford, who had reached the entrance to the main building. The same two soldiers were on guard, staring impassively ahead in the Major’s presence.

“I will make it clear once again that you are entering this base at your own risk,” he said curtly. “As the Brigadier said, do *not* touch anything powered by electricity. You have been warned.”

He stared at them briefly to emphasize his words, then led the way into the building and along a series of empty corridors, lined with doors that reminded Ace of the ones in her school, with small, square glass viewing panes at head height. Every single one of those doors was firmly shut, and silence reigned almost oppressively throughout the empty building. Or did it? Was there, just barely detectable, a faint and intermittent crackling of some kind from time to time? The sound of their footsteps made it hard for her to be sure...

“This is as good a place as any,” said Redford, halting before one of the doors.

“And this is the place where the dying’s been happening, is it?” the Doctor asked, looking at the plaque on the door below the viewing pane; it read MAIN COMPUTER ROOM.

Redford instantly rounded on him. “One of the places. And I find your levity utterly displaced, Doctor. Seven men and five women. Twelve human beings, dead. And twelve grieving families. If you could find it in you to curb what I find a particularly distasteful flippancy on this subject, I think it would be a rather more appropriate reaction to the circumstances.”

The two men glowered their mutual antipathy at each other. “How can I possibly refuse when you ask me so nicely?” the Doctor said sarcastically.

“Just – follow me,” Redford ordered with barely concealed impatience. “Coleman, you remain outside unless I tell you otherwise.”

“Sir!” Coleman acknowledged, and stepped back.

“You, too, Miss – er...” Redford hesitated as he realized he did not know – because he had not been interested enough to ask – Ace’s surname.

“I told you already,” said the Doctor swiftly. “Where I go, Ace goes.”

“On your head be it,” said Redford stiffly, and opened the door.

The room into which they entered was windowless, every wall lined with servers and other computer equipment. In the centre of the room was a console with a bank of three monitors and keyboards, the chairs in front of them empty. Every screen was blank; complete silence reigned. Small CCTV cameras were mounted near the ceiling in each corner of the room; their fields of vision would, under normal circumstances, cover the whole area, but all were positioned at weird angles and were clearly not functioning.

The Doctor chewed his lip thoughtfully. He turned to Redford. “What’s the periodicity of the power surges?”

As if his words had been a signal, the faint crackling sound that Ace thought she had heard earlier began to be audible. Redford clearly recognized it.

“Here comes one now! Don’t touch anything! Not anything, do you hear?”

As they watched, a physical phenomenon began to manifest itself to match the rising volume of the crackling. Within seconds, over every piece of equipment in the room swarmed an electrical field of some kind, looking like a semi-transparent, almost milky surface of plasma over which sparks and tiny strands of lightning flickered, like fingers trying to locate something.

“The screens,” said Redford, pointing. “As I told you, Doctor.”

The screens had sprung into action. On every one, a stream of numerals – ones and zeroes – began to race across, filling the whole display. Ace stared at them, fascinated.

“Is that happening because the electricity’s scrambling the computer system?” she asked, expecting an instant response from him.

Instead, there was complete silence alongside her. There was something about the quality of that silence that made her look at him quickly; when she did, she saw he was staring at the screens with a look almost of shock on his face. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen him looking like that.

“Professor? What is it?” she demanded urgently.

The tone of her voice made Redford, too, turn to look at the Doctor, just in time to catch a glimpse of the alarm in his eyes before his face became suddenly unreadable. Redford looked quickly from the Doctor to the screens of binary code and back again.

“Doctor? Do you know what’s going on?” He made it sound like an accusation. “Tell me!”

The Doctor ignored the demand and continued to regard the swarming plasma. “You said wireless technology had been ineffective. In what way? What did you try to do?”

“To shut everything down,” Redford said, his eyes narrowing as he studied the Doctor. “So we could physically unlink the equipment from the power. Conduct our investigations in safety. As I’ve already told you, two men died trying to do it manually.”

“Hmmm. Yes,” said the Doctor reflectively. Then he looked sideways at Redford. “Well, let’s see if I can do better than you, shall we?” The tone of his voice said very clearly ‘*..and I can!*’.

Ace was utterly delighted by the infuriated expression on Redford’s face.

Redford stormed back to the Brigadier’s office and knocked in a peremptory fashion on the door. In response to the muffled “Come in” that followed he almost hurled himself into the room. The Brigadier took one look at him and sighed inwardly, but merely said, politely, “Yes, Major Redford? You have an update for me? Where’s the Doctor?”

“He’s gone off with Sergeant Coleman, sir,” Redford said, his voice taut. “There’s some equipment he wants – I don’t know what for. But I think he knows what the problem is, sir. I took him to the Main Computer Room. There was a power surge when we were in there, and the screens filled with binary, as they always do. It was the look on his face, sir. I think he knows something he’s not telling us.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” said the Brigadier, with one brief and somewhat suspect twitch of his moustache.

“Look, sir, the purpose of this base is to detect alien incursions into our solar system,” said Redford earnestly. “The Doctor’s an alien himself. What if we’re undergoing an alien attack and he knows who’s doing it? I know you have a very high opinion of him, sir” – *one I do not share*, said his tone – “but how can we be sure he’s on our side? What if, for reasons of his own, he’s involved in what’s happening?”

