

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

canary in a coal mine



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"Come on, Dorothy!"

"Don't call me that, Ange, you doughnut!"

Ange offered the other girl her hand. "If we don't get over this wall, we'll get caught and done for trespassing. Now get moving, Ace!"

Ace grabbed Ange's hand. Ange, who was already partly over the wall, tried to pull Ace up but her friend struggled to find a foothold and fell back into the scrap yard. Ange looked down at her.

"You idiot! Come on!"

Before Ace could move, she became aware of something standing in the scrap yard behind her. Turning, she was confronted by a large, fierce-looking Alsatian.

"I said they had dogs!" said Ange. "Now get moving!"

Dorothy McShane froze. She knew any sudden movement would cause the dog to pounce. She turned back to the wall and tried to shin up it. A sudden, agonizing pain clamped down on her ankle. Looking down, she saw the dog tugging at her leg. She cried out as she felt its teeth penetrate her flesh. Ange grabbed her by the wrist and pulled. At the same time, Ace kicked her leg and the dog let go.

The two girls landed in a heap on the other side of the wall. When Ange opened her eyes, she saw Ace holding her ankle, tears sliding down her face. It was the first time she had seen Ace cry.

* * * * *

"So why did they send canaries down the coal mines?" Ace asked the Doctor.

The Doctor looked up from the TARDIS console. "To check if it was safe. The canaries were more sensitive to methane gas than the miners. If the canary died, the miners knew the gas was there so they wouldn't go down the mine."

"Seems really cruel to me."

"Indeed. But ethics aren't always as simple as that. Many human lives would have been lost without the use of the canaries. And your great civilisation, with all its wonders and all its imperfections, was based on industry. Industry based at that time on raw fuel - coal. Without the canaries, men would never have got the coal. The industrial revolution might never have happened. And even though I agree absolutely and totally with what you say, applying your modern standards to things that happened long ago can be very problematic."

"You mean they sacrificed the canaries for the greater good?"

"Yes, you could argue that."

"Which was one justification for dropping the atomic bomb?"

The Doctor looked pensive. "I see your point." He changed the subject. "I thought you were going to take my photo?"

Ace waved a small compact camera. "Go on then," she said. "Lean on the console. Smile, Professor!"

The Doctor winced as Ace took his picture. "Ace, the flash hurts my eyes! Put it away now."

Ace put the camera in her pocket. "Sorry Professor, but I'm bored. When are we going to land on another planet?"

The Doctor smiled. "Soon Ace, I promise." He took his cream-coloured jacket from the coat stand and put it on. "I have a few alterations to make to the console and then we'll...."

Suddenly, the console room rolled. Ace and the Doctor were flung across the room, then back to the console, where they managed to grab onto it and steady themselves. The light in the room flickered and the lights on the console went mad. Sparks exploded from some of the controls.

"What's happening, Professor?!"

"Disturbance in the space/time vortex! If you think of the TARDIS as a sailing ship and the vortex as an ocean - we'll, we've just got caught in a storm!"

"Can we escape?"

"Easily. I just have to take us out of the vortex and materialise at a fixed point in space/time. No time to choose anywhere specific. It'll have to be random; somewhere the TARDIS thinks is safe." The Doctor operated several controls and flicked a switch. "There, that should do it."

The shuddering stopped and the lighting in the room returned to normal. All was calm.

"We've arrived," said the Doctor. He opened the TARDIS scanner. They hovered above a small blue-green planet that Ace recognised instantly. The Doctor looked down at the console.

"December 1960. We're in low Earth orbit. We'll stay here a while whilst I make some adjustments and then we'll be on our way." Ace watched the Doctor walk around the console, fussing over the controls and making various changes. Then, without warning, the lights went out, leaving the room in total darkness.

"Professor!" called Ace. "I can't see a thing!"

"Strange. The emergency back-up systems are supposed to provide us with at least some minimal lighting in the event of something going wrong. I just need to--"

Ace heard a noise from the console and slowly dim light bathed the room.

