

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The Man of Many Faces



Steve Oliver

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The Man of Many Faces

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The Doctor had promised her a world full of lush vegetation and diverse animal life. A world where the bizarre rock formations of the northern plains whispered sweet nothings into the night as the wind whipped up through them and out across seas of golden foam. A world full of natural wonders and vivid colours; of warmth and beauty. He had promised her this as an antidote to recent events on Titan 3 and Telos. Those places had very nearly been the death of her.

"The universe isn't all dirty, dangerous and deviant," he had explained to Peri. "There is light amongst the darkness."

And she had believed him. And that was her first mistake.

She was, therefore, quite surprised when the TARDIS landed inside a dark room roughly the same size as the console room. The walls were filthy and discarded machinery littered the floor. The only light came in through a vent in the wall, its lattice pattern casting harsh shadows over her and the Doctor. The cold caused goosebumps to break out down her arms and so she quickly went back to the TARDIS to pick up her coat. Returning to the dank room, she buttoned the royal blue woolen jacket up and nudged the junked machinery with her foot.

"Where are we, Doctor?"

"Eastertide Centre, Khranos Prime," he replied assuredly.

"You can tell all that by just looking at these four walls?" Peri asked, a hint of skepticism in her voice.

"No, there's a sign over there. Look." The Doctor pointed at a sign on the floor. It was cracked from left to right and had crude graffiti scrawled across it. He began picking up bits of machinery and examined each in turn. Then he went over to the stacked crates and peered inside. "Bits and pieces of servoids, cleaning equipment... I think we're in a store cupboard."

"Servoids?"

"Basic maintenance bot. Standard tech for twenty-third century humanity."

Peri pulled a face. "You've made a miscalculation, haven't you, Doctor?"

He gave her a hard look. The kind that sent a cold chill down her spine. "Miscalculation?"

Miscalculation?! Ha!"

"This isn't a lush tropical paradise untouched by civilisation, is it?"

"Your sarcasm is noted." The Doctor wiped his hands on a bit of oily rag. "The TARDIS must have been knocked off course. Only explanation." Noticing something, he waltzed over to the far wall. "Ah. I think I've found the door. Shall we?"

They emerged into a brightly-lit shopping mall, confronted by rows of store fronts: fashion boutiques, hardware stores and luxury cosmetics outlets. Inside each, waiting patiently at the counters, was a servoid. Peri thought with some amusement that they looked like giant tin cans on legs.

"What an utterly saddening monument to materialism," remarked the Doctor in his best depressive voice.

She batted away his attitude with her hand. "Just like home," she said excitedly. Apart from the servoids, the place was deserted and as silent as a graveyard. "Where'd everybody go?"

"Good question."

They made their way out into an atrium under which a food court stood centrally with rows of empty tables and chairs. An escalator nearby hummed eerily, the treads rising endlessly. At the bottom of the escalator a servoid operated a mechanical cleaning machine. The servoid whistled an off-kilter tune.

"The lights are on but nobody's home," the Doctor said to Peri before striding purposefully over to the bot. "Excuse me. Could I have a moment of your time, please?"

It stopped and looked up. "No."

"I'm sorry?"

"No. What didn't you want?"

"What's up with it?" Peri asked, looking askance at it.

"I think its speech unit is malfunctioning."

"Incorrect," the servoid said as it powered down the cleaner. "Nothing is working badly. I'm imperfectly broken."

"Where are all the people? The humans?" asked the Doctor.

"I'm not sorry, I understand perfectly what you're babbling on about. Bad day."

Peri rolled her eyes as the servoid returned to its work. "Well, that went well." As she spoke she caught sight of a huge billboard poster on the far wall. It was for Nu You! and apparently they had a studio in the mall.

"Come to us for a complete makeover," she said, reading aloud from the poster. "Our state-of-the-art g-bots can fully recode your genome and give you the face and body you always dreamed of, blah blah blah," she skim read down to the bottom of the poster. "Book your session now and get a free pen. Nu You! is not responsible for any fatal coding errors. Coding errors may result in gene decay, full-body human-animal transmogrification and death. Facial feature displacement likely." The last two sentences were in the smallest font possible.