“That’s quite enough of that, Major Redford!” The Brigadier shot to his feet and met Redford’s eye with a steely glare. “Now, you listen to me! The Doctor’s record of protecting the Earth from alien incursions is without peer. I have personally witnessed countless occasions on which he has put himself at risk in order to defend our planet and its people. And although he seeks to avoid it whenever possible, when conflict has been inevitable he has always chosen to preserve humanity against alien aggressors. So I’ll thank you to put your baseless prejudice against him to one side, and concentrate on helping him discover the cause of our problems here and on resolving them. Have I made myself clear?”

“But, sir, I’m sure he knows what’s going on!” Redford persisted. “So why doesn’t he tell us?”

The Brigadier ignored the question. "Have – I – made – my – self – clear, Major?" he repeated, spacing out his syllables for emphasis.

Redford ground his teeth together. "Yes, sir," he muttered. "Very clear."

As they headed back to the Main Computer Room, Ace looked with interest at the gadget that the Doctor had concocted from the equipment Sergeant Coleman had requisitioned for him. It was small enough to fit in one hand and consisted of a small LED screen, a tangle of electronics that included a lot of microchips, and a weird little keypad with just two keys on it – a '1' and a '0'.

"Bit Heath Robinson, Professor," she observed brightly. "What's it do?"

"*What's it do?*" repeated the Doctor reprovingly. "You know, Ace, your use of the English language can be very inelegant at times."

Ace pulled a face at him. "Don't nitpick, Professor! What *does* it do?"

"Wait and see," said the Doctor evasively, with a quick sideways look at Coleman, who chuckled.

"Don't worry, Doctor," he said. "At my pay grade I'm very familiar with the 'need to know' principle."

"I'm sure you are," the Doctor agreed with a knowing smile.

Coleman looked at Ace somewhat quizzically. "If you don't mind my asking, Miss – why do you always call the Doctor 'Professor'?"

Ace grinned. "It's my nickname for him. He likes to be reminded how clever he is."

"I don't need reminding of *that*," said the Doctor, a little tartly. "I *know*. But sometimes I need data to be clever *with*." He suddenly looked at Coleman with narrowed eyes. "That first lightning strike. Did anyone see it actually hit the antenna?"

"It's funny you should ask that, sir," said Coleman, looking slightly surprised. "Yes, they did. It was me, as a matter of fact. They caught it on the cameras, of course, but I was the only person who saw it directly."

"And was there anything odd about what you saw?" The Doctor looked at him expectantly. He was clearly pursuing a specific line of enquiry, and, moreover, he was anticipating an affirmative answer. Which he got.

"It was the afterimage," Coleman said slowly. "The cameras can't record that, of course, but I saw it. And I can't explain it. Because the afterimage – well, there was something strange about it."

"What was it?" Ace demanded.

"You know how when you've looked at something very bright, if you shut your eyes straight afterwards, you can still see the silhouette of the thing you've looked at, against the inside of your eyelids, but you see it in shades of grey – dark and light grey, like a photographic negative?"

Coleman frowned in recollection. "It wasn't like that. It wasn't grey. It was red. Shades of red."

"I knew it!" the Doctor exclaimed triumphantly. "Red! That's it!"

"That's what?" Ace demanded.

"It confirms my theory. I know what's happened."

Ace stared at him. "How do you know?"

The Doctor smiled smugly. "Because I'm clever. Weren't you listening?"

"So what *is* it?"

"Need to know, Ace," said the Doctor, tapping the side of his nose with one forefinger. "Need to know." They had reached their destination, and he turned to Coleman. "And what I need to know is that you're going to be on guard out here, Sergeant. No-one must be allowed to approach while I'm performing this experiment. No-one."

"Don't worry, Doctor." Coleman nodded reassuringly and took up his post alongside the door, his back to the wall, so he could monitor both ends of the corridor if needed.

"Right! Come on, Ace," and the Doctor slipped into the Main Computer Room, Ace on his heels. She closed the door and turned to survey the room. The screens were blank; all was quiet, as before. "What now, Professor? Are you going to bring on your gizmo?"

"That gizmo, as you so facetiously term it, is a highly sophisticated communication device!"

"Communicating with what?"

The Doctor didn't answer. He pointed the device at one of the computer screens and swiftly tapped a staccato sequence of ones and zeroes using the two keys.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Ace heard the faint crackle that heralded another power surge; as it increased, the same sheen of plasmic activity as before began to ripple over the surface of every piece of equipment, and the three computer screens glowed into life. However, this time Ace saw that while two of them began to fill with high-speed binary as before, the third screen contained only that sequence of binary code that the Doctor had tapped onto his keyboard.

For a few more seconds the other two screens continued to fill with numerals. Then, abruptly, they cleared. One stayed blank, but more numerals began to appear on the other – not filling the screen this time, just four lines before stopping. The Doctor tapped on his keypad again, and a different sequence appeared on his screen. When he'd finished, the other screen cleared and a new sequence appeared. And so on.

Ace successfully fought down the urge to ask what was going on for a whole minute before asking, "What's going on, Professor?"

"Sssh!" said the Doctor, without looking away from the screens. "Busy!"

Ace frustratedly folded her arms and hunched her shoulders.

"I have excellent peripheral vision, and I speak body language as well as binary, you know," the Doctor told her, still concentrating on the screens.

"All right, so what's the binary telling you?" Ace demanded.