"Managed to get some basic lighting up and running," said the Doctor. "Still, this is very

unusual."

Suddenly, the room began to shake and judder. Not as it had done in the space/time vortex - this was far, far worse. First Ace, then the Doctor, fell to the floor. Ace saw the Doctor struggle to his feet but a fresh tremor knocked him down again.

Lying on the floor, Ace heard the most terrifying noise. Scratching - a very primitive, animal-like noise as though giant claws were trying to get into the TARDIS from the outside, the sound like fingernails running down a blackboard.

Ace clapped her hands to her ears, though it did her no good. The noise was in her head, and with it she felt the most unnerving sense of danger and fear. It wasn't the fear caused by their predicament. It was something deeper than that, something that went to the very heart of her being. She felt as though someone had walked over her grave.

Ace rolled on the floor, her head in her hands. "I can't stand it Professor!" she cried. "These feelings; I feel so afraid, so anxious. And the loneliness, I can't bear it!"

The shuddering, as well as the scratching sound, stopped as suddenly as it had started. The negative feelings subsided. The Doctor and Ace rose unsteadily to their feet and tried to compose themselves.

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure. But I have some very nasty suspicions." The Doctor looked at various instruments on the console. Ace saw his frown deepen.

"It's as I suspected. The TARDIS has materialised in a part of space already occupied by another object. The failsafe mechanisms should stop that sort of thing happening but we came out of the space/time vortex so quickly they seem to have failed. The TARDIS and this other object are trying to co-exist - both are in flux, neither solid nor unreal. The scratching sound, the feelings - they are echoes of the object, perhaps of the beings contained within it. If we don't do something to rectify the situation, the TARDIS and the object may destroy each other - or merge permanently."

"Is that bad, Doctor?"

"Have you ever seen the film *'The Fly'*?"

"Umm, yes," replied Ace, not really sure what the Doctor was implying. Then she remembered the scene he was talking about. "Oh, I see what you mean."

"Of course, there is a second possibility. Rather than merge, everything might just blow up. Like when the two halves of the Dalek tried to co-exist on the transmat in the school cellar - do you remember?"

"Don't remind me. So what do we do?"

"We have to stabilise both objects." The Doctor looked at the console again. "I don't know what the object is but I can work out its approximate size. We should be able to materialise around it so that it solidifies in the TARDIS. It's too big to fit in the console room..." He tapped a tooth as he considered the problem. "But it would fit in the swimming pool. That would be the safest place for it anyway. It could materialise in the pool and float in the water."

"The TARDIS has a swimming pool?"

"Yes. I had to jettison the original as it was leaking. But after Mel and I visited Paradise Towers, I re-installed it. Trouble is, it's empty. We'd need to refill it."

"Which is easy, presumably?"

"Yes, but I can't do it from here. There's a switch by the pool which has to be operated

manually.”

“So we have to go down there?”

“Yes, but it's not that easy. I have to stay here and try to keep both objects separate as best I can. It's a tricky piece of space/time manipulation which requires considerable knowledge of the TARDIS workings.” The Doctor sighed. “Ace, I'm afraid you will have to go to the pool.”

Leaving Ace to ponder this, he walked over to the interior door and opened it. The lights in the corridor beyond flickered unsteadily. Ace thought it all looked very sinister and uninviting.

“It's quite a long way to the pool,” explained the Doctor, “And as you can see, it's going to be in partial darkness. And these noises may just have been the start. As the two objects start to fuse you may experience all sorts of weird things.”

Ace swallowed. “But I'll be ok, Professor.” She noted the Doctor's look of doubt. “Won't I?”

“It's going to be dangerous, Ace. Dangerous and unpredictable.”

“So you're sending me alone? Charming. I'm the canary in the coal mine while you're safe here?”

“If we don't get started soon, neither of us will be safe. But I'll be with you in spirit. And I'll be watching you from the console room.”

She looked at the Doctor like a child looking at a teacher who had just set an impossible task. “So, you're asking me to be the hero?” she said without enthusiasm. “Again? Wicked.”