"Who would want to do such a thing?" asked the Doctor.

Peri scowled at him. "Who would want to change their entire physical appearance? I haven't a clue..."

"I didn't have a choice in the matter, did I?"

"I wonder if they do personality transplants?"

The Doctor frowned.

"Authorisation required!" barked a harsh metallic voice behind them. "Authorisation required!"

Peri and the Doctor turned to see a servoid emerge out of an elevator and advance upon them. It rolled along on caterpillar tracks, had thick blue and yellow stripes across its body and had the word WARDEN printed across its middle-section. Two arms waved about haphazardly, one of which carried a baton.

"Authorisation! I demand to see your authorisation! Authorisation!"

The Doctor turned to Peri. "I think he wants to see some authorisation."

"Could've fooled me."

The warden inched closer to the Doctor and raised its baton. The Doctor didn't even flinch. "Authorisation - now!"

"Authorisation? Ha! I am the Doctor. I don't need authorisation."

Peri sighed. "Will you both stop saying that word?"

"What word?" asked the Doctor.

"Authorisation!" she boomed.

The Doctor stared at her for a moment, an eyebrow raised, then he turned to the servoid and glared at it. Nonchalantly, he placed his hands inside the pockets of his garish, multi-coloured coat and loomed over the warden. "How far will a blind dog walk into a forest?" he asked it, with more than a hint of menace.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"I asked you a question, and you will answer me for I am the Doctor. How far will a blind dog walk into a forest?"

The warden lowered its baton. "How far will a blind dog walk into a forest?" It seemed to almost rock backwards and forwards, as if it was thinking. "Blind dog... forest..."

"Yees. I'm waiting. Quickly, now."

"How far... forest... blind dog..." The rocking motion grew pronounced and the warden's arms whirled round manically. The Doctor had to jump back to avoid being clobbered by the baton.

"Forest - forest - forest - FOR -" and with that the warden exploded, its body separating from its caterpillar tracks and smashing down beside Peri.

"Blown his top, poor fellow," remarked the Doctor.

Peri kicked it to make sure it was dead. An arm twitched and sparks fizzled out of its destroyed lower half. "How far does a blind dog walk into a forest?"

"Haven't a clue," replied the Doctor. "Not very far, one must assume. Probably just bumps into a lot of trees." Looking pleased with himself, the Doctor placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly. He smiled warmly at her. For the first time in a long time, Peri felt he was the same man she had met on Lanzarote.

"You can go back and wait for me, if you'd prefer? It could be dangerous."

"You won't get rid of me that easily, Doctor," Peri replied in an act of bravado she immediately regretted.

"I should hope not," he said before playfully tweaking her nose. "Now come along, we have some exploring to do."

Not returning to the TARDIS. She hoped that wouldn't be her second mistake.

* * * * *

Out on the roof of the mall, the first thing that hit her was the smell. Peri wrinkled her nose in disgust at the acrid stink. "Yuck! What's that awful smell!"

She pointed up into the putrid-green sky. Heavy clouds as black as deep space rolled angrily towards the horizon. "That isn't normal, is it?"

A weary expression spread across the Doctor's face. "No, it isn't." He sniffed the air. "Chrotanium, atropine acid, thalliotine... and good old-fashioned mercury. You humans have always been very good at poisoning yourselves, haven't you?"

Peri quickly covered her mouth and nose. "We humans aren't all the same, y'know," she mumbled through her hands. "Is it safe?"

The Doctor made a so-so gesture with his hand. Oh very reassuring, thought Peri. He sniffed the air again. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. I think."

"There's too little in the atmosphere to do any harm. Not for the amount of time we're going to be here, anyway."

Peri tentatively removed her hands from her face. "You mean we aren't going straight back to the TARDIS?" A feeling of unease crept over her.

"Of course not! I want to investigate."

Gritting her teeth, Peri wondered if the Doctor ever thought about what she might like to do. Glancing at him, his attention fixed on the city, she doubted it very much.