For a long moment he didn't reply. Then he looked at her, and his face was serious.

"It's not the binary. It's what's using the binary to talk to me. There's a sprite trapped in the power system," he said gravely.

"A *what*?"

"A sprite."

"An alien, you mean?"

"Once, millennia ago," agreed the Doctor. "But not any longer. This is their home now."

"*Their* home?" repeated Ace. "So there's more than one of them? What are they?"

"Sprites. Red sprites, to be exact. As far as everyone else is concerned, they're just an atmospheric phenomenon. Electrical discharges. Coloured flashes generated above thunderstorms, high up in the atmosphere."

"What, and they speak binary?"

"It's in a *computer*," said the Doctor with artificial patience. "How would you *expect* it to communicate?"

"Pretty good for an atmospheric phenomenon! Except they're obviously more than that."

"Indeed they are." The Doctor was still wearing a serious expression. "Their existence only really started to be realized close to the start of the twentieth century, and nobody managed to photograph one for another ninety years or so after that. Even that happened by complete accident. They're difficult to photograph; the conditions have to be just right. That's why they're called sprites. Very elusive creatures. They only become visible – and that only momentarily – when their particles are ionized by lightning. Which is why they're assumed to be transitory atmospheric phenomena. But they're there all the time. Harmlessly living their lives miles up in the sky, floating about perfectly happily. Until now."

"But if they're not native to Earth, how did they get here?"

The Doctor shifted slightly uncomfortably. "Me," he said. "I brought them here."

"*You*? When? Why?" Ace demanded with furrowed brow.

"Millions of years ago, by your calendar. Their home planet was going to be destroyed," the Doctor explained. "Their sun was about to go nova. So, to make sure they survived, I brought them here. The atmosphere was similar enough to their native one for them to adapt. Which they have, over the millennia. They're quite at home here now."

"And they're intelligent, yeah?"

"Oh, yes," agreed the Doctor. "Very. There's an entire invisible civilization floating overhead every day."

"So why doesn't anyone else know that?"

“Because they mustn’t!” said the Doctor emphatically. “It’s absolutely vital that no-one suspects that the sprites are anything other than a transient optical phenomenon.”

Ace’s brow furrowed. “Why not?”

“You know what the human race is like,” said the Doctor, his eyes darkening. “Two kinds of people. The ones who are tolerant and kind to each other and to the creatures they share this planet with. They treat them with respect, don’t try to over-exploit them or cage them. But then there’s the other kind. The ones who can’t tolerate anything except the narrowest of differences within their own species, let alone the welfare of any others. How do you think *those* people would respond if they learned they were sharing their planet with a life-form of equal intelligence? And an alien one, at that? Even though there’s no possible overlap in the needs of the two species. Provided they left each other alone. But would they? The sprites don’t need anything humans have got. But what if humans discovered there were creatures made of electricity floating in the sky above them? Sooner or later someone would think, ‘*Ah! A source of power, to be exploited like every other creature and resource on the Earth!*’ The sprites would be in equal danger from the ones who’d want to destroy them and the ones who’d want to exploit them. There’d be humans who’d want to do either one or the other. There always are. Fear, ignorance, greed, the desire to dominate – always a deadly combination.”

Ace regarded him with a very unimpressed expression on her face. “If that’s what you think, pretty stupid of you to bring them here in the first place!”

“I thought they were going to be safe!” The Doctor sounded both aggrieved and irritated. “I didn’t think anyone would ever find out!”

“What, you didn’t think that as technology progressed they wouldn’t be spotted eventually?” Ace was incredulous at this apparent naivety on the Doctor’s part.

“Of course I knew they’d be *seen* sooner or later,” the Doctor snapped impatiently. “What I didn’t know was that there was ever going to be any danger that anyone might find out about their being an intelligent alien race. I didn’t know *this* was going to happen!” He spread his arms dramatically wide in a gesture of frustration.

“*What* was going to happen?”

“An accident. A one in a million chance, you might say. Except that it was much more unlikely than that,” the Doctor corrected himself. “A billion. A trillion. A gazillion!”

“Okay, Professor, I get the idea. A lot,” Ace summarized drily.

“It got caught up in a freak discharge of lightning,” the Doctor continued. “Like getting your sleeve caught in the door of a car just as it’s moving off, so you have to run alongside the car until you can get the driver to stop. Except this was a lot faster and there was no way to stop the lightning. So the sprite got dragged down with it. Normally the bolt would just have struck

something non-metallic – like a tree, or a rock, or something. But this was the one-in-a-gazillionth time.”

“Because it struck the dish?” Ace was beginning to understand. “And that’s linked to the mains power? So the sprite got shoved through into the electrics, and now it can’t get back out?”

“Exactly,” agreed the Doctor. “I’ve got to help it escape before anyone realizes what it really is and starts regarding it as dangerous.”

“Well, isn’t it? It’s killed twelve people,” Ace pointed out.

“Ah, but it didn’t mean to,” said the Doctor swiftly.

“How do you know?”

The Doctor looked at her impatiently, and gestured with the device in his hand. “Because I’ve been asking it. It had no idea what it was doing was harmful to humans. It was just trying to ask for help.”

“Funny way to go about it,” Ace said disparagingly.

