

WHAT GUNS DO

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Okay, so the world's about to end. The Doctor's sat in the middle of the floor, one wire in one hand, one wire in the other. You can practically feel the electricity begging him to touch them, to let it flow, to unleash the chaos. The air crackles with it, so much so that you'd think that's were the charge was, not in one red wire, and one blue.

One second. Is he sweating? I am.

'Do you want to talk about it?' he asks me.

I consider. I don't even want to *think* about it.

Let's go back.

I'm standing over him – over *it*. What is *it*? It doesn't matter. It's big and

green and scaly and thirty seconds ago it had a gun in its hand. Thirty seconds ago it was pointing that gun at the Doctor and telling him to make his peace with whatever God he worshipped. Thirty seconds ago, it was towering over the Doctor, watching as thick blood trickled down his forehead: blood that smeared the butt of the dark gunmetal. Thirty seconds ago, it didn't even seem to notice me – well, isn't that the companion's lot, to play second fiddle to short, dark and broody in the paisley scarf? – but then somehow thirty seconds passed and the gun's in my hand, pointing at a green and scaly forehead.

It looks up at me with crystal blue eyes – *human* eyes – and says nothing, out loud.

'Well?' asks the Doctor in my ear. 'What are you waiting for? You've got the gun. You're in control. Take control. Show him what guns are for. Show him what guns do.'

It screams at me, in silence, with bright blue eyes.

Let's go back.

'I met you at a pretty weird time in my life,' I said.

Let's go back.

So you've heard of the Doctor. Short dude, eyes like an arc-welder's flame, dress-sense like a five-year old set loose in the dressing-up cupboard.

You've heard stories: how he turns up just before all hell breaks loose – usually gets the blame too, when the giants start knocking through matchstick defences – how he turns up and somehow, *somehow* just makes everything right again. Not like it was, maybe, not even good sometimes, but just *right*.

But you've never heard of me, have you. Den Tyler. Companion number who-cares in a series of God-knows-how-many.

There we were, walking down the street – little and large – two of us twice as real as death or taxes, but I bet you didn't even notice me, did you? I bet you couldn't take your eyes off the odd looking bloke swinging his umbrella and sniffing the air for evil.

'Earth,' I said, two steps behind as always. 'Again. Twentieth century. Again. Are you sure that thing's a time machine?'

He just put a finger to his lips, his eyes flicking this way and that, seeing things I'll never even know.

'I know, I know,' I muttered. 'Rule number one: don't mention the TARDIS.'

'Or me,' the Doctor intoned, barely glancing at me. 'There are people here I'd rather didn't know about me.'

'Look, Doctor,' a pause – cue stock companion phrase number six hundred and three: 'What's going on?'

He looked at me then: grey eyes that cut through so far I know – just *know* – that he can see every thought I've ever had, before I've ever had it.

'Evil,' he said. The umbrella twitched and pointed. 'This way.'

And so there I go again, playing catch up.

\* \* \*

It's looking up at me with bright blue eyes – at me, not at the gun staring back at it – and it's not saying a word. It can't get a word in edgeways.

'Guns kill. Guns end lives,' the Doctor's saying, but still it's looking straight at me, barely hearing him. 'They end the lives at both ends of the muzzle.'

But it's not listening to him, it's looking at me. Because I'm the one holding the gun now.

'That's right,' the Doctor whispered, right inside my head. 'You've got the gun. You've got the power. Because you've got the gun. That makes you powerful, doesn't it.'

But still I'm not pulling the trigger.

I met him at a pretty weird time in my life. Let's go back.

Den Tyler, fifth cog in the machine that fits with the fifth cog of the machine that turns with the fifth cog of the machine that makes sure all the letters that get sent to the second cog get neatly filed away in the right place with the right date written in blue biro in the right hand corner, just in case the first cog wants to read them. The first cog never does, of course, but that's all right: there's a whole other machine that takes all of the letters out of their neat files on the appropriate date and makes sure that they're carefully shredded before heading home to make bedding for the kid's hamster.

For this, they give me twenty thousand a year. Twenty thousand what

I'm not even sure, because I never get to see it with my own eyes: it's all just numbers on a screen that gradually count down to the end of the month.