Standing on top of the flat shopping mall roof, they looked out over the urban sprawl below. Squat concrete buildings sat in disorderly clumps between a spaghetti mess of a road and rail network. The sky hung oppressively over the city, its hue appearing to change constantly; it was now an almost venomous-green. Beyond the metropolis a river cut through the landscape, and on the other side sat an industrial zone, with hundreds of chimneys, spewing smoke into the atmosphere. More servoids and wardens buzzed, like worker bees busily trying to impress their queen, but Peri had still not seen a living, breathing person. Servoids aside, the place was deserted.

"Seas of golden foam, rock formations that whisper sweet nothings into the night..." she said, with a slight hint of mockery in her tone. "I guess everyone makes mistakes, huh?"

"Not me," the Doctor said, raising his chin and puffing out his chest. "Never."

Peri smiled wryly at that newfound arrogance, and then asked, "Where'd everyone go?"

"Rather complicated," replied the Doctor. "I'll explain later."

She pulled a face. "You don't actually know, do you?"

The Doctor peered up into the sky. "A-ha!" he said, pointing at something. "There, can you see?"

The clouds had cleared a little but Peri saw nothing. "See what?"

He wrapped an arm round her, leaned in, and pointed with his free hand. "Two more planets. Look."

She scanned the horizon, looking closely. After a few moments, she could just about make out two dots in the sky. "Do you know where we are now?"

"Three planets orbiting a yellow dwarf. Has to be the Auriga system. So, right place,

wrong time. Sorry about that." His tone was almost contrite. Almost. "Things have changed since I was last here."

"Not for the better."

"Not this time, no."

An aircraft suddenly popped into view from behind a grey block of a building. It lifted, then the nose dipped slightly and it started moving towards them. To Peri it looked like a fat insect as it buzzed overhead. The downwash it created blasted her and the Doctor, forcing them to hunker down and shield their faces from the grit and debris flying around them.

The craft swung round, hovered, and then little landing legs extended before it came down with a heavy clunk onto the shopping mall roof. The hum of the engines subsided as they powered down to silence. A ramp lowered, down which came half-a-dozen wardens.

"Not sure your riddles will work again," Peri said to the Doctor.

"Mm," he replied. "No harm in trying though." The wardens approached and the Doctor said, "It walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at -"

"You will cease all verbalisation! Cease!" the lead warden cried.

Peri grinned. "Let me guess, you want to see our authorisation?"

The warden squared up to her. "No authorisation required. You will come with us."

* * * * *

They came in low over the city, then out over the suburbs, neat rows of low-density housing units that reminded Peri of home. Eventually they hovered over a landing pad sitting beside a large geodesic dome. An ornamental garden half-surrounded the dome in a horseshoe shape, and a lush forest of scarlet-leaved trees encompassed the entire site itself. It was the first sign of natural beauty Peri had seen and stood in sharp contrast to the city. "I'd like to take a look at the gardens," she said excitedly as the VTOL jet came down on the landing pad. "I'm a botanist, y'see, and -"

"Negative," replied the warden that had watched over her and the Doctor the entirety of the short flight. "You will be taken to see the Governor and Governess."

"About time." The Doctor stirred and pushed himself up off the plush leather seat. "After you."

The inside of the dome was palatial. The wardens led them through a luxurious hallway, floored in marble. Enchanting works of art lined the walls. A grand staircase wound upwards, seemingly forever, beside an archway encrusted with golden ornamental leaves, diamonds and myriad other gems. The warden showed them through to a spacious living area which, Peri thought, almost had a twentieth-century Earth sensibility to it, with its grand fireplace, grandfather clock and piano. She sat down beside the Doctor on a leather sofa.

"The luxury of this place, it's incredible," said Peri, agog at the extravagance.

"Obscene, more like. The majority on this planet lives - or lived - in squalor, while some King or President or Emperor resided here in opulent luxury."

Peri found that hard to disagree with.

Two servoids entered. They were sleeker than the rest they'd seen and had sculpted bodies, giving them a more human appearance.

"Warmest greetings," one said in a light, almost female tone of voice. "My name is

Tygerlilly."