The Doctor looked at her with an expression of forced patience. “If *you* were snatched away from everything you knew and found yourself trapped in a completely alien environment, how well would you be able to control *your* reactions? Wouldn’t you be desperate for help? Would you have any idea if the way you were trying to ask was proving dangerous to a life-form you’d never encountered before?”

Ace was silent.

“The sprite hasn’t the first idea what a computer system or a telephone is,” the Doctor continued. “But it can sense input, so whenever it did it came to the point of interface. All it was trying to do was to find help, so it could escape.”

“Interface,” Ace repeated. “You mean, anyone who was touching a keyboard or a phone or whatever – when the sprite touched *them*...”

“Exactly!” the Doctor agreed. “No malicious intent at all. Because it had no idea physical contact between it and these strange creatures it hadn’t met before was going to be lethal. All it wanted – all it *wants* – is to get home.”

“So you need to come up with a rescue plan, Professor.”

“I already have,” the Doctor said, slightly indignantly, as if there should never have been any doubt about it. His fingers were once again busy on his keypad. Ace watched the steady flow of ones and zeroes on his screen, and the answer begin on the sprite’s screen when he paused.

“What are you saying now?” she asked.

“I’m telling it what I’m going to do, and what I need it to do,” said the Doctor. He tapped the final key with a flourish, and both the screens blanked. The plasmic sheen subsided and vanished.

“And what’s that?”

“Set it free before Major Redford starts to suspect the truth. He’s here to ensure that aliens don’t invade Earth. What do you think he’d do if he knew what’s really happening here?”

Ace didn’t need much time to come up with her answer. “Like you said, Professor. He’d want to capture them or destroy them.”

“Exactly. And he wouldn’t be the only one. We’ve got to keep him from knowing – or even suspecting – anything even close to the truth.”

Even as he spoke, the Doctor turned toward the door, which he had had his back to all the time, and Ace turned with him.

To find Major Redford staring through the viewing pane of the door at them.

For two seconds the two sets of eyes held each other, Redford’s full of furious fear, the Doctor’s full of furious alarm. Then the Doctor leapt for the door and threw it open so quickly that Redford had no time to do anything other than step back, his hand going instinctively to the flap of the holster at his waist.

“How much did you see?” the Doctor demanded angrily.

“Enough to know that you’re a traitor to Earth!” Redford accused. “You were communicating with someone in there! Who? Who was it?”

The Doctor narrowed his eyes. “Who do *you* think it was?”

“This base and its facilities were built to protect the Earth from alien invasion,” said Redford, his voice almost vibrating with implicit menace. “Then, all of a sudden, it’s taken offline by something nobody understands, leaving us wide open all the time the system is down. Then here *you* are. That’s not by accident, is it? You *knew* the Brigadier would call on you. You *knew* you could make capital out of his so-touching faith that you’d rescue us all.” His scorn was blistering. “What do you think your precious Brigadier will say when I tell him I have proof you’re in league with whoever or whatever’s behind all this? Being a Trojan horse for your alien friends? Who are they, Doctor? Where are they from?”

The Doctor looked at him with withering disdain. “You have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

Redford gestured at the doorway of the Main Computer Room. “What, that?” he sneered.

“No,” said the Doctor implacably. “Me.”

“Oh, I do know what I’m dealing with, then,” Redford assured him. “A spy! A traitor!” Suddenly he tore open the flap of his holster, pulled out his revolver and aimed it at the Doctor’s head. Ace instinctively grabbed at the Doctor’s sleeve, as if that would help protect him from a bullet.

“What do you think you’re doing, stupid?” she yelled.

“I’m going to make sure the Doctor doesn’t get the chance to interfere any further,” Redford ground out from between clenched teeth. The tightening of his trigger finger showed just how he intended to achieve his intention.

But then, from further down the corridor, there came the sound of another revolver being cocked.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't let you do that," said Sergeant Coleman flatly.

Redford glanced over his shoulder, almost shocked to see the weapon being pointed steadily at him.

"The Doctor's a traitor, Coleman! We've got to stop him!" he insisted passionately.

"Maybe you're right, sir, maybe you're wrong," said Coleman, though it was clear which of the two options he'd decided upon. "But this isn't the way. You should speak to the Brigadier, sir. Give him your evidence. He'll decide, sir."

Redford hesitated. Ace didn't like the way his trigger finger kept relaxing and then tightening again; he was clearly longing to put a bullet through the Doctor's brain here and now. But he must have realized that short of shooting all three of them, he had no choice but to obtain his superior officer's legitimization for whatever action he took. Still aiming his revolver at the Doctor, he began to back along the corridor, moving slowly until he was level with Coleman, who made the mistake of slowly lowering his gun to his side. Redford suddenly and viciously swung the butt of his revolver at Coleman's head, sending him crashing to the floor. Then he turned on his heel and ran.

"Major Redford! Stop!" the Doctor bellowed, but Redford ignored him. Without so much as a second glance at his stricken subordinate, he ran on and vanished through the doors at the end of the corridor.

Ace and the Doctor ran to Sergeant Coleman and helped him to his feet. He was bleeding from a cut on his temple, and was dizzy for a moment or two, but otherwise seemed none the worse for wear.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," he apologized. "I told him you'd said no-one was to approach while you were in there, but he's my superior officer and he gave me a direct order. I didn't have any choice."