For this I give them eight hours of my life, five days a week plus overtime, with fourteen days off a year for good behaviour. Not including bank holidays and sick days and Sundays.



But that's all right, because as the little numbers count down, my little flat fills up with stuff. DVDs I never get to watch, CDs I never find the time to listen to, mini-disks I never can decide to fill. And the more my little flat fills up with all this *stuff*, the less it seems like my little flat any more. But that's all right,

because I barely get the chance to be in it anyway, what with commuting, eating, sleeping. Because if I don't get my eight hours sleep, then I'll be no use to anyone, and the letters might get filed away with the wrong date in blue biro in the right hand corner. And *then* how would they know when to shred them?

And if there was something else going on in the world, something bigger and more important and more *exciting* just out of the corner of my eye, well that was just too bad. I was far too busy to pay any attention to that.

Until the office blew up one Thursday and this little dark-eyed man came flying out of the rubble, all arms and legs and cuts and bruises.

Leave him alone. Don't get involved. The office has gone, and that means at least one day off without biting into your holiday. Find the boss, tell

him where you'll be, and wait for someone else to sort it all out. *That's* what I should have done.

'Are you alright?' I asked, picking him up, and dusting him off.

He fixed me with those dark eyes, looking for all the world as if he'd known I'd be there (hell, as if he knew every event in my life that had led me there), and said:

'If anyone asks, you didn't see me.'

'I don't –'

'Trust me,' he said, 'I'm the Doctor. But don't tell anybody that, either.'

And then he was gone, back into the smoke and the rubble.

Somehow, another thirty seconds has gone, and I'm still here.

Somehow, it's still here too, looking up at me, frozen.

'Well?' says the Doctor.

It took them a grand total of two days and three hours to relocate each and every machine to the sub-office twenty yards down the road. Those twenty yards cost me an extra twenty minutes in commuting time, but that was all right. I was back doing the same thing I had done for the last five years: all that changed was the colour of the shelves the letters slotted onto. That, and that every morning or so someone had a new piece of gossip about who or what had caused the last office to spontaneously combust. But that was all

right: I had other things to keep me occupied.

The numbers on the screen went down a little more, and my little flat gained a nice little PC, complete with CD-R, printer and modem.

Every day I went to the office and turned in time with all the other little cogs, and every night I hooked my little PC up with the rest of the world, and searched. Most nights I barely even got two hours sleep, let alone my blessed eight. But that was all right. I was making progress.

‘First thing’s first,’ the Doctor said. ‘Somewhere to stay.’

‘Can’t we stay in the TARDIS?’ I asked, already knowing the answer.

He was already shaking his head, not even looking back to see if I’m looking. He *knows* I’m looking.

‘Might draw attention to ourselves. Best stay incognito.’

So we find ourselves a guest house and book a room for the next few days: just the one – the Doctor never seems to sleep. He signs the register “Dr John Smith”. They don’t even ask me to sign anything.

Once we’re alone, he explains the situation.

‘Let’s imagine,’ he said: he always starts like that. ‘Let’s imagine that there’s a corporation that’s managed to get themselves some technology. Years ahead of its time, *alien* technology. They’ve got their claws into every country in the world, selling this technology – this *alien* technology – to anyone who can afford the price. But no-one can afford the price: some day soon, the aliens are going to come and foreclose on the deal. Every sentient



being on this planet will be their property.'

He fixed me with those dancing eyes of his – blue, grey, green, they never seem to make up their mind what colour they want to be.

'We're going to stop them.'

I don't even have a shadow of a doubt that we will. He's the Doctor: it's what he does.

'Just another day at the office,' I said, shrugging.

And it is, too: that first time I saw him, there was a corporation with some ahead of its time, *alien* technology. And he stopped them.

'What's the plan?' I ask, because he always comes up with the plans. I couldn't do anything without him.

He smiled, barely.

'You get some rest. I've got some work to do.'

*Transcript of e-mails to newsgroup Japanese Pavilion from account Apricot Tuesday, and their replies.*

AT: So you're saying you know about this "Doctor"? Who is he?