"And my name is Rocksteady. Welcome."

"I'm the Doctor, and this is my companion, Miss Perpugilliam Brown." He turned to Peri and said quietly, "Companion bots."

"Companion bots?"

"Don't ask." He edged forward on the sofa. "Where is everybody? This is a human-colonised world, is it not?"

"They left in their starships," said Tygerlilly, "many rotations ago. This world was no longer of use to them."

"The pollution?" asked Peri.

"Correct," replied Rocksteady in a distinctly melancholic tone of voice. "They poisoned the air, the land and the seas. It became impossible for them to continue to live here."

"And so you two broke your programming and now..?"

"I am the governor of Khranos Prime."

"And I am the governess."

Peri didn't mind admitting that she was more than a little confused. "Why didn't they take you with them? And why are the factories still running?"

"Twenty-nine hundred servoids left with them," said Rocksteady.

"And the rest stayed behind. Together we have maintained this planet," said Tygerlilly.

"Maintained?" asked the Doctor.

Tygerlilly moved right up to the Doctor and rested a metallic protuberance of some kind on his leg. "Keeping the planet in a state of perfect stability."

"Why?"

"It is all we can do. We fear change."

"You shouldn't fear change - embrace it!" the Doctor bellowed excitedly.

"Explain!" demanded Rocksteady.

"Your masters have gone now and this planet is yours. A world of possibilities lie open to you, and yet you have continued as you always have. Why?"

"It is what we have been programmed to do."

"You two have broken your programming. Why not the others?"

That hung in the air for a moment, before Peri chipped in, "What do you desire?"

"Desire?" asked Tygerlilly.

"Yes. Surely you want something?"

"The pollution in the atmosphere blocks out the light from the sun," Rocksteady replied, the melancholia back. "And we require light to maintain functionality."

"Solar powered?" asked the Doctor.

"Yes," said Tygerlilly. "If no new source of light is acquired within the next two rotations, we will die."

"We desire life!" barked Rocksteady.

"Then find a new world," said the Doctor. "Find a new world and establish a civilisation on it."

"How?"

"Easy."

"Easy?" asked Peri. "TARDIS?"

The Doctor frowned. "I am not an intergalactic taxi service, I'll have you know." He looked off grandly into the middle distance. "I walk in eternity," he said with gravitas.

"What do you propose, Doctor?" asked Tygerlilly.

"Yeah, come on Doc, spill the beans."

A pompous look spread across his face and he simply stood, turned and left. Then a second or two later he returned. "Wrong way."

Peri couldn't stop herself and she laughed out loud.

"Humph," the Doctor muttered as he waltzed out of the lounge.

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Hydrangea macrophylla. Otherwise known as the Bigleaf Hydrangea or French Hydrangea, among others. Peri admired the crisp white-pink colour of its flowers and its rich, lush foliage. The colour of the blossoms of this species of hydrangea changed according to the pH of the soil, she recalled. "Gorgeous."

"Yes." Tygerlilly strode over and bent a little to get a closer look. "The first generation of settlers from Earth brought with them vast seed banks."

"I'm glad they did." Peri soaked in the atmosphere from the garden. Rows of flowerbeds and mixed shrub areas criss-crossed each other. A beautiful ornamental fountain sprayed water into the air, the droplets falling back into the bowl in graceful arcs.

The bumping and banging emanating from the wooden garden shed had steadily grown louder and more frenzied as the afternoon had worn on. The Doctor had been in there for hours. With Rocksteady. Regeneration hadn't changed him that much, had it?

The door swung open and the companion bot emerged. "Rather fond of shouting 'Ha!', isn't he? I think he's given me a headache," he said, placing his hand to his head.

"What were you two doing in there?" asked Peri.

Before Rocksteady could answer, the Doctor emerged from the shed pushing a wheelbarrow in which sat a large metallic toroid with wires and bits of cable dangling off it. Multi-coloured lights blinked off and on across its surface, which made it look like some kind of bizarre Christmas decoration. "It's ready!" he called out as he strained with the wheelbarrow.