"Oh, the joys of a hierarchical institution," the Doctor commented tartly. Then he looked at Coleman's obvious distress and relented. "You've bought us some time, Sergeant, but we've got to act fast, and I need your help again. I know what the problem is, and I know how to solve it, but I need some more equipment, and I need it quickly. Major Redford is undoubtedly on his way to persuade the Brigadier to order my arrest, and he's probably ordered your two colleagues on the door to stop me leaving this building while he does it. Can you get us out of here another way?"

Coleman smiled.

"Follow me, Doctor," he said confidently.

The Brigadier looked up with astonishment as Redford burst into his office without ceremony and stood in the doorway, his revolver gripped in his hand.

“I was right!” Redford shouted. “The Doctor’s up to something, and we’ve got to stop him!”

The Brigadier shot to his feet. “Major Redford, I’ll thank you to stop shrieking at me like a fishwife and show the proper respect for my rank and standing!” he barked.

Redford stared at him wildly. “But, sir, we’re in danger! I know we are! I’ve just seen the Doctor in the Main Computer Room. He was communicating with someone, or something!”

“What do you mean, communicating?” the Brigadier demanded.

“The screens – the binary on them – it’s not random, it’s communication of some kind! From an intelligent being! He was talking to it using the same method. Sir, we’ve got to stop him, and find out what’s going on! Who’s he talking to? What’s he saying? He might have compromised us to alien invaders. We’ve got to be sure!”

The Brigadier looked at the almost manic eyes confronting him. Redford clearly utterly believed what he was saying. But what he was accusing the Doctor of doing was impossible, surely. Though...

The Brigadier’s mind flashed back to other occasions in their association where the Doctor’s approach to alien intruders had differed markedly from his own. They hadn’t always seen eye to eye on the best solution. He’d better make his own assessment of the situation.

“Sir, you’ve got to order the Doctor’s arrest!” Redford persisted. “He’s got to be interrogated! I’ll do it, sir! I’ll make sure he tells us the truth!”

That implications of that proposal got the Brigadier’s instant and focused attention. He looked at Redford with a rising sense of disquiet. The man was clearly in no state to be objective, let alone conduct a meaningful investigation of the facts. He’d been against the Doctor’s presence from the start, and the antipathy between the two had been almost instant. It was quite obvious what he meant by ‘making sure’. Which in turn meant that whoever was going to speak to the Doctor, it definitely wasn’t going to be Redford.

“Thank you, Major, but that won’t be necessary. I’ll talk to the Doctor myself,” he said briskly.

Redford’s face contorted. “With respect, sir, are you sure you can be objective about the Doctor?” he challenged. “I’m not sure you can. You’ve known him for too long, know him too well. You’d be predisposed to believe him no matter what he told you...”

The Brigadier stiffened. “It’s precisely *because* I’ve known him for so long that I know I can trust him, Major Redford! And I’ll thank you not to doubt my ability to be objective about the situation. I’m as aware as you are of the potential security issues, and I can assure you I won’t hesitate to take whatever action proves to be necessary.”

“But you’ll *believe* him!” Redford almost wailed. “Because you *want* to!” His right hand, the hand with the gun in it, was starting to twitch upwards spasmodically, as if he now regarded the Brigadier as a threat.

The Brigadier studied him with an outwardly calm face, but inwardly his thoughts were racing. Redford had always been a stickler for rules and regulations, ardent about the need to protect the Earth from aliens to the point of obsession. Perhaps that was why he couldn't bring himself to trust the Doctor, in spite of the Doctor's record. That obsessiveness must have brought him closer to the edge of sanity than anyone had realized. His disintegration from the super-efficient officer he had been before the Doctor's arrival to the quivering paranoid he now was had been terrifyingly swift.

The Brigadier came to the inescapable conclusion that he was facing a potentially very dangerous man.

"I will *listen* to him," he said firmly, taking a couple of studiedly casual steps from behind his desk to within an arm's length of Redford. "As I have to you. And then, Major Redford," he said with emphasis, "I'll make a judgement based on facts, not on emotions. Meanwhile, I think it'll be for the best if you –"

Redford's eyes flashed alarmingly, and he started to raise his revolver. Even though the Brigadier had been expecting it, the move was so swift that he almost didn't have time to counter it. He went for Redford's gun hand with both of his own; Redford brought his left hand up to grip the Brigadier's right wrist and forced their collective arms upwards. The two men wrestled silently for a few seconds, each trying to gain control of the revolver now pointing skyward. Then Redford's trigger finger contracted and a shot rang out, the bullet expending itself harmlessly into the ceiling.

Within seconds there came the sound of running feet, and two soldiers, a corporal and a private, appeared in the doorway.

"Sir – ?" the corporal began, but broke off as he took in the tableau before him. Instantly he and his colleague leapt upon Redford and wrestled him away from the Brigadier, who leant back against his desk, panting heavily as he watched the two disarm and, with some difficulty, eventually subdue the wildly struggling man by means of a double arm lock.

"Thank you, Corporal Stevenson," he managed to say at last.

"Sir," Stevenson acknowledged briskly, breaking off to add to his colleague, as Redford gave a particularly violent lunge, "Hang on to him, Hansen!" Then, to the Brigadier again, "What do you want us to do with him, sir?"

The Brigadier straightened himself. "Major Redford is under arrest for assaulting a superior officer," he said curtly. "He's to be confined to quarters immediately, is that clear?"

