

Doctor Who

SALUTO TE

A Twelfth Doctor short story
by
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Brigadier Sir Alastair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart

leaned back in his chair and studied his visitor with a keen eye, assessing her demeanour. He might be long retired, but old habits died hard. The subject of his scrutiny allowed one corner of her mouth to twitch upward.

“Still inspecting the troops, Dad?” Kate Stewart enquired.

The Brigadier expelled an amused snort. “Ha! My inspection days are over. I’m the one who keeps getting inspected these days. Damned doctors... And, talking of Doctors...?” he prompted hopefully.

Kate glanced at the bottle of amber liquid and two glasses grouped on a table in the corner of the room, and shook her head with regret. “Nothing lately.”

The Brigadier looked resigned. “Oh, well... Daresay he’s got better things to do than wasting time on a redundant old fossil like me.”

“That’s not how he thinks of you, and you know it,” Kate scolded, just for a moment sounding genuinely angry with him.

“Perhaps not,” the Brigadier conceded. “Oh, well, he’s probably busy thwarting some alien plot somewhere. What about you? Being kept occupied on that front?”

Kate shrugged. “Oh, you know – some days are busier than others...”

“Indeed I do,” her father agreed.

“Dad!” Kate pretended horror. “Was that a hint of *nostalgia* I heard there...?”

The Brigadier smiled ruefully in tacit admission of her accusation. “You know, I remember an American military liaison chap back in the eighties who came out with a splendid phrase for those sorts of ‘busy’ days. It was Sontarans, that particular time, if I remember rightly. He said something along the lines of, ‘*Well, looks like somebody loosed mice in the washroom, and now we’ve got to go catch them all.*’”

Kate chuckled. “I wish I could’ve seen the Sontarans’ faces if they’d heard that! *Mice...!*” Her grin widened.

Her father embarked on what should also have been laughter, but which after only a second or two turned into a cough, which he stifled with something of a wince. Kate immediately sobered as she realized he seemed for a moment or two to be fighting for breath.

“Dad – are you all right?” she said, suppressing a sudden sense of anxiety.

“Of course I am!” He sounded it now – indeed, almost irritated by her concern. “Just a cough. Nothing to worry about. Probably some side effect from one of these damned pills they keep feeding me these days –”

He broke off, interrupted by a knock on the door. The knocker didn’t wait for a response, but opened it and came straight in – a round-faced, dumpy woman wearing a smart pale grey twinset that managed to exactly duplicate the shade of the waves of her carefully sculpted hairdo. She halted as she realized there were two people in the room instead of just the one she’d been expecting, then summoned an ingratiating smile.

“Ah, Sir Alistair!” she gushed. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t realize you had a visitor...”

“Indeed! Why would you?” the Brigadier enquired rhetorically, and with a slight edge to his voice. “This is my daughter, Kate. Kate – Mrs Isobel Chirlington, the new Head Administrator of this renowned domicile. Our acquaintance may be short, but she has already made a great impression on me.”

Mrs Chirlington blushed and bridled slightly, obviously taking his words on face value. Kate, however, instantly deducing what he’d *really* meant, fought down a smile.

“Oh, call me Isobel, please!” Mrs Chirlington implored, then switched her gaze back to the Brigadier. “After all, we don’t stand on ceremony here, do we, Sir Alastair?”

“Clearly not,” said Kate evenly. “Not if you don’t find it necessary to wait for my father’s permission before entering his room.”

Her face was as bland as her voice, but Isobel Chirlington found herself shifting uncomfortably.

“Oh – er – yes... Well, I won’t keep you,” she said, much too brightly. “I only came to say there’s been a slight crisis in the kitchen, so dinner will be half an hour later than usual this evening. Obviously my staff are informing all the residents, but I decided to let our more illustrious clients know myself. Dear Sir Alastair! I do hope you’ll forgive the delay?”

“Madam,” the Brigadier declaimed floridly, “difficult as it will be for me to have the joy of experiencing the next example of the cuisine of this estimable establishment deferred for *any* reason – given my previous encounters with it – you have my word that I’ll do my best to contain my disappointment, and school myself to await the pleasures to come.”

Isobel blinked uncertainly. “Well – yes – thank you, Sir Alistair,” she said, ventured a brief smile, and withdrew with slightly more haste than was consonant with dignity. As the door closed behind her, Kate rounded on her father, face alight with suppressed laughter.

