

Faithful Friends: Part One

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An Adventure of the Third Doctor, with the Brigadier

The rhythmic scratching of an expensive and well-used fountain pen was the only sound in the office. A single desk lamp illuminated the document the figure at the large mahogany desk was working diligently on, the rectangle of window behind him fading from deep inky blue into the deeper darkness of a cold December evening.

The figure seated at the desk made a definite flourish with the pen, signing a well-practised signature:

Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, Brig.

With quick, efficient moves, he picked up a stamp that sat in neatly ordered place amongst the sparse accoutrements on the desk, brought it down firmly on the document and returned it to its place by the ink pad.

The Brigadier breathed out with a satisfied sense of job done and closed the stiff card cover of the file. He pushed his chair back and rose to his feet, his back aching after a stint of UNIT paperwork more than it ever used to. He turned to the window, feeling his constricted spine click and crack back into place. Let him face down an Auton or a Cyberman and he was the happiest soldier alive, but give Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart a stack of paperwork to do, and he was groaning like an old man these days.

With a rueful smile, he looked out over the darkened car part of UNIT HQ. It was quiet as the grave – on any given day, the car park was usually a hive of activity. Smudges of green running back and forth, shouted orders, the crunch of booted feet as platoons were drilled, vehicles thundering from one side of the grounds to the other, even the odd explosion and cloud of foul-smelling smoke billowing out of Sergeant Osgood's workshop.

But not tonight. Tonight was special, sacred. A time for family and friends.

Yes, even UNIT closed for business on Christmas Eve.

A brisk knock at the door pulled the Brigadier from his thoughts and he turned smartly on his heel, barking, 'Come!'

The door opened and Sergeant Benton entered, a festive ring of holly shuddering where it hung on the outside of the door, drawing attention to the lack of seasonal decoration within the office.

'Ah, Benton,' said the Brigadier. 'All done?'

Benton saluted quickly. 'Yes, sir, all personnel accounted for and leave approved.'

‘Excellent. And yourself? What plans for the holiday?’

Benton, abashed, smiled nervously, unused to such personal questions from his superior. ‘My mother’s, sir. Same thing every year. I have a boot full of presents for my nieces and nephews.’

The Brigadier nodded. An uncomfortable silence followed between the two colleagues.

Benton coughed. ‘And... and yourself, sir?’

The Brigadier blinked, a look of embarrassed surprise on his face. ‘Me? Oh. The usual, I suppose.’

When the Brigadier clearly wasn’t going to elaborate on what the usual entailed, Benton moved to leave. ‘Well, I’ll be off then, sir. Merry Christmas.’ He made to salute, as always, but was surprised when the Brigadier smiled warmly and held out a hand.

‘Merry Christmas, Benton.’ The two men shook hands. ‘I had the liberty of having a hamper delivered to your mother’s. I do hope you enjoy it. The port is particularly good.’

Benton visibly relaxed and returned the Brigadier’s handshake with renewed vigour. ‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. That’s...’

‘My pleasure, Benton. Now, be off with you before somebody decides to invade.’

Sergeant Benton didn’t need any further bidding and with a final ‘Good night, sir,’ he backed out and closed the door, leaving the Brigadier smiling fondly and shaking his head slightly.

The Brigadier stood for a second before returning to his desk and scooping up the file. He stooped to pick up a smart leather attaché case, switched off the desk lamp and strode towards the door. He stepped through into the outer office and closed the door on his own darkened chamber, stopping by the neatly ordered desk that inhabited the outer office and dropping the file into a tray. His eyes were drawn to the bottle sitting on the side of the desk, a shiny bow wrapped round the neck.

Smiling, the Brigadier picked up the bottle and unpicked the note attached to the side.

‘Merry Christmas, sir.’

Corporal Bell, thought the Brigadier. Every year, without fail, a good bottle of malt. He hefted the bottle and made his way into the warren of corridors that made up UNIT HQ.