"It's the Doctor you should be arresting, not me!" Redford yelled, still writhing.

Stevenson ignored him. "Yes, sir," he said to the Brigadier. Both he and Hansen tightened their grip as Redford began to struggle even more furiously. "Come along, Major Redford. You need to come with us." He looked at the Brigadier again. "Should I fetch the MO, sir, while I'm at it?"

The Brigadier looked at the wildly staring blue eyes, almost entirely rinsed of reason, that blazed in Redford's face, and shuddered inwardly.

"Excellent idea, Corporal," he approved, straightening his uniform and picking up his swagger stick. "If anyone needs me," he announced, "I'm going to look for the Doctor."

Ace looked at the black, box-like device in the Doctor's hands as they hurried toward the huge dish of the radio telescope.

"That didn't take you long to put together," she said. "What is it?"

"Something that'll guide the sprite to the antenna," said the Doctor. "It's trapped in a maze of electrical pathways, nothing to orient it. Once I activate this, it'll know where it needs to go to in order to get out."

"And how's it going to do that?"

They had by now reached the foot of one of the pillars that supported the dish, an access door positioned on its outward-facing side, just as all the other pillars had. The Doctor looked over his shoulder and beamed.

"With the help of the equipment that Sergeant Coleman is so valiantly pursuing us with," he said cheerfully. Ace turned, too, and saw Coleman running toward them. Her eyes lit up as she saw what he was carrying.

"A rocket? Wicked!" she breathed, her eyes lighting up.

"Yes, I thought you'd approve," said the Doctor smugly.

"Here you are, sir!" Coleman panted as he came up to them. In his arms he was carrying a small, slender rocket, about four feet in length, along with its launcher and remote control, and a coil of wire.

"Excellent!" The Doctor pocketed the remote control and opened the access door, revealing a spiral metal staircase inside the pillar. "Now, if you wouldn't mind waiting here, Sergeant, all Ace and I have to do is put everything in place up on the antenna before Simple Simon spots what we're doing..."

"Sir," Coleman acknowledged, unable to suppress a momentary grin as he handed the rocket over to Ace and the launcher and wire to the Doctor.

Ace frowned, puzzled. "Simple Simon?" she queried.

"Major *Simon* Redford, remember?" said the Doctor ironically. He winked at Coleman.

"I couldn't possibly comment, sir," said Coleman innocently.

"Of course not," the Doctor agreed, his eyes twinkling. "Thank you, Sergeant. This won't take long."

"Sir," Coleman said again, still grinning as he left, closing the door between them and him.

“What are you going to do with this stuff?” Ace asked, as she followed the Doctor awkwardly upwards, trying to stop the rocket she was now carrying from tangling with the staircase.

“Create the conditions for an artificial strike of lightning. A way out for the sprite. Attach one end of the wire to the antenna, the other to the rocket. The rocket goes up, trailing the wire behind it, the sprite travels out and up the wire, and it’s free again. Simple but brilliant. Like me!”

“Brilliant you may be, Professor,” Ace muttered. “Simple, you are *not*...”

A few minutes later she was standing out on the dish, the wire and launcher at her feet but still cradling the rocket in her arms, while the Doctor attached his guidance device for the sprite to the apex of the antenna. It wasn’t a comfortable place to stand; the dish was tilted upward on one side, away from the main building and toward the huts of the temporary HQ, and the slope was slightly too steep to balance on with ease. Also, she felt unexpectedly exposed, standing on this white expanse which suddenly felt so much nearer to the roiling clouds illuminated by almost constant lightning, every strike followed by thunder that she could not only hear, but feel in her very bones.

“Professor, there’s one thing you haven’t explained yet,” she said at last.

“Oh? What’s that?” said the Doctor half-absently, intent on his task.

“This thunderstorm. The Brigadier said it’s been going on ever since the first strike. So ever since the sprite got trapped. The two things are connected, right? But how?”

The Doctor gave her a momentary glance before continuing what he was doing. “If a child went missing, what would everyone do? Word would get round the family. The parents, the siblings, the grandparents, the uncles, the aunts. What would they do?”

“Call the police, probably.”

“Mmm. But before that. They’d all go out and look for the child themselves, don’t you think?”

Ace stared at the Doctor, then up at the streaks of lightning stabbing across the sky. “You mean – ?”

The Doctor slid her a sidelong smile. “Of course. Those are the other sprites, trying to retrieve their stray. So we’re giving them a bit of a hand. Talking of which, hand over that rocket...”

The Brigadier was having little luck trying to run the Doctor to earth until accosted by Private Hansen, who had been despatched by Corporal Stevenson to confirm that Redford had been confined to his quarters as ordered; he then additionally reported that Sergeant Coleman had been seen out by the access door of one of the pillars of the radio telescope.

The Brigadier raised his eyebrows. “Really? What’s he doing there?”

“I don’t know, sir. Just standing. As if he was on guard, sir.” Hansen hesitated, then added, “Major Redford saw him. While we were taking him to his quarters, sir. He started to yell like a

madman. Demanding that Coleman tell him where the Doctor was. It was all we could do to get him into his room after that. The MO's in there with him now."

The Brigadier ruminated for a moment. "Is Coleman still out there?"

"As far as I know, sir."