“Dad, *really*...!”

“Well! Damned woman couldn’t be more sycophantic if she tried!” muttered the Brigadier mutinously.

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t suppose she has any idea she’s doing it...”

The Brigadier grunted, still glaring at the door. “No consolation at all! Knew a captain like that once. Watters, his name was. Constantly trying to butter me up, and all he did was drive me mad. Worst thing was, *he* had no idea, either.” Then he caught Kate’s eye; father and daughter both broke into a smile at the same moment.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” said Kate, her smile fading abruptly. *Sorry you’re irritated. Sorry you have to be here at all. Sorry I have to give you over to strangers and depend on them to look after you, because my responsibilities mean I can’t do it myself. I’m sorry, Dad.*

The Brigadier, reading her mind, leaned over and took her hand, gripping it reassuringly.

“Don’t worry about it! Any good leader has to delegate. Let the right person do the right job. You do yours. They do theirs. Some of them are better at it than others, that’s all.”

“You’re my father! My most important job is, and always has been, being your – ” Kate began, but broke off as her phone started to ring. The Brigadier instantly released her hand so she could answer it.

“Yes...?” She listened, then frowned. “When? ... How many? ... All right. Containment strategy seven seven one. I’m on my way.” She was getting to her feet even as she spoke. As she looked down at her father her face was a strange mix of regret and resolution. “Sorry, Dad. Got to go.”

“More mice in the washroom?” the Brigadier suggested, one eyebrow raised.

Kate smiled. “You could say that.” She leaned forward and dropped a quick kiss on his forehead.

“Off you go, then,” he said briskly. “Make me proud of you.”

“As proud as I am of you?” she teased, as she slipped through the door.

“Of course!” the Brigadier called after her. “And if you hear from the Doctor, tell him to come and see me!” But he wasn’t sure if she’d heard that last sentence.

Moments later there was another knock.

“Yes?” he barked.

Isobel Chirlington put her head round the door again. Did the dratted woman *live* in that corridor, waiting to pounce?

“Oh, Sir Alastair! Was that your daughter going already? Well, at least that’ll give you time for a lovely little nap before dinner,” she said, with her most patronizing smile yet. “That’ll be nice, won’t it?”

“Yes, Captain Watters,” the Brigadier muttered, *sotto voce*.

It was some time later that he came back to consciousness with a start, and realized that he must indeed have fallen asleep. That wretched woman! He hated it when she was right.

He shifted in his chair, and turned his head. Which was when he realized he was no longer alone in his room.

In front of the door, blocking it completely, stood – the TARDIS.

And seated in a chair opposite him, a man.

But not the young man with the deep-set green-grey eyes and sweep of brown hair he had been expecting. This was a man in late middle-age. A man he had never seen before. Curling salt-and-pepper hair, a long, narrow, lined face, blue eyes fixed on him with an almost unsettling intensity from under eyebrows that could only be described as ferocious. Ferocious when drawn together in a frown, as they were at the moment, at any rate.

“Brigadier,” he said. The voice was unfamiliar, too – slightly rough, gravelly – but the Brigadier was in no doubt.

“Doctor! Nobody told me you’d regenerated again,” he said indignantly.

“No... No, well, they wouldn’t have,” the Doctor agreed.

“Ah... They don’t know, then.”

“Not exactly. At this point in time, it hasn’t happened yet.” The new face relaxed as it was touched with amusement, and suddenly the eyebrows didn’t look ferocious at all.

“So – you’re a *future* Doctor?”

The Doctor executed a self-deprecatory shrug.

“Are you supposed to cross over yourself like that?” the Brigadier enquired. “Didn’t you use to tell me how dangerous that was?”

“Don’t worry. No temporal anomalies today. I’m somewhere else. The me you were expecting, that is.”

“Don’t know that I *was* expecting you!” the Brigadier sniffed. “I’ve been hoping you’d drop by for a visit ever since I managed to get back from Peru” – his eyes flicked over to the bottle and glasses – “but no – not a sign of you! Until now. And to think I once thought I had enough troubles when there were just two of you!”

“Yes – well,” said the Doctor, with a slightly uncomfortable shrug. “Stuff...”

