

Doctor Who

MIRROR IMAGE

A War Doctor/Torchwood short story

by

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Ianto Jones stood, eyes narrowed, staring intently across the road at the crumbling buildings opposite. Much of Cardiff was now vibrant, up-to-the-minute, bubbling with life, progressive. This long-abandoned industrial estate on the outskirts of the city was a sorry relic of the closing decades of the twentieth century – run down, disintegrating, the glass of long-broken windows fragmented into the encroaching weeds. The whole place seemed eerily sentient, as if aware of its status as an unloved, unwanted remnant of past decades, superfluous to modern requirements, knowing it was only still in existence simply because no-one could be bothered to replace it with anything else.

Aware of it, but long past caring about it.

Ianto stared through the padlocked iron gates, wondering exactly what there could be about such a place that would have attracted whatever it was that had come through the Rift little more than an hour ago.

Five energy signatures had flashed up, scattered in apparently random locations across the city. Energy signatures that were indisputably alien in origin. Jack Harkness had looked round the Torchwood team as they clustered around him.

“Okay,” he’d said. “Today everyone gets a prize.”

Ianto had looked up, surprised. He’d had to fight to convince Jack to take him on at Torchwood Three, and even now was always the one left to mind the shop – quite literally, when manning the fake information centre above the Hub. “Including me?” he queried as impassively as possible, ignoring the sneer that his peripheral vision could detect on Owen Harper’s face.

“Five signatures, five of us,” Jack had said, with only the briefest of glances at him. “So, yeah, including you.” His eyes swept round the ring of faces surrounding him. “Everyone, keep in touch. Report back as soon as you find anything. We need to know what’s goin’ on here quick as possible. On your toes, people! I’ll take the city centre. Gwen, the park. Owen, the museum. Tosh, the housing estate...”

And what Ianto had got was this – this graveyard of former aspirations.

He got out his PDA to check whether there was any updated information. No – the energy signature was still there, somewhere in among the disintegrating, graffiti-sprawled structures. What was it, and where had it come from?

Time he found out.

Ignoring the rusting padlock, he took the obviously well-used route through the peeled-back section of chain-link fencing next to the gate – any conventional route of entry would have been scorned by the graffiti artists, of course – and was in, walking with soft-footed caution along the road that led into the heart of the estate.

He scanned his surroundings ceaselessly as he went, a process rendered more difficult by the contrast between the piercing sunlight pouring out of the cloudless blue sky and the black shadows cast by and between the buildings; he could almost hear his brain complaining at the constant split-second rate it was being expected to adjust between the two extremes when interpreting the data his eyes kept feeding it. But there was nothing out of the ordinary to be seen, or heard.

Though, of course, that wasn't true. There *was* something out of the ordinary here, somewhere. He just hadn't found it yet...

He must be getting close to the source of the signal. Ianto referred again to the map of the industrial estate on his PDA, and his eyes instantly widened. *Two* energy signatures! *Two*, where seconds ago there had been only one – and the second signal was completely different from the first. Where had that second one come from?

Jack needed to know about this.

Ianto was about to make the call when the PDA's screen suddenly, shockingly, went blank. Within moments he realized that none of his technology was working anymore – PDA, phone, none of it. Completely dead, everything. Or, if not dead, completely blanketed by some kind of interference. A distinction without a difference, in the circumstances. He couldn't contact Jack; he couldn't contact anyone. His brow creased incredulously. What could possibly do that to *Torchwood* tech?

Even worse, he could no longer be sure where he was in relation to either of the energy signatures, and wouldn't know if either of them were on the move.

Had he changed from the hunter to the hunted?

He had no option but to find out. He took a deep breath, and drew his automatic from the shoulder holster so carefully crafted not to spoil the lines of his characteristically immaculate suit. Gripping the gun conveyed a reassurance that he knew might be completely false, but was nonetheless comforting. Because he had to go on, had to continue to investigate, and hope he survived to report to Jack in person. Turning tail without finding out anything at all would be so useless that it simply wasn't an option, whatever the unknown energy sources might turn out to be.

He needed to prove to Jack Harkness that he was more than the coffee boy.

Maybe he needed to prove it to himself, too.

So he went forward, his heart thudding at his ribs as if it was trying to beat out a warning to him – a warning he had to ignore, if he was to find out what was going on.