The Brigadier decided on his course of action. "All right, thank you. I'll go and talk to him myself, see if he does know where the Doctor is. You'd better get back to Corporal Stevenson, in case he still needs you."

"Sir!" Hansen saluted and left.

"Right, Doctor!" the Brigadier said under his breath, squaring his shoulders. "Let's see if I can track you down this time..."

Hansen could see something was wrong as soon as he approached the door to Major Redford's quarters; it stood ajar, but there was complete silence within. He unholstered his revolver and moved toward the door with caution, then carefully pushed it wide.

Surrounded by the wreckage of what had clearly been a violent struggle, Stevenson and the doctor lay unconscious on the floor, and Redford was gone.

Hansen stopped long enough only to check that the two men were still breathing. Then he took to his heels to raise the alarm.

Coleman turned as he heard the sounds of Ace and the Doctor returning down the ladder inside the pillar, and opened the door for them.

"Everything all right, Doctor?" he asked.

"Indeed it is," the Doctor confirmed with satisfaction. "All we have to do now is to launch the rocket."

"Am I allowed to ask what this is all for?" Coleman enquired.

"You might describe it as flushing the system," said the Doctor. "Clearing out what shouldn't be there." He turned to Ace, and caught her covetously eyeing the launch controller in his hand. "And I suppose you want to be the one to press the button?"

Ace beamed at him. "You know me, Professor!"

"Indeed I do," the Doctor agreed with a wry lift of his eyebrows, as he handed the controller over. "So let's get to where we can see what happens as well as hear it, shall we?"

He started away from the pillar, Ace and Coleman with him, heading toward the huts that constituted the Brigadier's temporary HQ, just as the Brigadier himself emerged from one of them.

"Hullo," said Ace suddenly. "What's going on there, Professor?"

Another soldier had emerged at a run from the same door, and accosted the Brigadier. Whatever he said made the Brigadier stiffen and turn quickly to look toward them.

The Doctor frowned.

“Don’t know,” he said warily. “But somehow I don’t think it’s going to be good news.”

Because all their attention was taken by what was happening in front of them, none of them looked behind for as much as an instant, and so did not see the figure that ran with furtive speed toward another of the pillars and disappeared through its access door.

Redford climbed swiftly upwards inside the pillar. He’d seen the Doctor and Ace up on the antenna, seen that the Doctor had attached some sort of device to it. All part of his scheme, no doubt, brewed up with whatever group of aliens he was conspiring with.

Whatever purpose the Doctor was trying to achieve, Redford was determined to make sure it failed. And the first step had to be the destruction of that device.

“Doctor! Have you seen Major Redford?” the Brigadier demanded as he came hurrying toward them.

“Not since he raced off with the intention of placing me under arrest,” the Doctor said. “Why? Have you lost him?”

“*He* was the one who got arrested, but he’s broken out. I’m afraid he thinks you’re in league with aliens who are trying to invade the Earth while the radio telescope is out of action. His state of mind could best be described as” – the Brigadier sought the right adjective – “volatile. I think he may be –”

“Sir!” Hansen exclaimed, cutting across him. “There he is!” His finger pointed urgently upwards.

Everyone swung round to look at the radio telescope. Redford was indeed up on the dish, awkwardly balancing on the slope as he made his way toward the antenna. He reached the foot of one of the arms and stared balefully for a moment at the black box affixed to the apex. Then he began to climb.

“Major Redford, get down from there!” the Brigadier bellowed, but Redford ignored him.

Ace, gripping the rocket launcher control, was startled by the Doctor suddenly seizing it back from her and then deliberately stepping back so he was behind the Brigadier.

“Brigadier, you’ve got to get him down from there,” he said urgently. “That rocket is going to launch in seconds, and I can’t stop it!”

The Brigadier threw him a swift, horrified look. “Coleman! Hansen! Get up there and stop him!” he roared, and watched the two men race toward the nearest pillar.

Ace stared at the Doctor. She knew perfectly well he wasn't telling the truth. The rocket was set up to be launched by hand, not automatically. Why was he lying? What was he planning?

Redford was almost at the top of the antenna. Coleman and Hansen were still yards away from the access door. They weren't going to get to him in time. Nobody was going to be able to stop him.

His hand reached up...

Ace looked back at the Doctor, just in time to see the convulsive jerk of his thumb that depressed the launch control of the rocket.

It leapt skywards, drawing the wire up after it. At the same instant that Redford touched the device there was a huge concussion of sound, as what looked like a bolt of lightning leapt skyward from the apex of the antenna.

Incredibly, at that very same moment a descending dagger of lightning arched toward the dish. The Brigadier couldn't be sure, because he was busy clapping his hand over his ears, but he could have sworn, just before his eyes instinctively closed against that dual shriek of light and noise, that the two had made contact in mid-air before they vanished. And not just vanished, but vanished *upward*... Surely not! No, his eyes must have been playing tricks on him. Lightning didn't behave like that...

He lowered his hands, shaking his head to try to clear the ringing still reverberating in his ears, momentarily slightly dazed. Then he recollected, and looked up at the dish.

Still attached to the antenna, but burned and melted out of all recognition, the Doctor's device remained moulded to the apex. And below it, starkly black against the white of the dish, a burned and smoking heap of what looked like discarded clothes.

In the ensuing silence Coleman and Hansen appeared on the rim of the dish and halted abruptly, looking down at the dead man below them. Then something else caught Coleman's attention.