“No doubt.” The Brigadier studied the Doctor’s clothing: a sturdy-looking jacket over what looked like a hoodie and a couple of t-shirts beneath that. “Dressing down a bit these days, I see,” he couldn’t help observing.

“Not always,” the Doctor demurred. “But I do find this quite practical. And the students relate to it.”

“Students? Don’t tell me you’ve taken up teaching!”

“Lecturing,” the Doctor corrected. “In a university.”

“Lecturing. Really. Obviously some things never change.” The dryness of the Brigadier’s tone was unmistakable.

The Doctor’s eyebrows came down reprovingly for a moment, then he doggedly continued with his explanation. “I mentor one of the students. Very bright young woman. Sometimes I take her for – field trips...”

The Brigadier glanced at the looming bulk of the TARDIS in complete comprehension.

“But not today,” he said.

“No,” agreed the Doctor. “Not today.” He regarded the Brigadier for a long moment, then leaned back in his chair and treated the room to a swift, almost dismissive survey.

“What are *you* doing in a place like *this*?” he asked, and there was a note in his voice that fell somewhere between indignation and pain.

“Running down, Doctor,” said the Brigadier matter-of-factly. “No dying with my boots on for me, I’m afraid. This, instead. Not quite how I’d envisaged things, but not as bad as I thought it would be, I suppose. More frustrating than anything else. Knowing the machinery’s breaking down,

and it can't be repaired." He glanced down at his expanded girth and let out a suppressed snort of amusement. "Still, at least I can honestly say I'm twice the man I was when I met you."

The Doctor's head momentarily tipped to one side as he gave the Brigadier a very old-fashioned look. Then he leaned forward in his chair with an air of purpose. "I suppose you've realized this isn't purely a social call."

The Brigadier cocked an eyebrow at him. "I suspected as much."

"I have a dilemma," said the Doctor, evidently choosing his words with especial care. "And I need your help to resolve it."

"Me?" snorted the Brigadier. "There was a time, Doctor! But now? An old has-been who can barely fit into his uniform anymore? And can't walk without a stick even then? How can I possibly help you now?"

"I'll come to that. But first I need to give you some background. There's a Thing coming."

Somehow the capitalization of the 'T' was clearly detectable. "A Thing," the Brigadier repeated, slightly sarcastically. "Would you care to be more specific? What sort of thing? Alien, I assume, but – animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

"None of the above," said the Doctor. "I'm not even sure it's alive. It's big, I know that. Twice the size of the Solar System. I suppose it's easiest to call it a field of some kind."

"As in forcefield, I take it?"

"Actually, no. Not even if you do want to talk in clichés," said the Doctor rather scathingly. Just as he had so many times in the past. The Brigadier was torn between amusement and a very familiar sense of irritation. The face might be different, but – as he had already observed himself – some things never changed...

"Most of it can't be seen," the Doctor went on. "I don't know if there's anything on Earth that would be capable of even detecting it. But it's not sentient. So we can't ask it – very nicely, very politely – to go another way. And we can't frighten it by waving any silly little missiles at it. Because it can't *be* frightened. It's not even aware of itself. It certainly won't be aware of you humans."

"What is it that makes it so dangerous, exactly?"

"It consumes electricity. Not consciously, of course. But I tracked it back, saw what happened in other systems, on other planets that it passed through. Wherever there was any form of electrical activity, it ceased. Somehow it drains all electrical energy from whatever it encounters. And, from what I could see, does it so thoroughly that the drained system can't re-energize. Just – dead. And stays dead. No chance of a reboot."

The Brigadier nodded sombrely as some of the implications started to become clear. "Without electricity, Earth wouldn't function. Our lighting, our heating, homes, hospitals, weapons systems" – he ignored the Doctor's grimace of distaste at that one – "communications, transport – they'd all go down. Our entire way of life would be devastated."

The Doctor looked at him in a way that made him feel he'd completely missed the point. "Oh, it's worse than that."

"How?" the Brigadier demanded.

“Without electricity, there can *be* no life on Earth,” said the Doctor flatly. “All animal life relies fundamentally on electricity. It fires the synapses in your brain, pulses through your nervous system to make your muscles work, keeps your heart beating. Animal life, insect life, even plant life. All reliant on electrical energy to some degree or other.”