A couple of minutes later the road emerged from between the rows of buildings, into a large open space, blindingly bright with sunlight. It was paved, almost like a plaza, but one garlanded with more disintegrating frontages, more heaps of crumbling brickwork. The sun glinted from jagged

teeth of glass but failed to illuminate the black maws behind them. Grass was pushing up between the paving slabs, contesting with weeds and wildflowers for available space. In the centre, a single tree had been planted, perhaps as much as forty years ago; a sapling then, now a mature tree that blocked the sunlight overhead and cast an almost ominous black shadow on the ground. Save for the rustle of its leaves when a breath of breeze disturbed them, all was still and silent.

As was the man standing close to the trunk of the tree, one hand resting on the rough bark. He stood in the shadow of the tree's crown and at first could only be seen as a silhouette against the brightness of the sunlit buildings beyond. He had his back to Ianto, and he was staring across the plaza, his head held slightly to one side, almost as if he was listening for something.

Ianto instinctively halted, moving the hand holding his automatic to hide it from view behind his back, but as he did so gravel scraped under his shoe. The stranger instantly swung round to confront him.

They stared at each other. Because of the smoothness of that movement, somehow suggestive of the swift reactions of a trained soldier, Ianto hadn't expected to find himself facing such an old man. Of slight build, probably in his seventies, with greying hair and a lined face half hidden under a pale grey beard and moustache. He cut a somewhat shabby figure, an old velvet waistcoat visible under a leather overcoat that, like the trousers, had clearly seen better days. The woollen scarf looped around his neck must surely be making him uncomfortably hot on a day such as this, but his footwear was perhaps the most eccentric thing about him – combat boots, but covered by well-worn gaiters. *Gaiters*? Who on earth wore *gaiters* these days? Footwear that might have been commonly seen a century or so ago, but not anymore, not even among the down and outs of Cardiff. And was that a bandolier, hardly visible beneath the ends of the scarf...?

The eyes of the stranger, similarly busy assessing him, were intent, but not threatening. Sad, yes. Weary, even. The eyes of a man who, if he had ever had any illusions, had lost them long ago. But not threatening.

For no apparent reason whatever, Ianto found himself experiencing a strong feeling that this man was an ally, not an enemy.

"Hello," he said with characteristic brevity, at last.

The old man ignored the greeting. "It's not safe for you to be here," he said, in a voice that made Ianto think of finely graded sandpaper. It had a strangely attractive quality, for all that the tone conveyed such a clear warning.

Ianto nodded. "I know," he agreed.

The old man looked at him more closely. "Understand me? You're in danger. You should go. Leave. Immediately."

"Danger from you?" Ianto wondered if his question would elicit any sort of clue as to the stranger's intentions.

"No, not me. From something that's hiding here. I'm here to find it."

"This something. How did it get here?" Ianto persisted.

The old man regarded him through suddenly narrowed eyes. "In a way that I don't suppose you'd believe, even if I told you."

Responding to an instinct he wasn't aware of having, Ianto decided to take a chance on forthrightness. "You could tell me it came through the Rift," he suggested. "I'd believe that."

The man frowned, half in surprise, half in incredulity. "You know about the Rift?"

"It's part of my job to monitor it," Ianto said steadily.

The declaration brought a momentary gleam of humour into the old eyes. "Just you?"

"And others. We watch the Rift. Deal with what comes through it. Our team is called –"

The old man cut across him. "Never mind what it's called. What's *your* name?"

"Ianto. Ianto Jones."

"Jones..." Another glint of humour. "Of course. The chances were quite high that it was going to be, weren't they? Well, Ianto Jones, since you know all about the Rift, you know how things get caught up in it and transported away from where they should be to where they shouldn't be."

"Yes. Noticed that," Ianto acknowledged, poker-faced.

"Then you won't be surprised if I tell you it's happened again. How much do you know? Enough to come here, at least."

"We detected a Rift energy spike, then alien signatures. Spread throughout Cardiff. The whole team are investigating. I was assigned to this place."

"Well, you've just walked into a theatre of war, Mr Jones," the old man informed him sombrely. "A war my people are fighting against a savage and implacable enemy. A war that's lasted many centuries. One of the weapons launched against us failed to reach its target. Instead it was taken into the Rift and accidentally brought to Earth. I'm here to find it before it can do any harm."