Ace put on her jacket, waved silently to the Doctor who watched her from the other side of the console, and entered the corridor. Familiar with this part of the TARDIS, she hurried along. She passed the bedrooms and the TARDIS wardrobe. She continued passed the food machines and various storage rooms. Along the way she noticed little signs of those who had previously occupied the space/time machine. Scattered on the floor at one intersection were bits of wool which appeared to have been pulled from a scarf. To her amusement and puzzlement she also saw what she thought were lipstick marks on the wall.

Eventually, she entered areas she hadn't been in before. She had always meant to explore more of the TARDIS but with so many new planets and periods of Earth history to visit she had never found the time.

“Let's hope I get the chance,” she muttered to herself, nervously watching the sinister shadows cast on the walls by the flickering lights.

“Ace?” The voice boomed out of the very air and Ace jumped.

“Professor?”

“I'm talking to you through the TARDIS internal communication system. A bit like the pilot of a plane talking to the passengers.”

“A pilot who almost gave his passenger a heart attack! You might have warned me.”

The Doctor paused. “Yes, well, you may be right. The important thing is that while I'm doing my calculations here in the console room, I'll keep in touch with you as much as I can via the intercom. You don't need a map or anything like that, you'll have me.” He sounded rather

impressed with himself.

"In much the same way the TARDIS allows me to share with you my ability to understand alien languages," continued the Doctor, "It also allows me to share my knowledge of its internal layout. You'll have a mental image of the swimming pool in your head and you just carry on going the way you think is best. You'll get there by going with your instincts. Or rather *my* instincts shared with you."

"I've got it, Professor. I'll speak with you later." She came to a junction in the corridor and turned left. On she went. Without warning, there was a judder and the whole TARDIS shook.

"Ace? Are you ok?"

"Yes, Professor."

"The molecular instability off the TARDIS is getting worse. Better quicken your pace."

"Quicken my pace?!" Ace mumbled to herself. "Who does he think I am – Sebastian Coe? He sits in that console room while I wander around dark corridors!"

She stopped herself. It wasn't like her to get mad with the Doctor. He was her friend. She shouldn't be so negative. Now that she thought about it there was a very negative feeling in the air, like the anguish she had felt in the console room. Shaking her head, she hurried on.

Further along, Ace heard scratching again. Rodent-like scratching. Suddenly, she was pushed over by the sheer force of a black shape hurtling along the corridor. No, not one shape. Hundreds of small shapes. Furry and fast. Rats!

The rats overwhelmed her. She struggled against the living tide. They ran over her, snarled in her hair and scratched at her skin. Their weight forced the pins on the back of the badges on her jacket to dig into her. As Ace began to pass out she thought, *Brilliant. I'm the Pied Flipping Piper.*

"Ace? Are you there?"

Who was that? The Piper... the Professor... the Doctor! She tried to get to her feet.

"What's happening Ace?"

"What do you think's happening?" She felt her anger with him growing. "Rats - everywhere!"

"Ace, the TARDIS isn't picking up life signs. Or at least not very solid ones. Those rats are phasing in and out of reality. It's something to do with the TARDIS and the other object trying to stabilise. At the moment the rats are little more than a mental projection. If you deny that they exist they should disappear!"

"Deny they exist?" said Ace as she tried to fight off the rats. "That's easy for you to say! Why don't you come down here?" Ace's anger gave her strength - focus. Rats continued to pour over her but she batted them aside and stumbled to her feet.

"These rats do not exist!" she shouted. The stream of rats stopped and the last creature, real or not, scuttled off down the corridor. After the relentless chittering, the silence was a relief. Ace brushed herself down. She looked at her hands.

"These scratches are pretty real."

"Real enough," said the Doctor. "The rats are between reality and unreality but their effect on you was real. Are you okay?"

Ace felt bad about the way she had thought about the Doctor. "Yeah, I'm fine, thanks."

"Carry on if you feel up to it. Brave heart, Ace."

"What?"