JP: I don't know the Doctor. Never heard of him. What gave you that idea? I mean, the idea of some \*alien\* space-time event setting history right, well that's crazy talk, isn't it?

AT: I never said he was an "\*alien\* space-time event".

JP: I didn't say you did. All I'm saying is, \*if\* he existed, well he'd probably be the kind of near Godlike creature that could see the flow of history

like it was yesterday's newspaper. He'd be some unstoppable force that nobody in their right mind would want to get in the way of. Maybe because of what would happen if you got in his way, but mostly because nobody who wanted the universe to be right – to be the best it can – would want the Doctor out of the way.

JP: But wouldn't you say that someone – some\*thing\* – like the Doctor would have the nowse to keep an eye on what people were saying about him?

JP: Oh, yeah, definitely. I bet he'd urge people who's met him to say "Nope, never heard of the Doctor" – but I still reckon he'd pop up every now and then, just to check his friends were being as good as their word.

JP: Oh, of course. But they'd be bound to be a couple of people who knew just enough to spot him.

JP: From his IP address, I'd guess.

JP: If he was testing them.

JP: \*If\*.

AT: Are you saying you know the Doctor's IP address? What's his e-mail addy?

JP: The Doctor? Nope, never heard of the Doctor ;)

JP: Doctor? Who he?

*Transcript as downloaded by email account John Smith ends.*

I can see my hand holding the gun. I can see the alien on its knees in

front of me. I can see the red welt on the Doctor's arm, where the alien grabbed him just a little too roughly before throwing him to the floor.

'Well?' the Doctor repeats.

*E-mail sent to account Apricot Tuesday by account John Smith.*

JS: I think we should meet.

He woke me up around five in the morning the next day. Same routine as always: I'm dead to the world and he vanishes to arrange everything. I mean, doesn't he ever sleep? Experience would say no: he's the Doctor. He saves worlds. You can't do that in your sleep.

But he still needs me for some things.

'I need your help,' he said.

'Let me guess,' I said. I don't need to be there to know what's happened. 'You've located the alien's technology, and you've figured out how to destroy it. But you need me to get you into the building.'

'That would be the quickest way of putting it,' he said, looking almost like he was sulking. He'd prefer it, I'm sure, if I gazed at him adoringly and let him take a couple of hours telling me how clever he's been.

I don't even think about it any more.

'Let's go.'

\* \* \*

I can see my arm. Let's go back.

Getting into the building was easy. It's always easy – the whole world seems to have security systems like the ones they had at work. Before the Doctor blew it up. I suppose it's understandable: we've been sticking pretty exclusively to twentieth century Earth, and work was the leader in its field. The only thing that isn't understandable is why The Doctor needs a pleb like me to bypass the system for him: surely the big bad force of nature™ should be able to do it himself. I suppose he just wants me to feel useful, like I can make a difference. Yeah, cheers, Doctor.

Once we're in, all hell breaks lose. Finding the weapons cache is easy – the Doctor knew right where it was – and while he whirled around connecting this wire to that, reversing the polarity of the whatsit and tweaking the power cells of the whodyacallit I just sort of . . . phase out. It's always like that when the Doctor's at work: I just end up feeling sleepy, probably in sympathy.

Then the next thing I know is tall, green and nasty has appeared from nowhere and is giving the Doctor the whupping of his lives. For some reason, looking at the alien reminded me of my boss.

The Doctor was losing big-time. But that was all right: the alien was ignoring me. It's all down to me.

'If you have a God,' the alien says, 'I would make your peace with it.'

Somehow, thirty seconds pass.

It's all down to two wires, one red, one blue. Touch them together, and the whole thing goes kaboom! The Doctor's holding them, one in one hand, one in the other. The air crackles. My palms feel damp, and I can feel the electricity spark across the sweat.

'This is the final cache. Once this is gone, the aliens will have no more weapons. They'll be powerless. Defeated.'

A pause.

'Do I have the right?'

I snort.

'Don't start that again, Doctor.'

He looks at me, shadows in his grey-blue-green eyes.

'I think we should talk.'

I can see the alien kneeling before me. I can see my arm holding the gun. I can see its eyes, locked onto mine. I can feel the Doctor inches away.