"That doesn't sound as if it should be too difficult," Ianto commented. "Finding it, I mean."

The old man snorted. "Doesn't it? Well, there's something that you should know about this particular weapon. It's not just an inanimate artefact, like a bullet, or a missile. What makes this weapon so difficult to combat is that it's directed by an organic brain. A living creature that's an integral, inbuilt part of it. This is a weapon that can think, and plan. Finding it will be the least of my troubles."

"You keep talking in the singular, not the plural," said Ianto. "We picked up five energy signatures."

"Oh, it knows how to hide itself," said the old man. "It's sent out fake signatures as camouflage, to confuse and mislead. To make it difficult to locate accurately."

"Like a submarine putting out counter-measures?" Ianto suggested, brief images of the last time he'd watched *The Hunt for Red October* flashing through his mind.

"Exactly so," the old man agreed. "So I'm sorry to have to tell you, Mr Jones, that your colleagues are all chasing wild geese. Because *here* is where it is. Somewhere here."

Ianto digested this in silence for a moment. He suspected that he had been sent out here on the assumption that this place was the least likely location of the five to hold any real threat.

There's irony for you, Jack, he thought.

"This thing," he said. "Creature. Is that what's responsible for blanking out my communications?"

"Ah. It's done that, has it?" The old man was unsurprised. "It can do it over a limited range. Once it detected the need, it would automatically employ that capability."

"Does it know what's happened to it? That it's on the wrong planet?"

"Possibly not. Not yet. It's isolated from its Supreme Command. It may take time to realize what's happened. I'd place no bets on what it'll do once it knows," said the old man grimly.

"Then I'd better help you find it, hadn't I?" said Ianto, for the first time letting the hand he'd been holding behind his back drop to his side, revealing the automatic.

His companion eyed it, unimpressed. "That won't help you," he observed dismissively. "A peashooter would be just as effective."

Ianto shrugged. "Somebody told me once there are no dangerous weapons, only dangerous men. It might be more useful than you think."

The old man once again snorted derisively. "I don't use one. And you haven't the faintest conception of how dangerous I am."

Ianto decided not to comment on that. "You said 'my people'," he probed. "What planet are you from? How did you follow the weapon through the Rift?"

"I was able to detect where and when it ended up. I merely came to that 'where' and that 'when'."

Ianto's brow furrowed. All those stories Jack had told him and the rest of the team. Some of the files he'd read when trawling the Hub's database. A suspicion was beginning to dawn...

"You 'came to that when,'" he repeated. "So you're saying you can travel in time as well as space? Does that mean you're a Time Lord?" He hesitated, then launched his final question. "Are you – the Doctor?"

The old man's face was suddenly bleak, and he looked away, as if no longer wanting to meet his interlocutor's eyes.

"The Doctor" – a long pause – "is lost." Four words pronounced without inflection, yet so devastating.

"Dead?" Ianto exclaimed.

"Lost." The word was repeated with the finality of a death knell.

"Not dead, then," Ianto deduced. "Lost when?"

"When he ceased to be someone who made things better. When he let anger become his motivation. When he became a warrior, not an explorer."

Ianto stared at him, and the pieces dropped into place. "It *is* you. You *are* the Doctor."

The old man shook his head. "No," he said flatly. "I *was* the Doctor. No more." He turned his head to meet Ianto's gaze again. "But you can still call me that, if it's easier for you to think of me that way."

The younger man felt momentarily overwhelmed by the mix of grief and self-loathing in those weary eyes that had clearly looked on so much suffering and death and destruction that it now

coloured everything they saw. But then he straightened his stance and gripped the automatic more firmly.

“Looks like we’d better find this thing, then,” he said defiantly. “What is it we’re looking for?”

For a brief moment the Doctor allowed one corner of his mouth to rise in a half-smile. But for a brief moment only.

“You’ll know it when you see it,” he said gruffly. “If it doesn’t see you first. Come, then, if you’re coming,” he added, leaving the shadow of the tree and heading across the plaza. “And keep your eyes and ears open. Not just our lives depend on it. Thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, will die if we don’t succeed.”

“Right. No pressure, then,” Ianto muttered under his breath, as he followed the Doctor.