The old place never felt right when it was empty like this. Even though the mansion had only been UNIT’s home for a comparatively short time, every nook and cranny held memories for the Brigadier. Here was the spot where Captain Turner had requested transfer back to the regulars so he could start building a future with the Watkins girl. There, by the records office, the Brigadier had enjoyed his last clipped conversation with Miss Shaw as she’d reminded him, one final time, that she was a scientist not a soldier. The last he’d heard of her, she was expecting her first child. The sharp smile that twitched beneath the immaculate moustache failed for

a minute as the cold realisation of how many goodbyes had been said within these walls, how many colleagues had moved on...

The Brigadier stepped up his pace, brisk and businesslike again. No sense for a chap to wallow in nostalgia just because it was Christmas. One final turn of the west wing before handing over to the holiday relief, shutting those Christmas ghosts away for another year. Wanted to get on the road as soon as possible to avoid any idiots who'd climbed behind the wheel a little too full of the festive spirit.

He pushed through a pair of double doors, which banged back and forth in his wake as he continued his route into a part of the building that he rarely visited these days...

What the devil was that? The Brigadier came to an abrupt stop and cocked his head on one side, listening.

Singing.

Someone was singing. Sighing, the Brigadier spun on his heel and marched in the direction of the song, muttering 'Liberty Hall,' irritably under his breath. Probably a squaddie having imbibed too much of Osgood's Christmas home brew in the mess. But, as he turned the corner and realised the origin of what could only be called caterwauling, a smile spread across his face and he allowed himself a slight chuckle. Typical!

The Doctor couldn't have heard the Brigadier enter the lab. He had his sapphire-blue jacketed back to him, his enthusiastic baritone positively vibrating the light fittings. The Brigadier couldn't place the song, something about a love machine and feeding fantasies or some such. Probably Martian, knowing the Doctor.

The Brigadier tried a polite cough, waited, and then tried a slightly less polite one.

The Doctor's head snapped around, taking his attention away from what he was doing for a split second, long enough for the delicate mish-mash of apparatus on the workbench to topple noisily into a heap.

'Oh, good grief,' he exclaimed, his voice full of indignation. 'Now look what you made me do!'

'Sorry, Doctor, I was just...'

'You're always "just" doing something, Brigadier,' retorted the Doctor, rubbing the back of his neck. 'Usually getting under my feet.' He fixed the Brigadier with a piercing gaze. 'Do you know how long I've been working on the fragile equipment you just reduced to a... a... pile of junk?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'Seven hours. Seven hours of painstaking construction ruined in the blink of an eye by your ham-fisted, clod-hopping...'

'Now steady on, Doctor,' the Brigadier bristled, ready for one of their famous arguments, but he made a half-hearted attempt to appease him. 'Was it important, your erm... gizmo?'

'Important? Of course it was important. My "gizmo", as you so

colourfully put it, was a multi-phasic, warp-rigged retro-scanning beam emitter. If I'd been left alone for just one more hour I'd have been able to isolate and gauge the lifespan of aqueous intelligent plankton life living in the atmosphere of Nigellus II.'

The Brigadier held the Doctor's gaze. 'Well,' he mumbled uncertainly, 'I suppose that's useful.'

'Yes,' the Doctor hissed. 'It is, if you are of a mind to isolate and gauge the lifespan of aqueous intelligent plankton.' The Doctor gazed down at his workbench sadly. 'Back to the drawing board, I suppose.'

The Brigadier seized his chance. 'Well, I'm sorry to interrupt, Doctor, but I just wanted to ask you...'

The Doctor didn't let him finish.

'If I'd accompany you on another tedious wild goose chase? Itching to blow something up, Brigadier? What now? The Downing Street cat has been abducted by a UFO? Cilla Black has been revealed as a Nestene infiltrator? Whatever it is, Brigadier, I'm afraid I have better things to do with my time. Now, if you will excuse me...'

'Actually,' the Brigadier continued, ignoring the Doctor's outburst, 'I was just wondering if you had finished for the night or are you staying on? I'm eager to get off, you see, and I need to let the holiday relief know...'

The Doctor looked up from where he was gathering the remnants of his failed experiment.

'Holiday relief? Whatever are you talking about, man?'

'I'm shutting up shop, Doctor. It is Christmas, after all.'

It was as if a light had clicked on behind the Time Lord's eyes. 'Christmas? Did you say Christmas?'