The Brigadier’s eyes widened. “Of course! But that means – ” He broke off, appalled.

“Quite so,” said the Doctor.

There was a short silence. Then the Brigadier drew in a deep breath. “Well, I assume you have a plan, Doctor. You always do. What is it?”

“I’ve analyzed it as far as I can. The Thing. I couldn’t get too near. Even the systems in the TARDIS would have gone down. But I found a node in it. A heart, if you like. It’s the only part of it that’s in the visible spectrum. It’s actually rather beautiful.” He sounded almost regretful. “Shows up as flashes of light. Rather like a constant display of sheet lightning, but phasing through different colours, changing all the time. And like any heart, it can successfully be punctured, if you use the correct mechanism.”

“And you’ve got the correct mechanism?”

“Yes. I worked out what was needed, went forward a few centuries to a planet where they could build what I needed, and brought it back here with me. A capsule.” The Doctor paused, considering, then amended his own description. “More of a projectile, you’d call it, I suppose. It’s quite small, really. It just has to be in position in the right place, at the right time. Then – bang, flash, finish. Well, not quite bang, perhaps. Strictly speaking, we’re talking about the release of a disruptor wave. It won’t touch the physical structure of the capsule itself. But its effect will be to sever the connections that keep the Thing functioning.”

“And is that your dilemma?” the Brigadier enquired “Whether to kill this Thing” – he heard himself pronouncing the initial capital, as the Doctor had been doing, for want of any other name – “assuming it’s even alive – or to let it kill the Earth?” He began to feel a rising indignation. “Really, Doctor! I know only too well the extremes you’ll go to to avoid destruction of life – heaven knows I’ve disagreed with you enough times over the years about that! But surely you can’t think there’s any choice in this situation? All those billions of present and future lives, against something that may not even be alive itself?”

“No, that’s not my dilemma,” said the Doctor quietly. “As you say, billions of lives against a non-life. That’s not the problem.”

“Then what is?” the Brigadier demanded.

“It can’t be done remotely,” said the Doctor. “I can’t just send the capsule into it and push the button from here. I talked about the light changing in phases. The disruptor will only work when the right combination of phases is happening. And that can’t be predicted. The phases do repeat, but completely randomly. It needs an intelligent mind to make the decision when to activate the wave. And that has to happen the exact instant the right sequence of phases occurs. Each phase lasts only for about one second. But the problem is, the nature of the Thing itself disrupts any signal trying to travel into it. Warps it so that even if it did get through, it would take too long to get there.

By the time it arrived, the crucial moment would have passed. So it can't be done from outside. It's impossible. Someone has to be there, inside the capsule. Inside the Thing. To make that judgement on the spot, and to act on it. Instantly."

The Brigadier began to see where this was going. "And whoever that is, won't survive."

"No," agreed the Doctor softly. "They won't. The disruptor wave won't just sever the connections that keep the Thing functioning. It'll do the same to whoever's in the capsule. They can't be shielded."

Another silence, during which the Brigadier studied the Doctor's face.

"There's something going on here I don't understand," he said at last. "I was beginning to think you'd come here to say goodbye. But you haven't, have you?"

"Haven't I?" The Doctor was watching him with a very strange expression.

"Don't forget how well I know you, Doctor. Out of all but one of a million times you'd be taking this on yourself. You've put yourself at risk to save the human race more times than I can count. Which has, you'll remember, resulted in me having to get used to rather a lot of new faces." The Brigadier raised one eyebrow to augment that touch of black humour. "But not this time. Not this one in a millionth time. For some reason you need someone else to do it, don't you?"

"Well, someone does have to do it," the Doctor acknowledged.

"But you've just said that what you're proposing is a suicide mission..." The Brigadier was half astonished, half puzzled. "You, Doctor? Of all people? Asking someone *else* to sacrifice themselves? That's rather out of character, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, it's certainly not something I'd suggest to anyone who I didn't already know was going to die today," said the Doctor evenly. He didn't break eye contact, but his voice had gone very quiet. Very quiet indeed.

The Brigadier stared back at him. Then comprehension dawned. His eyes widened for a moment. Then he drew a deep breath.

"I see," he said. "Today. Are you – ? Yes, of course you are," he corrected himself. He studied the Doctor's expression, and realized something more. "But you don't know *how* it'll happen, do you?"