"Sorry, wrong companion!"

He's mixing me up with his exes now, thought Ace.

Ace carried on uninterrupted for a few minutes, until she became aware of something brushing against her foot. Looking down she saw through the dim light what appeared to be the root of a plant. Rustling sounds came to her and the air grew warmer and she realised that she had entered an area of increasingly dense vegetation. It wasn't apparent if the plants were hanging onto the TARDIS walls or growing *through* them.

The plants grew thicker until Ace thought she was walking through a jungle. The various leaves and roots were of differing shapes, sizes and colours and appeared to be from different species of plants. Here and there, flowers appeared as well, unfurling in a series of increasingly vibrant colours.

Suddenly, a root which had somehow got tangled around her foot tightened its grip on her ankle. Ace tried to pull her foot free, without success. Then leaves and branches started wrapping around her body. The plants were not just alive - they were active! Ace began to panic, feeling that she was going to suffocate.

"Professor!" yelled Ace. "Doctor! I've got a bit of a plant problem here! A Triffid situation! They're swallowing me up!"

* * * * *

The Doctor stopped what he was doing at the console and looked at the scanner. "Krynoids?" he thought out loud. "Surely not?"

"They're coming out of the walls, Professor," he heard Ace manage to blurt out, despite the vegetation forcing its way into her mouth. "Help me! The Enchanted Wood this ain't!"

The Doctor stroked his chin anxiously as he tried to think of a solution. "Do what you did before," he said. "Deny they exist!"

"I've tried that. It isn't working. And I can feel the leaves against my skin. They're solid, real!"

"The nightmares are becoming reality," the Doctor said to himself, his mind racing. "As though whatever is trying to co-exist with the TARDIS is breaking through, becoming more solid. And threatening our existence whilst it does so. Now think man, think."

He flicked a switch on the console. "Plants like warmth, so if I can bring the temperature down in that part of the TARDIS... it's working. But too slowly. And a dramatic fall in temperature would hurt Ace too." He flicked the switch back. "No, must think of something else. Ace..."

The mumbled reply suggested that Ace was losing her battle.

"Must think of something, and quick." The Doctor brought up an image on the scanner. "A schematic of the section on the TARDIS where Ace is. Of course, that's perfect.... Ace on the wall, a handle, find it!"

* * * * *

Ace pulled the foliage from her mouth.

"But the wall is covered in plants! Thick, nasty plants! And ...oh no, insects as well! Cockroaches or something. Crawling all over the walls, mixed in with the plants! This is not good!"

The Doctor was sounding increasingly worried. "Look, be brave. Try and find the handle. It can't be more than a foot away from you."

Ace moved her hand against the wall, wincing as she seemed to squash insects and creepy-crawlies as she went along.

"Doctor, I can't hold out much longer. I - oh, got it!"

She'd found the handle, set into one of the wall roundels at about shoulder height. She turned it and the floor beneath her opened up.

She fell with a cry. Landing on her back, she looked around. Yet another corridor. Just as featureless, just as dark as all the rest. But no plants or insects.

"Professor! It was a trapdoor! You could have said!"

"No point worrying you unnecessarily, Ace," she heard him say. "Now, the corridor you're in runs parallel to the one above so you can continue your journey without incident, I hope. The TARDIS is a bit of a maze. Different routes to the same place."

Shaking her head, Ace continued on her way. The corridor seemed to go on for miles, and her feet began to get sore. As she went on, she noticed that the walls were beginning to change appearance.

"Professor, this section of the corridor is different. The roundels have gone. The walls here are more metallic - like a primitive spacecraft. The floors as well. It's all looking a bit NASA."

"That's bad," replied the Doctor. "The other object must be a spaceship. We're starting to merge, the TARDIS taking on the characteristics of the other vessel."

"Like the Fly and the Telepod in the film? Fusing together?"

"Yes."

"Jeff Goldblum, eat your heart out. Will we merge totally?"

"Yes," said the Doctor. Ace thought he didn't sound pleased at the thought.