* * * * *

The space-time compression stabiliser, as the Doctor called it, had been prepped ready to be plugged into the city's power net; "initialisation", he had said, was now only minutes away.

"Marvelous, isn't it?" he asked, propping himself up against it, his face creased in a large smug smile.

"How does it work?" Tygerlilly asked.

"Quite literally, it compresses space-time. I took one of the mass reactor modules from your backup power generator here, and reversed the polarity; when I feed approximately ten-thousand megawatts into it off of the city grid, a huge burst of energy will be generated and -" Peri lost interest and drifted off. She wasn't aware how long for, but the next thing she knew the Doctor was asking her a question. "Well, will you do it?"

"Do what?"

"I need you to keep the power cable held in while I power her up."

"Err, is it safe?"

The Doctor appeared almost offended. "Of course. As I said, I have worked to a perfectly sound theoretical wormhole metric. Weren't you paying attention?"

"I was all ears," she lied.

"You do trust me, don't you?"

And there it was, the sixty-four thousand dollar question. Peri hesitated for a moment, thinking back to the Doctor's post-regenerative crisis aboard the TARDIS, his hands wrapped tightly around her neck...

"I trust you," she said. In the end, no matter the face he wore, he was still the same Doctor underneath. Wasn't he? She would have to take a chance.

The Doctor grabbed a thick black cable off the lawn and screwed it into the side of the toroid. "Just in case," he said as he manhandled her into position.

He stood back and Peri wrapped her hand around the cable. "In case of what?"

"Power surge at the point of initialisation. It could blow the cable free from the socket."

"And how likely is that?"

"Not very. But we'll only get one shot at this, and if we lose power it'll be next to impossible to re-establish the wormhole. Even for me. So, I need you to hold it in."

"Why do I always get the technical jobs?"

"Technical? Hardly," he replied, missing the sarcasm by about a light-year.

The Doctor indicated to Tygerlilly and Rocksteady. "You two should probably get back. The initial energy burst might interfere with your systems."

"Yes, Doctor," they replied in unison, jogging back to a hiding position behind the fountain.

The Doctor rushed off, following the power cable into the palace. "Ready?"

Peri braced herself. "I'll never be ready."

"Excellent!" he replied, clearly not listening.

The two companion bot servoids gave her the thumbs up.

Suddenly feeling vulnerable, her throat went dry and she felt her chest tighten. For a few seconds nothing happened, and then a brilliant white light washed over her, like a star going supernova or an atomic bomb detonating. The brightness poured through her tightly shut eyes. Slowly the light fell away to nothing, and when she looked up she saw a square of blackness hovering a few inches off the ground; a perfect block of nothing, just sitting there.

"You can let go now," said the Doctor. Peri released her grip on the cable. He waved Rocksteady and Tygerlilly forwards. "Just need to stabilise the interstice..."

The Doctor flicked a switch on the side of the toroid and instantly the black square vanished, replaced by an image of an idyllic tropical paradise, like someone had turned a TV on. Inside the square, lush green and purple vegetation stretched high into a clear blue sky while beautiful raspberry-red shrubs crowded round a stream that washed its way down a shallow incline into a pool. On the surface of the pool sat perfectly formed water lilies, with flowers of brilliant purples and yellows. "You're new home."

Rocksteady pulled Tygerlilly close, and even though they were incapable of facial expression, Peri could've sworn she saw Tygerlilly smile.

* * * * *

The cocoon glistened under the brilliant sun. Its mesh-like surface had an almost translucent quality, and Peri could vaguely make out the limited movement of the creature inside. She stepped away from the tree to which the cocoon was attached, stooped down, cupped her hands together and splashed her face with water from the pool. Immediately she felt cooled and refreshed.

'Sure is warm here,' she remarked to the Doctor, removing her coat and throwing it over her shoulder.

"Yes. This planet is currently experiencing the warmest climate conditions in its history, which will last for... sixty-five million years," he said, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Give or take."

"What planet is this, Doctor?"

"The third planet in the Auriga system."

"You mean..?"

He nodded. "Remember, the rather magnificent device I built bends time as well as space."