"No," said the Doctor sombrely. "I know what it says on the death certificate. Heart failure. But all deaths are due to heart failure. What makes the difference is why. What causes the failure. And that's where my dilemma lies. Does that gallant old heart of yours simply stop beating because of the fullness of years? Or does it stop beating because you do this and it kills you? I don't know. I'm never going to know. I only know two things. One, that today you *will* die. And two – well..."

For a second his voice – and his eyes – let the emotion behind his apparent composure come through. It was as if, for that instant, the Brigadier was behind those eyes, inside the Doctor's mind, feeling what he felt...

The Doctor was *raging*. Raging against the dying of *this* night. The loss of another friend. The Time Lord who eventually lost everyone, because they died and he didn't. Raging because their

friendship, which had been strong enough to withstand all the disagreements, all the differences of opinion, all the last words of the arguments, couldn't withstand this last word.

But, being the Doctor, he couldn't bring himself to say any of that aloud. Other than to say that one word, not completing the sentence. "Well..."

In that one brief word the Brigadier heard all the things the Doctor would *never* say about their relationship. About the comradeship, the trust, the respect. Or about a deeper feeling even than those...

Then he was back, on the outside, their minds separate again. And looking into the Doctor's eyes, half-hidden by those lowered, fierce eyebrows, he knew that the Doctor understood very well what had passed between them in that brief burst of comprehension.

"When they told me you'd died," the Doctor continued, as if nothing at all had just happened, "there was something so *wrong* about that. *You*, dying in bed, half-forgotten, in a nursing home? After everything you've done? Everything we've done together? All the enemies you've stood alongside me to face in defence of the Earth? No, that was just – wrong. *Really* wrong. And the longer I thought about it, the more wrong it felt. So I came back to find out what really happened. That was when I discovered that the Thing was coming. *Is* coming. Yet I know *doesn't* come. It never gets here. So something prevents it. Meaning *someone* prevents it. And I know you – die – today." That was still hard for him to say. "So the only question is – and this is what I don't know – are you simply going to die, or are you going to die in battle?"

There was another short silence. Then the Brigadier's lip twitched momentarily, and there was a glint in his eye that was only too familiar.

"As if there was ever going to be anything other than one answer to that," he said, almost cheerfully.

The Doctor bowed his head for a moment. When he lifted it again, his expression said all the things that there were no words for.

The Brigadier shifted almost uncomfortably in his chair. Then he gripped the armrests purposefully. "Right! Think I'll smarten up a bit, then," he announced.

The Doctor was waiting by the console when the Brigadier, resplendent in dress uniform and leaning on his walking stick, stepped inside the TARDIS, halting abruptly to take in the magnificence of the control room.

"I see you've redecorated," he remarked, with great restraint.

"Well, I don't want to know if you don't like it," the Doctor told him brusquely. He began operating the controls.

The Brigadier looked upwards as the great discs above the Time Rotor began to revolve. "It used to be smaller," he commented. "Less – ostentatious."

"So did your uniform," retorted the Doctor. "Some things *do* change."

“Indeed,” the Brigadier agreed, with a slight smile. His expression changed to one of surprise as his eye fell on the electric guitar propped against one of the two semi-circular banks of controls that stood either side of the central console. “Good grief! What’s that thing doing in here?”

The Doctor gave him a slightly offended look. “Well, excuse *me!* That happens to be mine.”

The Brigadier regarded him, and then the guitar, with some disbelief. “Don’t tell me you *play* that thing!”

“Oh, yes!” The Doctor picked it up and brushed his long, elegant fingers over the strings, producing a dissonant twang. “But I never let it win,” he added reassuringly, putting it down again.

The Brigadier shook his head in astonishment, then straightened.

“Well, let’s get on with it,” he said, with an air of getting down to business. “I have to confess, more ostentatious or not, this uniform’s a rather more snug fit than the last time I wore it.”

“Perhaps you should have worn something more comfortable, then,” the Doctor remarked.

“Not going to look less than my best for this sort of thing!” the Brigadier responded briskly.

The Doctor’s face suddenly wore the same anger-at-loss expression that had been there earlier. “There isn’t this *sort* of thing. There’s just – *this*.”