"Brigadier! Sir!" he shouted, looking upwards with astonishment. "The thunderstorm – it's stopping! Just like that!"

The Brigadier, too, looked upward. The sky above them, that had been roiling with storm clouds and rent with continuous lightning for so many weeks, was suddenly quiet. The lightning had gone, the thunder was silenced, the clouds were rolling away over the mountains, leaving the white peaks outlined majestically against a clear blue sky.

The Brigadier looked sharply at the Doctor. "Just like that, eh?" he commented, his tone tinged with irony. The Doctor returned his gaze unreadably, and didn't reply. The Brigadier emitted a brief snort and turned back to Coleman.

"All right, Coleman, get him down from there," he shouted. "Then assemble a team and run a safety check on all the electrical systems in all buildings. I'm sure the Doctor is about to tell me that

the problem's over" – he glanced briefly at the Doctor, receiving the expected nod of confirmation – "but let's make doubly sure, shall we?"

He gave the Doctor another penetrating look, then turned on his heel and strode back toward the huts.

Ace waited until he was out of earshot. Then she rounded on the Doctor.

"Why didn't you let me do it?" she demanded savagely. "You said I could do it! I would have waited until he got clear!"

The Doctor turned an expressionless face to her.

"Yes," he said quietly. Just the one word, falling into a silence suddenly full of implications. Ace stared at him with increasing horror.

"But why?" she wailed, almost pleading with him to deny it. "*Why* did you do it?"

"An unfortunate coincidence of timing," said the Doctor, still showing no emotion whatever. His eyes were dark holes into his soul. "The sprite is free, and the only man who might have found out what it really was is never going to tell anyone else."

"You *made* that happen," Ace said with repulsion. "You made the Brigadier think he couldn't've been saved. That it wasn't *you*. You are *such* a manipulator!"

"Then isn't everybody lucky I choose to do it for the greater good?" said the Doctor, with a hard edge to his voice.

Ace opened her mouth, but closed it again; she had no answer to that. Because he was right. In a choice between a single man and an entire race of intelligent creatures, between peaceful co-existence and potential conflict, between allowing the presence of the sprites to be revealed and keeping them safe from human depredations in the future, what the Doctor had done was, indeed, for the greatest good of the greatest number.

The Doctor saw her expression. "We live in the universe as it is, Ace, not as it should be," he reminded her harshly.

"I know," said Ace grudgingly. "But I still don't like it," she added swiftly, and somewhat rebelliously.

"Why would you?" The Doctor clearly didn't expect an answer. He dropped his arm and looked at the launch control still in his other hand. "Tell you what *I'd* like, though," he said, in a completely different tone of voice. "A nice cup of tea. Do you think you could find someone who can rustle one up for me? I'll just hand this back to Sergeant Coleman, then I'll be with you."

Ace sighed inwardly. No point in trying to prolong the argument. The Doctor would win it. He always did. "Okay, Professor," she said resignedly, and made off toward the huts.

The Doctor turned back to look once more at the radio telescope. Above him, Coleman and Hansen were standing above the charred body lying spread-eagled in the dish, looking down at it sombrely.

“Do not touch anything powered by electricity. You have been warned,” the Doctor quoted quietly. Very quietly, as if the crumpled heap that had once been Major Simon Redford was able to hear his own words echoing back at him. The Doctor’s eyes were dark and unfathomable as he pronounced Redford’s epitaph. *“You were warned. By me. You can’t say you weren’t.”*

“And now I suppose I’d better inform my superiors that the problem’s been resolved,” said the Brigadier. He awarded the Doctor a penetrating look as he put his teacup down on his desk. “Don’t think for a moment I don’t know there’s been more to this than you’ve told me, Doctor. But they’ll only get the version you want them to have. Not that you’re giving me any choice in the matter!” He allowed himself a rueful half-smile, then squared his shoulders. “I wonder if this was our last battlefield...? Never mind – don’t answer that... Not that you were going to!” he added, watching the Doctor’s face. “And now I suppose you’ll be wanting to slip away without saying goodbye, as usual!”

“Have I ever done that to *you*, Brigadier?” said the Doctor, arching his eyebrows innocently.

“Frequently!” the Brigadier retorted.

“Wrong about that, Professor!” Ace agreed, then added, “And you were wrong about something else, as well.”

Both men looked at her, the Doctor with indignation, the Brigadier with interest.

“Was he?” the latter enquired, a gleam of mischief igniting in his eye. “About what?”

“When we first got here. He said Peru was a place where things don’t happen!”

“Yes, he did get that one rather wrong, didn’t he?” the Brigadier agreed, the beginning of a smile quirking one corner of his mouth.

“You’d better hope I’m right about it from now on,” said the Doctor promptly. “You wouldn’t want to get yourself stranded down here, in the back of beyond! I wish I could believe this place won’t throw up any further problems for you in the future, but...”

“Why ever should it?” the Brigadier enquired.

“No reason, really. It’s just that some wishes come true, and some don’t...” The Doctor paused pensively for a moment. “Oh, well... Time will tell. Eventually. As always...” Abruptly he flourished his umbrella in the direction of the door. “Come on, Ace! Time is currently telling me we should be on our way.”

“One of your quick getaways, Professor?” Ace suggested brightly.

“Very quick,” the Doctor agreed. “Quick as lightning!”



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