"Well you should do something about it!" She tried to check her anger but she could feel it welling up in her again "At this rate I won't get to the pool in time!"

* * * * *

The Doctor heard the anger in Ace's voice. Was this just a result of all that was happening to the TARDIS or something more fundamental? He had sent her on a dangerous mission. As Ace had said, he had made her the canary in the coalmine. He dashed around the console. Time was running out. Glancing up at the scanner, he saw her shadowy figure.

"Keep going, Ace. I believe in you. I know you can do it."

* * * * *

Turning a corner, Ace found herself confronted by two large, growling, slathering dogs. They were like no breed Ace had ever seen. They were huge and primitive-looking, not like a domestic dog – almost like wolves. All she could liken them to was the Hound of the

Baskervilles from a Sherlock Holmes film she had once seen.

"It's another illusion, right?" she said.

"Err, no," said the Doctor. "These are very solid. I think they could do you some harm. We're getting close to full fusion with the other craft and its occupants. The rats, the plants, the dogs - there must be animals of some kind on the other ship. It must be some kind of space ark or science vessel."

Ace gulped. "I'm scared Professor. I was bitten by a dog when I was little. A big nasty one. And these are like something out of a nightmare." The dogs growled. Seeing the shoulders of one dog bunching, Ace took a step back. Growling, it leaped at her. Ace tried to duck aside, but it was too quick. Its weight dragged her down, pinning her to the floor.

"Doctor!" Teeth bared, the dog snapped its jaws at her, forcing Ace to twist her head away. She pushed at the animal, hoping to force it back. She felt her anger towards the Doctor getting stronger as she realised she could not hold the dog off. Then, in a split second, she had a thought. The Doctor wouldn't get angry, the Doctor would use his initiative, use the things he had to hand. She felt something in her pocket. What was that? The camera.

Ace pulled out the camera and activated the flash. The dog leapt back, startled and temporarily blinded. Scrambling to her feet, Ace pushed the animal away, knocked over the other beast, and dashed down the corridor. Opening the first door she came across, she slammed it closed behind her. She ran down the next corridor, not stopping to think, through more doors and more corridors.

"Ace, are you ok?" asked the Doctor.

"I think so. Nearly there." She stopped as she felt a tingling in her arms. She looked at her hands. They seemed to be becoming furry.

"Doctor, I'm developing a very dog-like pair of hands here!"

"Paws!"

"Pause, why?"

"No, paws, not hands. Fusion is beginning! The TARDIS is fusing with the spaceship and we are merging with the organic beings on board. Look, you're nearly at the pool!"

Not daring to touch her face for fear that might be changing too, Ace ran through a final set of doors. Inside was one of the most beautiful rooms she had ever seen. The flickering light seemed only to enhance its charm. It was, quite simply, a Victorian swimming pool. But not a Victorian swimming pool with cracked tiles and damaged furnishings like those she had seen on the few occasions she'd been swimming. This one looked as if the builders had only left yesterday. The high ceiling was simply amazing – it was covered by a huge mosaic depicting heroic figures Ace assumed were Time Lords fighting evil villains such as Daleks, Cybermen and other monsters that she did not recognize.

"There, on the wall, Ace," she heard the Doctor say. "The red button - press it."

With a great sense of satisfaction, Ace hit the button. Water began to flood into the pool. She watched the liquid rush in, impressed at how quickly the pool filled.

"Is the pool full?" asked the Doctor presently.

"Near enough," replied Ace.

"Good, I'm in a position to materialise the other object. Here we go!"

There was a grinding sound, not unlike that made by the TARDIS. A spacecraft appeared in the pool, floating on the surface of the water. It was silver and cone-shaped, about

four metres long with a base diameter of about two metres. Ace recognised it from a school project. It was one of the old Russian Sputniks. Not the whole rocket but the module section - the bit that comes back.

The TARDIS lights stopped flickering. Ace felt the sense of anguish, anger and fear that had dogged her every step lift from her shoulders. She looked at her hands - they were back to normal. She sighed in relief. All was well.