“Quite so. All the more reason not to procrastinate,” the Brigadier said. “‘*Action this day,*’ as Winston used to say.”

“Not till I said it first,” the Doctor amended. “He wasn’t above the occasional bit of plagiarism, you know...”

The Brigadier raised one eyebrow, but didn’t pursue the point.

“How long will it take us to get there? To this capsule of yours?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Not long,” said the Doctor shortly, without looking at him.

As in ‘*not long enough*’, apparently. The Brigadier decided not to ask any more questions for the time being. The Doctor, it seemed, was still raging.

The Brigadier stood in the open doorway of the TARDIS, looking out into interstellar space. An interesting sensation, he decided, to be facing the universe with nothing between himself and it. It gave an imminence – an immediacy – to the situation. Because he would, quite literally, never see anything like this again.

He looked to his left. Far, far off, an indistinct blur of light with a brighter point at its centre. The Solar System, where the Earth was circling the Sun, just as it had done for so many countless aeons, even though he could no longer see it. But it was there, and it had to be protected. He looked to his right.

There. There was what the Earth had to be protected from. Not that he could really see it, of course. A casual glance, and you’d never notice anything was there. But no matter where he looked in that direction, if he concentrated very hard he could detect the slightest hint of a ripple effect, as if the stars were repeatedly twitching and then relapsing into stillness.

“Where’s this node of yours, Doctor?” he asked, studying the phenomenon.

The Doctor left the console and came to stand beside him. He peered into the distance for a moment, then pointed. "There," he said shortly, and went back to whatever it was he had been doing.

The Brigadier looked over his shoulder at the Doctor's stiff back retreating toward the console, and one corner of his mouth twitched slightly. Then he turned to look in the direction the Doctor had indicated. Ah, yes. There it was. A tiny patch of continually blinking light. Too far away yet to detect the colours of which the Doctor had spoken, but nevertheless approaching, slowly but inexorably.

A metaphor for death itself, in a way. Something that could not be avoided, so – face it with dignity and fortitude. A principle he'd done his utmost to apply throughout his professional career. From the first he'd always been prepared to lay down his life for his country; when he'd become part of UNIT, that had, by extension, become being prepared to lay down his life for his world. Which was exactly what he was about to do. He hoped Kate would be able to see it like that. Not seeing her again was his one real regret; still, if it had to happen, perhaps it was best that it happened like this, with no time for either of them to dwell on it...

He turned to face the Doctor. "Will you tell Kate?"

The Doctor fell still, looking at him from under lowered brows. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know if I do tell her someday. I know I haven't told her yet. And she's never mentioned knowing. Yet."

"I see," said the Brigadier slowly. "Well, I hope you do, one day. I'd like her to know..."

The Doctor was silent.

The Brigadier returned to his contemplation of the distant stars. But after only a few moments something else caught his eye.

"Doctor," he said sharply, "what's that?"

"What's what?" snapped the Doctor, as if put out at being interrupted again.

"There's something out here – some kind of... Oh!" The Brigadier broke off as he realized what it must be.

"Yes," agreed the Doctor. "Oh. This is where I parked it."

The Brigadier studied the capsule as the TARDIS slowed – or appeared to slow – to a halt alongside it. Probably both vehicles were in motion but at a synchronized velocity, but the effect was just the same, so it was something that could only, in the circumstances, be viewed as a distinction without a difference. What really struck him was something else entirely.

"'Quite small,' did you say? It's *minute*!" he said, almost indignantly. "How can something that small destroy something that big?"

"Compared to a human, a single bullet is minute," said the Doctor grimly. "It still only has to penetrate in the right place to be fatal."

The Brigadier mentally conceded the point as he studied the capsule. More of a projectile, in point of fact, just as the Doctor had described it; his comparison of it to a bullet was indeed apt. The Brigadier wondered from what material it had been fashioned; whatever it was, it resembled

opaque glass, save for one rectangle, totally clear and positioned at head height, through which he would be able to see. The construction of the capsule would allow him to look forward only, he realized, but that was well enough; in the circumstances it was best that there could be no looking back, in any sense of the term.

“Who did you say built it for you?” he enquired.

“I didn’t,” said the Doctor trenchantly. “The Falatrians. Best weapons designers in the Thousand Galaxy Cluster. Not people I would ordinarily do business with,” he concluded grimly.