'Yes, Christmas,' the Brigadier repeated, his eyes widening briefly in frustration.

'My dear fellow,' the Doctor said, turning on a sixpence as he beamed from ear to ear. 'Why ever didn't you say? I had no idea.'

'And the paper chains, lanterns and enormous tree in the canteen hadn't given you the slightest clue?'

'Brigadier, I haven't eaten in that filthy canteen for years. It should have been shut down long ago on eight counts of galactic health-and-safety violations. Well, what are you waiting for?' The Doctor was a flash of lanky blue as he abandoned his experiment and strode elegantly across the lab to unhook that familiar cape with an overly impressive flourish. He smiled genially at the Brigadier. 'Let's get this place locked up, eh? Get you back to earth and home to enjoy the festivities.'

Shaking his head at his friend's famous mood swings, the Brigadier allowed himself to be swept out of the lab and down the corridor.

'I'm not so sure about festivities, Doctor. Just a splash of port, a comfy chair and a good book for me this year.' *And every year*, he added to himself.

The Doctor looked appalled.

‘That settles it, then. You’re coming to me.’

‘I am?’ The Brigadier was somewhat taken back. In all the years since the Doctor’s exile to Earth, he’d never invited the Brigadier to his mysterious home: the country pile, spoken of in such gushing tones by Miss Grant, which nobody quite knew how the Doctor had acquired.

‘We’ll take Bessie, of course.’

By now, the Brigadier had utterly resigned himself to his fate. ‘Of course.’

‘Excellent! Now, what’s that you’re hiding under your arm?’

‘Oh, just a bottle of malt. Present from Corporal Bell. Nice gesture, I thought.’

‘Indeed it is, Brigadier, and a fortunate one. I don’t think I’ve got a drop in the house.’

‘... and so the Slarvian in the Santa suit was left holding a rubber chicken!’

The Doctor roared with laughter at the conclusion of his story, a laugh that was taken up by the Brigadier just as enthusiastically. His face had reddened ever so slightly and there were tears in his eyes from the volley of constant belly laughter that had accompanied dinner.

The two old friends sat at the solid oak table in the long kitchen that serviced the Doctor’s comfortable – and rather large – home. Before them lay the remains of their gastronomic enterprise, the remains of the largest roast goose the Brigadier had ever seen taking pride of place in the centre of the table. Quite how the bird had come to be already roasting in the impressive range cooker that dominated one wall of the kitchen the Brigadier didn’t know, and he wasn’t about to ask. It was often best to just do as the Romans did when in the Doctor’s company; no questions asked.

The Doctor’s claim that he didn’t have a drop in the house was something of a white lie, the fully stocked wine cellar beneath them having given forth several fine vintages, including a 1945 Chateau Mouton Rothschild. The Doctor drained the last of this fine claret into the Brigadier’s glass and sat back in his chair, stretching those long legs out in front of him.

‘I wonder how Miss Grant is spending Christmas,’ pondered the Brigadier as he raised his glass.

‘How indeed,’ said the Doctor quietly.

‘Still no word?’

‘Not so much as a postcard.’ The Time Lord waved a hand before his face in a dismissive gesture. ‘Jo is a free spirit, Brigadier. It’s in her blood, and that’s my fault more than anybody’s.’

‘Your fault?’

‘You can’t take somebody wandering through the stars and not expect them to get a taste for adventure. Jo isn’t the first, and she won’t be the last.’ The Doctor leant forward and retrieved his glass, raising it in a toast. ‘To absent friends.’

‘Absent friends,’ the Brigadier agreed, raising his own glass. ‘And what about you, Doctor? When do you become a free spirit again?’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you trying to get rid of me, Brigadier?’ he asked with mock accusation.

‘Not at all, not at all. But I have always been painfully aware that the nature of our arrangement is that UNIT needs you more than you need UNIT.’

“Arrangement”? That’s a very cold term. I thought we had a friendship.’

‘You know what I mean, Doctor.’

‘Yes, I rather suspect I do.’ The Doctor spread his hands wide. ‘What can I say? I could drive back to UNIT HQ right now, step into the TARDIS and be on Barastabon, or walking through the ice caves of Magellan IV within seconds.’