'Well?' he asks for the third time.

I can see the welt on my arm where the alien grabbed it just a little too roughly before throwing me to the floor. Only that wasn't me: that was the Doctor.

'Well?' the alien croaks. 'Will you kill me, Doctor?'

Only he's not looking at the Doctor. He's looking at me.

Let's go back.

There we were, walking down the street – little and large – two of us twice as real as death or taxes, but I bet you didn't even notice me, did you? I bet you couldn't take your eyes off the odd looking bloke swinging his umbrella and sniffing the air for evil. Let's go back.

'Earth,' I said, two steps behind as always. 'Again. Twentieth century. Again. Are you sure that thing's a time machine?' Let's go back.

So we find ourselves a guest house and book a room for the next few days: just the one – the Doctor never seems to sleep. He signs the register "Dr John Smith". They don't even ask me to sign anything. Let's go back.

One guy, alone in the street, dressed like a five-year old who's raided the dressing up cupboard.

'First thing's first,' he says to himself. 'Somewhere to stay.'

'Can't we stay in the TARDIS?' he asks himself, already knowing the answer.

'Might draw attention to ourselves,' he counters. 'Best stay incognito.'

One guy, alone in the street.

Let's go back.

Okay, so the world's about to end. The Doctor's sat in the middle of the floor, one wire in one hand, one wire in the other. You can practically feel the electricity begging him to touch them, to let it flow, to unleash the chaos. The air crackles with it, so much so that you'd think that's were the charge was, not in one red wire, and one blue. There's a big, green, scaly, unconscious monster in the corner, blood trickling from behind its ear, where the butt of an alien gun struck him.

One second. Is he sweating? I am.

'Do you want to talk about it?' he asks me.

I consider. I don't even want to *think* about it.

'You met me at a pretty weird time in your life,' he says. I can do nothing but agree.. 'Your business was thriving. World sales were up. Because of your product. The product your new partners had brought to you. You'd never seen them, of course. Why should you? You're just a cog.'

A memory. I'm in the office. I need to see the boss – I don't know why: is it important? His secretary's missing – probably gone to the loo. That doesn't matter – I'll just take a peek and see if he's busy. I can always say

Hilary said it was okay if he spots me. But he doesn't spot me. But I spot him.  
But not him. *It.*

In his office, in his suit, a green scaly giant, smearing on his face until suddenly it's not a green, scaly giant, but it's Mr Attwood, large as life and twice as ugly.

'Well, what could you do?' the Doctor says. 'You knew something was wrong. You knew this was an alien threat – truly *alien* – and it didn't take long for it all to fall into place. You knew it was wrong. You knew they had to be stopped.'

But what can I do? I'm just the fifth cog in the machine that turns with the fifth cog of the machine. I couldn't stop an alien invasion if you gave me the keys to the Millennium Falcon.



'And so you invented me. The Doctor. The dark alien for whom this kind of thing is as simple as burning the toast in the morning. The one who can make it right.'

And then it occurs to me. The wires aren't in the Doctor's hands. They're in mine, one red, one blue.

'The gun is loaded. There's a finger on the trigger,' the Doctor says softly. 'But it's a big responsibility, pulling the trigger. And you can't avoid it forever, no matter how hard you try.'

And that's when it occurs to me.



\* \* \*

'Well?' the alien croaks. 'Will you kill me, Doctor?'

Only he's not looking at the Doctor. He's looking at me.

And with a yell, I pull the trigger and watch as its brains suddenly decide they'd like to see the view from the window.

Okay, so the world's about to end. There I am, sat in the middle of the floor. *Alone* in the middle of the floor, one wire in one hand, one wire in the other. I can practically feel the electricity begging me to touch them, to let it flow, to unleash the chaos. The air crackles with it, so much so that you'd think that's where the charge was, not in one red wire, and one blue. There's a big, green, scaly, dead monster in the corner, most of the back of its head missing.

One second. I'm sweating. And I'm thinking.

Is there a part of me – a part buried God knows how deep – some small part that knows (even if the rest of me doesn't) how to reverse the polarity of the neutron flow?