A shape moved slowly and cautiously in the shadows between the decaying buildings, scanning as it advanced for something – anything – that would enable it to make sense of its situation. It did not understand. This was not its target, but contact with Supreme Command had been lost, so it could not refer for information or instruction. And there were no intelligent organisms here for it to demand answers from. Such must be located.

Which made it necessary to investigate the energy signature now blipping on its scanner. That instrument was not tuned to detect individual lifeforms – the nature and purpose of the weapon did not require it – but whatever that signature was, it was logical to assume that an intelligence must be associated with it.

The shape, dark and indistinct in the crepuscular gloom of the shadows, ominously changed direction toward the location indicated by the scanner.

The Doctor had taken the lead, Ianto was covering their rear. Mostly in silence – and especially since Ianto had made one casual comment that had elicited a decidedly negative reaction from his companion. They’d been passing a particularly derelict industrial unit, one with every window broken, a detached section of the roof lying shattered where it had fallen from above, the door hanging from a single hinge.

“Looks like a bomb’s hit it,” Ianto had said.

The Doctor had immediately looked at him with an expression that had bordered on contempt.

“No,” he’d said, with withering scorn. “It doesn’t.”

Looking into those ageing eyes, Ianto had been visited with an inkling of what lay behind the sudden anger in them – a vision of all the death and damage, all the pain and grief caused by the countless bombs that really *had* hit...

Chastened, he’d cast around for something ameliorative to say, and his eye had fallen on an unexpected splash of colour. Emerging from a mound of rubble and earth piled against the wall of the building, standing above the grass and weeds that had taken root in it, there had been a small rosebush. Not any type of cultivated rose, but a wild dog rose. Most of the roses had now become

hips, but there had been one remaining flower open, one late bloom, its red petals almost defiantly still open to the sun.

“Look,” he’d said, pointing. “A rose in the ruins. It’s almost like a statement of hope, isn’t it?”

But the Doctor had merely snorted, and walked on.

Hence the silence between them thereafter. But as they progressed, scanning every gap between buildings, every window, every doorway, Ianto’s mind couldn’t stop generating a hundred questions, all jostling for priority, and after a while the pressure for answers could not be suppressed any longer.

“This war,” he said, the automatic in his clasped hands tracking the sweep of his eyes. “Who are you fighting?”

The Doctor emitted a brief bark of humourless laughter. “I’d forgotten there could be anyone who didn’t know that... Have you ever met a Dalek, Mr Jones?”

Images of the fall of Torchwood One darted through Ianto’s mind. “Is that what we’re hunting? A Dalek?”

“In a way, but not a Dalek as you’ve been used to seeing them. Housed not in a travel machine but a bomb. A living bomb. We call them contaminator bombs.”

“I’m sure the clue’s in the name, but what exactly is it they do?”

“First the Daleks drop conventional bombs, targeting our main centres of population. Partly to kill, of course, but primarily to destroy anywhere where people might be able to take shelter inside. Then they unleash the contaminators. When the capsule reaches the optimum height the Dalek inside detonates it, releasing poison droplets into the atmosphere that disperse into molecules and float down to ground level. Once breathed in... I leave you to imagine the results. At first they were merely designed to be launched from a distance and cover their target areas indiscriminately. But when the Time Lords’ aerial defence systems became too sophisticated for that approach, the Daleks took the principle one step further.”

A living bomb, he’d said...

“So – kamikaze Daleks, then,” Ianto deduced.

“Quite so,” the Doctor agreed. “Piloting the contaminators. Able to evade the defences often enough still to be deadly. Earth’s cities,” he added heavily, “have no such defences. This one contaminator, if detonated at the right height above Cardiff, could kill every man, woman and child for miles.”

“One less pocket of Welsh troublemakers – quite a lot of the English’d be happy with that,” Ianto said, taking refuge in facetiousness to cover his real reaction to what the Doctor was describing. “They’ve never forgiven us for not being suitably grateful for having their way of doing things forced onto us for our own good.”

“Then the English have nothing to be proud of. Cybermen use the same reasoning,” said the Doctor bleakly.

Ianto’s guts clenched. Images of Torchwood One assaulted him again. Torchwood One – Daleks – Cybermen – the partial cyber-conversion of Lisa Hallett, whom he had loved, and the death

that had befallen her despite everything he had tried to do to save her... He couldn't prevent one brief contortion of his face before he managed to restore its customary impassivity.