The Brigadier nodded. Knowing the Doctor’s feelings about weaponry, for him to bring himself to even consider, let alone to action, such a thing brought home just how serious the threat to the Earth must be...

“What exactly is it I have to do?” he enquired, turning to look at the Doctor, who was still pulling levers and pressing buttons.

The Doctor abruptly stopped what he was doing and stood as if frozen for a few moments, staring down at the console in front of him with eyes that were suddenly fixed but not focused. For a long moment, not replying to the question – because he did not want to. Then, with a rigid forefinger, he pressed one last control before looking up.

“I’ll show you,” he said, striding back to the doorway. He leaned across the tiny gap between the TARDIS and the capsule and pressed his hand flat against the opaque surface. Instantly the outlines of a door became visible as it swung into the interior of the craft to allow entrance.

“In you go,” said the Doctor brusquely. “There isn’t room for both of us in there.”

The Brigadier surveyed what he could see of the inside of the capsule.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Standing room only, I see. Very cosy. Well, look after this for me, Doctor,” he added briskly, holding out his walking stick. “I won’t be needing this anymore.” The Doctor took it wordlessly. Then, just as the Brigadier was about to move forward, he put a restraining hand on his arm.

“Alastair,” he said quietly. The Brigadier paused and gave him an enquiring look.

The Doctor dropped his hand. “Mind the gap.”

The Brigadier glanced down through the two-foot wide space between the two craft at the bottomless gulf of space and stars and galaxies below, and permitted himself a brief smile. Then he stepped across into the capsule.

The Doctor was right. There was just sufficient room for him to stand upright, looking forward. In front of him, on what could loosely be called the control panel, there was just one single object. A large, flat, circular button. Red, of course...

“The light phases change every second or so,” the Doctor was saying. “The sequence you need to watch for is white, blue, white, red. The instant it goes red, you need to press that.” He indicated the button by briefly pointing the walking stick at it; then he strode away just long enough to lean the stick upright alongside his guitar before returning to the doorway.

“Colour coded, I see,” the Brigadier remarked blandly, looking at the scarlet disc. “I gather your Falatrians are very helpful in these matters.”

The Doctor ignored the comment. "It has to be *that* sequence. Keep your wits about you. You'll only get one shot at this. And only a split second to act. No time to hesitate. White, blue, white, red. Remember that. Get it wrong, and the Earth is finished."

"Thank you, Doctor! No pressure, then!" the Brigadier retorted. He paused, then said, more gently, "But I won't get it wrong, will I? Because you already know the Earth won't be destroyed. Not today. So it's reassuring to know that my last mission is guaranteed to be a success, isn't it?"

The Doctor was silent.

"Will they see it? From Earth, I mean?"

The Doctor shook his head. "The effect of the disruptor wave won't be visible in most spectra. It would only be potentially detectable for a few seconds in any case, but I've made sure no Earth-built telescope will be looking in this direction at the crucial moment."

"That must have taken a lot of – manoeuvring..."

"I've done my research," said the Doctor shortly. "Nobody will know."

"Yes, they will," the Brigadier contradicted him. "*You* will know, Doctor. And that's important. To me, at any rate. Look, don't take it to heart so," he added, almost cheerfully. "Not to either of them! I thought I was going to just slip away, a useless old has-been –"

"Never that!" the Doctor denied swiftly. "*Not* a has-been. *Never* a has-been! An always-will-be..."

"But, instead, I go out with a bang," the Brigadier went on calmly, as if the Doctor hadn't spoken. "Quite literally. And I'm grateful to you for that. You know, Doctor, I'm going to admit something I would never admit to anyone else. And that is that since meeting you I have, from time to time – in my more frivolous moments – imagined dying saving the universe. But I'm happy to settle for saving the Earth instead. And I'll count it a privilege to do so."

He started to raise his right hand toward his head with obvious intention, but the Doctor cut off the salute by swiftly thrusting out his own hand in a gesture that was more of a challenge than an invitation to shake it. The Brigadier smiled wryly, and changed the trajectory of his hand to grasp the Doctor's.

"Still not going to let me do, it, are you?" Hints of resignation and regret were evident in his tone. "Even though you're the one person in the whole of time and space who really deserves it."