* * * * *

The Russian technician looked at the readings on his control panel. He turned to his superior. "The craft has gone," he said. "Gone the way of Laika."

His superior put his hand on the technician's shoulder. "Perhaps these sacrifices are not in vain," he said.

* * * * *

It took the Doctor some time to reach the pool. When he did, he came over to Ace, who had been gazing at the spacecraft, and stood beside her.

"I'm sorry, Ace," he said. "About everything."

"It's okay," said Ace. "Sometimes we have to ask others to do dangerous things for the greater good."

"Like the canaries?" pondered the Doctor.

"At least I had the choice. So what is this spaceship, anyway?"

"Sputnik 6," replied the Doctor. "This is 2 December 1960. The day it broke up during re-entry. On board, we'll find two dogs called Pchyolka and Mushka - Little Bee and Little Fly. Plus other animals, plants and insects, put on board by the Russians to see how they would cope in space. As the two craft started to merge, you saw images of the animals from the Sputnik. Images which became more solid as the two realities merged. They probably saw images of us too. And their fear, their confusion about being on a disintegrating spacecraft, was projected in the form of the anguish we felt. Those wolf-like creatures were a projection of the dog's psyches - the primitive dog within each - as they faced death."

"So what do we do with them? By saving the dogs we've changed history."

"Not at all. We materialised at the exact point the ship was about to break up. It was going to disintegrate during re-entry. The Russians will think it's gone and history will continue unchanged."

"So what do we do with the animals?"

"There's a chap in Wales I know. A beekeeper. Garonwy is his name. I'm sure he'd love to look after this menagerie. Not sure what I'm going to do with the Sputnik mind!"

Ace looked sad. "Do you think we were right to send animals into space? Mankind I mean."

The Doctor frowned. "Like Laika, the dog who died on Sputnik 2? Or Ham the chimp? No, I don't think you were. Sometimes it isn't right to send the canary down the coal mine, is it Ace?"

Ace smiled. "Maybe not, Professor!"

* * * * *

The central console column rose and fell jerkily. The Doctor's hat sat on top. Ace always smiled when the Doctor put it there and she watched as the hat went up and down. She turned and patted the two dogs next to her.

"Can't we keep them, Professor?"

"Oh, outer space is no place for dogs. The space/time vortex less so. Unless the dog happens to be made of metal. Did I ever tell you about Kg? I keep on meaning to drop in and see him and Sarah Jane. It's high time we had a reunion."

The TARDIS continued on its way. For once, all was calm and right with the universe. For now.

Ian Wheeler contributed to the Virgin Publishing book *Doctor Who: The Handbook – The Seventh Doctor*. From 2001 to 2007, he was Coordinator of the Doctor Who Appreciation Society, the longest-running fan group dedicated to the programme in the UK, and he has spoken about *Doctor Who* on television and radio. He has written for publications as diverse as the *Financial Times*, *Comics International*, *Best of British*, *Odeon Cinemas Magazine*, *DWB*, *Whotopia* and *Celestial Toyroom* and has edited publications for DWAS. His fanzine about British comics, *Eagle Flies Again* (co-produced with former *Doctor Who Magazine* editor John Freeman) was twice SFX fanzine of the month. He has a MA in Art Gallery and Museum Studies from the University of Leeds.

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS



Travelling through time is not without its hazards.

When the Doctor is forced to bring the TARDIS out of the space/time vortex, what should be a routine re-materialization goes horribly wrong. The time machine has materialised in a part of space already occupied by another object, and it's all going to get rather messy.

As the TARDIS and the other vessel struggle to co-exist, strange things start to happen. Whilst the Doctor tries to control the situation in the console room, Ace must travel alone into the bowels of the TARDIS on a terrifying journey. Her deadly mission will challenge not only her own resolve but will test her friendship with the Doctor as it has never been tested before!

What is the other object? Can it destroy the TARDIS? Can the Time Lord's friendship with his companion survive? And why is Ace turning into a dog?!

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