The Doctor, it seemed, had not noticed. "Every day," he said, in a suddenly lowered voice. A tortured voice. Almost as if he'd forgotten Ianto was there, as if he was talking only to himself. "Every day of my life I hear screams. The screams of the children of Gallifrey. I will *not* hear the screams of the children of Cardiff as well. *I will not.*" The last three words were a vow pronounced in a tone that made Ianto shiver.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"First, I have to find it," said the Doctor. "Then –"

He got no further. The front wall of the building on their right abruptly exploded into flame and rubble, the pressure wave of suddenly displaced air throwing them both flat onto the roadway, showering them with fragments of brick in a cloud of grit and dust.

"*It's found us!*" the Doctor yelled – somewhat superfluously, Ianto thought – as they scrambled to their feet. "This way! *Run!*"

Another explosion, this time making the road behind them erupt into chunks of tarmac and other debris, provided additional incentive to obey.

"In here!" the Doctor called, swerving toward a double set of fire doors in the wall immediately on their left. There was suddenly something in his hand, a small metallic tube, that he pointed at the doors. A small red light flashed at the end of the tube and the doors started apart as if they'd been impacted by a battering ram. The Doctor thrust them aside and hurtled in; as soon as Ianto was also inside, he slammed them shut.

"How did you do that?" Ianto demanded.

"Sonic screwdriver," said the Doctor shortly. He suddenly struck a listening pose. Ianto realized he could hear an ominous hum coming from outside.

"Come on!" the Doctor snapped. "Those doors won't keep it out if it decides to follow us in here. We need to get to the TARDIS!"

Before Ianto could ask where that was, there was an explosion that blew the window next to the fire doors into a lethal hail of glass shards that only just missed the two men.

"With me!" the Doctor yelled. "This way!"

As they fled, Ianto vaguely registered the fact that this was not an office unit but more of a small warehouse, one that had evidently not been cleared of all its stock when whatever company had last leased it had shut up shop. It had obviously specialized in the supply of mirrors; there were several, of varying sizes, unpacked and leaning against the piles of flat cardboard boxes stacked in random locations across the floor of the unit. The propped mirrors, dirty and covered with dust and smears, offered fleeting, imperfect reflections of himself and the Doctor as they ran for their lives. Another explosion thudded against the outer wall, not quite breaching it this time, but still causing a spray of dust and grit as breeze blocks shifted against each other under the pressure. The Dalek must be tracking them in some way, keeping pace with them from the outside of the building as they ran through the inside.

“How much further?” he demanded, as the Doctor found an exit door in the back corner of the unit and burst the lock with his sonic.

“The next unit but one,” said the Doctor tersely. “If we live long enough to get there.”

He led the way outside, hurrying along the concrete walkway separated from the back wall by a strip of long-neglected, weed-strewn grass. Ianto was following in his footsteps when he realized that the hum he had heard earlier was suddenly rising in volume – and in altitude. He looked up.

He had only a split second to register what he saw. Emerging from above the edge of the roof was an object with roughly – and appropriately enough, he supposed – the dimensions of a coffin, except that it was not rectangular but ovoid. The grey metal casing was studded with the rows of sensor globes that immediately identified it as being of Dalek origin. From the front of the ovoid projected two more objects – a Dalek eye stalk, and, alongside it, the barrel of a weapon that was not quite the standard Dalek gunstick but something closer to a small cannon. With, obviously, a Dalek brain behind both of them.

An exploding fountain of earth and concrete a few feet in front of them brought both the Doctor and Ianto to a halt. Instinctively they turned their faces up toward the danger hovering above them.

“Do – not – move,” commanded the Dalek. “I require – information. You will give it to me.”

“Really?” said the Doctor sarcastically. “I thought the Daleks knew everything! What can we possibly tell you that you don’t already know?”

“I require to know my current location. I cannot contact the Dalek Supreme Command. I cannot carry out my purpose. This is not Gallifrey. I require to know what planet this is.”

Ianto wondered if he was imagining the slight hint of confusion in the Dalek’s staccato voice. He suspected not, from the way the Doctor was smiling with grim satisfaction.

“Oh, dear!” The Doctor’s voice dripped with false sympathy. “Can’t contact your Supreme Command? No-one to give you orders, and you don’t know what to do, do you? Because you’re not capable of original thought! So much for the superiority of the Daleks!”