The Doctor's head jerked sideways in a gesture of denial. Then, gripping his friend's hand tightly, he locked eyes with the Brigadier for the last time.

"Goodbye, Alastair."

"Goodbye, Doctor. It's been an honour."

The two men released their hold on each other, and without another word the Doctor pressed his hand against the side of the capsule. Its door closed. For a moment his face contorted. Then he whirled round, strode to the console, and, with the air of a man who had to act now or would never be able to bring himself to do it, put his hand on one of the levers and pulled it back toward himself.

Through the still open door of the TARDIS he saw the capsule slide forward out of his sight. He scanned his instruments for a few moments to check that its trajectory was accurate. Then he

swung the TARDIS round slightly, so that the open doorway was now pointing toward the node. Putting a hand into his pocket, he drew out his sonic sunglasses, put them on, and walked back to the doorway, spreading his arms wide to put one hand on each jamb, as if he needed the support.

The pulsing heart of the Thing was already closing towards where the TARDIS hung in space. He could see the capsule, now so very, very tiny with distance, but still just about visible to the naked eye as a black dot against the flares of coloured light. Blue – white – yellow – orange – green – red – yellow – green – white – blue – white – red –

White – blue – white – red...

And instantly, a pulse of energy that radiated out in an ever-expanding circle from its point of origin, spreading throughout its target at a fantastic speed.

The filters of the Doctor's lenses showed him, for just a few moments, an image of a sky filled with coruscations of red, racing throughout the fabric of its target like flames. A fitting funeral pyre for the man who had died so that others might live. Then the tracers and bursts of red were gone, their work done, the destruction that they had been designed to wreak complete. The Earth was safe. The stars no longer twitched; they were once again steady points of light. Only the capsule still floated there, now a point of white amid all the other points of light, drifting – lifelessly...

Slowly, the Doctor drew both the TARDIS doors together and shut them, then leaned forward to rest his forehead against them for some seconds, his eyes closed in anguish. Had anyone been there to see, they would have seen his lips silently shape the words, "*I will miss you...*"

Then he pulled himself erect. Because there was, of course, still one thing he had to do.

One last thing, to ensure the sequence of events would be consistent with what his previous self would soon discover...

The Doctor stood looking down at the bed, his hands resting one on top of the other on the handle of the Brigadier's walking stick. The Brigadier lay stretched out on the bed as if asleep, his eyes closed, his face at peace. Though, if you looked closely, there was just the faintest hint of a smile of triumph...

The Doctor looked at him for a long time. He'd be found soon. The staff at the home might briefly wonder why he was in uniform, but they probably wouldn't think it was that odd; they'd probably assume he'd been indulging in an episode of nostalgia for his former life. If they told Kate about it, she might wonder, too. But perhaps they wouldn't even mention it. Perhaps she would simply be told her father was dead. And gradually the word would spread. To Jo – Sarah Jane – Mike Yates – John Benton – and, eventually, to himself, the man who lost everyone... There would be so many memories to replay, so many moments of courage and triumph to celebrate. And so deep a sense of loss to come to terms with...

For a moment, the Doctor felt again the regret – the guilt – that had stabbed him when, as his previous self, he had been told that the Brigadier had died. The realization that he could have – *should* have – visited so much more often, and had not done so. That he had let someone so important to him simply slip out of his life. Out of sight, out of mind. Always meant to, but – too

busy. Only to find that *too busy* had become *too late*... Or so he had thought at the time. At least, unlike everyone else, he had had a means to remedy that. But somehow the guilt remained, to accentuate the loss...

The Doctor drew in a deep breath and let it out again. He would simply have to come to terms with it. Yet again.

He gently propped the walking stick against the chair beside the bed and turned away, toward the TARDIS. But as he did so, something caught his eye.

The table in the corner of the room, on which stood two glasses and a bottle.

He regarded it somberly for a moment before going across to it, unscrewing the cap of the bottle, and pouring a measure of its contents into one of the glasses. Then he turned toward the bed and raised the glass in one last gesture of tribute toward one of the bravest, staunchest, most gallant human beings he had ever known, or ever would know. A man of integrity who had died as he had lived, selflessly doing his duty, defending the innocent and the vulnerable.

“Brigadier Sir Alastair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart,” said the Doctor, “I salute you.”



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