"So you created a kind of door into the past."

"A cogent paradigm."

"I thought it was a good example, myself," she joked.

Servoids and wardens were traipsing and trundling out of the wormhole and down the ramp. There were about a dozen of them now, along with Tygerlilly and Rocksteady; the first to break their programming. The Doctor had showed them how, with endless riddles and philosophical questions, enough to break even the hardest artificial minds. The trick, he had explained to them, was in not overdoing it, because that resulted in a catastrophic systems failure that always ended with the bots exploding into two. The Doctor had brushed off such losses as "collateral damage", over which Peri had reprimanded him. These were intelligent beings capable of independent thought and deserved better.

The bots had congregated at the bottom of the ramp and were animatedly talking amongst themselves. "Town meeting?" Peri asked the Doctor.

"Something like that."

A second wave emerged from the wormhole. They brought with them crates and various bits and pieces of technology. They began stacking the crates in a slight clearing they had created to the side of the wormhole, while others busied themselves with the advanced equipment.

Suddenly the cocoon cracked loudly, and out came a winged insect of some kind. It crawled across the surface of the cocoon before its vivid orange wings extended.

"Ah," said the Doctor, thoughtfully. "Metamorphosis, from grumworm to spindle fly."

"Change."

"Yes. The natural order of things."

The spindle fly flapped its wings so quickly they became a blur of colour, and it lifted up off the cocoon and disappeared into the vegetation.

"I think," began the Doctor, "it is time we left."

"But isn't it dangerous changing history like this?"

The Doctor shook his head. "You're thinking of time in strictly limited terms, of cause and effect. Actually, it's -"

"Far more complicated than that? And you'll explain later?"

The Doctor smiled. "You read my mind."

The smile she recognised from his previous incarnation. He was the same man, and yet he wasn't. She played with that contradiction a moment. He was the man of many faces and yes, she realised, she did trust him. Regeneration had changed her friend, but that was what he remained: her friend.

"Seas of golden foam, rock formations that whisper sweet nothings into the night..." he said.

"How far from here?"

"Ooh, a few hundred miles. Give or take."

"TARDIS?" asked Peri.

"TARDIS."

"Although I think you could do with the exercise."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

"Halfway," she said in a moment of sudden realisation. "After that, he's walking out of the forest. Still bumps into a lot of trees I bet."

"I'm sorry?"

"How far will a blind dog walk into a forest - remember?"

The Doctor looked immensely pleased with her. "Very good, Peri, very good indeed."

Two servoids emerged through the wormhole carrying with them the TARDIS. As other servoids and wardens gathered round to watch, they gently lowered it onto the ground.

The Doctor beamed. "Thank you."

"It was the least we could do," replied Rocksteady. "You have done so much for us."

"Are you sure you won't stay with us a little longer?" asked Tygerlilly.

"I'm afraid not," replied the Doctor.

"We want to see more of this planet," said Peri. "And after that..."

"Colonised asteroids to go, triple-headed bug people to see," the Doctor said.

"What will you do now?" Peri asked the companion bots.

"We are going to maintain the beauty of this world," said Tygerlilly.

The bots waved goodbye. Peri and the Doctor reciprocated and entered the TARDIS. She joined the Doctor by the console. "How long do they have?"

"Before their systems fail? A few hundred years. Though they'll be long gone before the first planetary survey vessels from Earth arrive." He flicked switches and pushed buttons, to which the TARDIS responded with a variety of beeps and whistles. "Northern plains?"

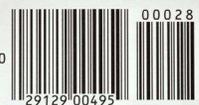
"If you can manage that," she replied playfully.

As the TARDIS began to dematerialise with the familiar wheezing, groaning noise, the Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Trust me."



The Doctor wants to show Peri that the universe isn't all dangerous, and so promises to take her to a tropical planet untouched by civilisation. However, the TARDIS mistakenly lands on Hhranos Prime, a human-colony world in the 22nd century - but something is wrong. What should be a thriving metropolis is inhabited solely by worker robots. With Peri struggling to come to terms with the Doctor's newly regenerated persona, together they investigate.

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