“Silence!” the Dalek screamed. “You will speak only to give me the information I require! What planet is this?”

“This?” repeated the Doctor, still wearing that grim smile. “You took a wrong turning, didn’t you? This is Earth. And there’s one thing I’m sure you know about Earth, even if you know nothing else about it. Earth is under *my* protection.”

It was only then that the Dalek seemed to realize who was addressing it.

“You! You are the Doctor! You are the enemy of the Daleks! You must be exterminated!” To Ianto’s ear there was no mistaking the sudden edge of fear in the mechanical voice.

“Oh, how many times have I heard that!” the Doctor scoffed, with a dismissive wave of his hand. “And you’ve never succeeded yet, have you?”

“You must be exterminated!” the Dalek repeated, its voice rising in pitch. “You are the Doctor! You are the enemy of the Daleks!”

“THE enemy of the Daleks?” The Doctor’s face muscles momentarily relaxed toward an ironic smile. “There are hundreds, thousands of species that hate and oppose you, yet you call *me* THE

enemy of the Daleks, as if I were the only one. You must think I'm the only one that matters. How very flattering!" His voice transmitted pure disdain.

Ianto couldn't restrain himself from reaching out to clutch at the aged leather sleeve of the Doctor's coat. "Doctor, what are you doing? Why are you provoking it?" he whispered urgently.

"I've got to make it focus on me," the Doctor hissed back. "If it's after me, it won't be thinking about flying up into the sky and raining poison on Cardiff!"

He had a point. But it didn't make Ianto feel any more comfortable about being on the business end of the Dalek's weapon.

"Get ready to run," the Doctor ordered in a harsh whisper. "See that door into the next building?"

Ianto glanced, saw, nodded.

"Right," said the Doctor. Then he returned his attention to the Dalek, hovering over the roof above them, making his tone as insulting as he could. "Well, then, Dalek? You're alone here. No friends to back you up. Not that you'd know what a friend is! You're incapable of recognizing the concept! No – no friends here, only enemies. Me! The Doctor! The enemy of the Daleks! Do you dare to take *me* on?"

The Dalek fired its weapon. The Doctor dived one way, Ianto the other. Neither was hit, but the ground beneath their feet seemed to erupt. The air filled with chunks of soil, powdered earth, shredded grass and weeds. A second blast hit the walkway just in front of them, adding lumps of shattered concrete and more dust to the mix. Under cover of the cloud of particles that filled the air, they scrambled away.

Coughing as he unavoidably inhaled the grit-filled air, Ianto stumbled after the Doctor. The dust had got into his eyes, as well, making them water so much that the older man had become just an indistinct blur, but blindly Ianto followed him as he swerved to the right, toward the target building, into it. Ianto had almost reached it himself when a third explosion seemed to blow him through the doorway, making him measure his length on the floor.

Left to himself he might have remained there, stunned, but almost immediately he felt himself seized and lifted.

"Come on!" the Doctor yelled in his ear. "We'll be safe in the TARDIS! It hasn't got the firepower to get through the forcefield!"

Dazed, Ianto tried to get his watering eyes to focus. Just a few feet away, a rectangular blue shape rippled across his vision. He felt the Doctor supporting him, urging him forward, saw him thrusting something small and silver into what must have been a lock, pushing the door open. Then they were inside and the door was slammed shut.

The Doctor supported him for a few moments more as he continued to cough the dust and grit out of his lungs. Then, judging that the younger man could now stand unassisted, he disengaged and strode away. Panting, Ianto dug into his waistcoat pocket for a handkerchief with which to wipe his flooded eyes. In a few moments he was recovered enough to start taking in his surroundings.

A control room. The control room of the TARDIS. But not as Jack had described it. Not quite, anyway. The console itself, more or less, yes, and the equidistant pillars spaced around it. But the walls – they were different from Jack’s description. Covered with luminescent white discs recessed into a pale grey surface, discs that looked as if they were lit from behind by a harsh white light. Despite that, there was a pervading gloominess both in terms of light levels and in the atmosphere of the place. The same sense of lost hope that showed in the Doctor’s eyes. And of course there was the obvious fact that though it seemed to be smaller than Jack had indicated, this sized space still could in no way known to humankind be fitted into the police box-sized exterior he had so briefly glimpsed before being propelled into its interior...