‘But?’

‘But I don’t, and I’m at a loss to explain why. Throughout my exile, I yearned to throw off the shackles the Time Lords had placed on me, wanted to wander through the fourth dimension unfettered with every fibre of my being. But now...’

The Brigadier raised a questioning eyebrow.

‘Perhaps personal friendships can become stronger than what our hearts desire the most.’

The Brigadier changed tack, not sure if he was entirely comfortable with such honesty from the Doctor. ‘Do you ever feel tired, Doctor?’

‘Tired?’ The Doctor frowned. ‘No, never.’ The Doctor sounded a warning tone. ‘Don’t tell me you’re thinking of retiring?’

‘Oh, good lord, no! Still life in the old dog yet. But after everything we’ve been through. Yeti, Daleks, Axons, the Master...’

The Doctor raised a finger. ‘And the terrible Zodin.’

‘The who?’

The Doctor thought for a moment. ‘Oh. No. Never mind.’

‘The point being, I’ve been wondering a lot recently where it all ends. How much more can we take?’

‘It never ends, Brigadier. The universe just keeps on going, and so must we, light and darkness poised in eternal balance.’ The Doctor looked embarrassed at what he’d just said. ‘A touch melodramatic, but you get the idea.’

The Brigadier nodded in silent agreement just as the clock hanging on the kitchen wall began to chime, followed a split second later by the rather fine grandfather clock in the hallway. The Doctor glanced up at the timepiece and smiled. ‘Midnight. I do believe it’s Christmas Day.’

The Brigadier looked at his watch. ‘Bless my soul, where did the time go?’

The Doctor chuckled. ‘Experience tells me that’s a question best left unanswered.’ He held his glass out to the Brigadier. ‘Merry Christmas, Alistair.’

‘Merry Christmas, Doctor.’

Glasses chinked together and the two friends held each other’s gaze, the house silent save for the ticking of a clock and the crackle of a fire.

The moment was broken by a shrill ringing from the hallway and both men blinked, pulled from the brink of words that would remain forever unsaid between them. Words that didn’t need to be said.

The Doctor rose and walked out into the hallway to answer the phone. ‘Yes?’ the Brigadier heard the Doctor gruffly say. ‘What? Yes, of course.’ There was a pause as the Doctor put the handset down and stepped back into the kitchen. ‘Brigadier, it’s for you. I had the liberty of having your emergency line patched through here.’

The Brigadier’s eyes widened in surprise – he had no idea when the Doctor might have made such an arrangement – but then quickly rose to his feet and strode past the Doctor into the hallway and the waiting phone.

‘Lethbridge-Stewart.’ He listened calmly to the crackly voice at the other end of the line. ‘Very well. Have Traps One and Two recalled and put the men on standby. Myself and the Doctor will proceed directly to the rendezvous point.’

He placed the handset into its cradle and turned on his heel, body language and posture changing as the professional soldier took over once more. He found the Doctor leaning casually against the doorframe, hands in pockets, an expectant smile playing at the corners of his lips.

‘Trouble, Brigadier?’

‘A shower of meteorites has made planetfall in the countryside just outside Bath. Shortly after, the nearest village appears to have completely disappeared off the face of the Earth.’

‘Like it never existed?’

‘Yes,’ affirmed the Brigadier. ‘Exactly.’

‘Well, what are we waiting for? It seems we may have a Christmas invasion on our hands!’

The Doctor retrieved his cloak from the line of hooks on the wall and fastened it round his neck with familiar flamboyance.

‘Thank you, Doctor,’ the Brigadier suddenly said.

‘Whatever for?’

‘For dinner, I suppose.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘Brigadier, the pleasure was all mine. What are faithful friends for?’

The Brigadier grabbed his own coat. ‘And next year, Doctor, you’re coming to mine for Christmas.’

‘My dear chap,’ smiled the Doctor, clapping the Brigadier on the back. ‘I’d be delighted! Now, shall we?’

As one, the two old friends turned to the door, ready to face once more the dangers the universe had to throw at them.