The Doctor put his head slightly to one side as he assessed Ianto’s reaction to his current location.

“Well? Aren’t you going to tell me it’s bigger on the inside?” he enquired rather caustically.

Ianto strove for what he hoped was the right degree of casualness. “I rather assumed you’d already noticed,” he said, achieving an off-handed tone.

The Doctor emitted a brief bark of laughter. “Hah! You’re a man of few words, Ianto Jones, but I have to admit that they do tend to be to the point.”

“Saw a poster once,” said Ianto. “A lot of hippos with their mouths wide open. It read, *After all is said and done, there’s a lot more said than done*. I’ve always tried to keep my saying level down and my doing level up. Which by association forces me to wonder what the Dalek is now doing...”

Almost immediately he got his answer. Through his feet he detected the slightest hint of vibration just as his ears detected a detonation from outside.

“Testing my defences,” the Doctor commented, clearly unworried. “Don’t worry. The weapon it has would be deadly enough if we were unprotected, but it’s not powerful enough to breach the forcefield. It may be a bomb, but it’s designed to disseminate liquid, not explosive. And what we have to do now is come up with a way to disable that bomb,” he went on briskly. “I’ll show you what we’re dealing with.”

Brushing rather ineffectually at the dust that covered his suit, Ianto followed the Doctor to the console, looking with interest at the glowing white glass column that rose out of it. That must be the Time Rotor he’d read about... But he wasn’t given the leisure to study it. The Doctor had already been operating some of the controls and now was directing Ianto’s attention to the small eye-level screen in front of him. It showed as a diagram the transparent outline of the ovoid shape he’d already seen, segmented into four sections.

The Doctor pointed at the largest one, at the rear. “That’s filled with the poison liquid,” he said. “That smaller section next to it contains the explosive, and the mechanism to trigger it, that shatters the outer casing and releases the poison into the air. Then there’s the energy source that powers the bomb’s flight, weapons and detonation capabilities, and the Dalek’s life support system. The section at the front houses the Dalek itself, and the bomb’s controls.”

Ianto studied the diagram. “It’s smaller than I would have expected,” he commented.

“A virus is so small you can’t even see it, but it can still kill you,” retorted the Doctor.

For some reason his words stimulated a small frisson of sensation on Ianto's skin, almost like a premonition. Like somebody walking over his grave... He shifted uncomfortably to dispel the feeling. "Point taken," he conceded.

"That," the Doctor continued, studying the diagram on the screen, "is a product of all-out war. Specifically designed to deal out indiscriminate death to non-combatants as well as combatants. Believe me, there's no form of weapon the Daleks won't use against the Time Lords..."

Ianto couldn't help noticing the Doctor's phrasing. 'My people', he'd said at first, but since then he'd referred only to 'the Time Lords', as if they were somehow separate from him – or he from them...

"...nothing they won't stoop to," the Doctor was saying. "I wonder if you'd be able to comprehend some of the things they've tried, Mr Jones. Some of the things they've *done*."

From time to time it could be heard and felt that the Dalek was still trying to breach the defences of the TARDIS, but as the Doctor was ignoring it, so did Ianto. He was busy getting his head round the implacable amorality of the Daleks.

"Poisoning children, as well as their parents. That's vile. Doing that to children." He thought of his sister, her children, imagined them being bombed and poisoned and who knew what else, and then wished he hadn't.

"Oh, they've done worse than that to the children," said the Doctor heavily. There was something in his tone that made Ianto look at him sharply.

"What do you mean? What could be worse than killing them?"

The Doctor was silent for a long moment. His eyes were unfocused, looking at something that Ianto couldn't see.

"When you're a child, something that is vital to your wellbeing is a sense of security," the Doctor said at last. "To know that those you love, who love you, will always be there. That they'll never change. That everything will go on as it always has. That your parents will always be the parents you've known. When you take" – he corrected himself – "when you *wrest* that kind of security away from a child, they're psychologically damaged. Some never recover."

That triggered a memory in Ianto's mind; one of the most unusual things about the people of Gallifrey. "But staying the same – that's not what Time Lords do, is it? You regenerate, don't you? You – change."

"We change," the Doctor agreed, "and yet in many ways we remain the same in the essentials of our characters. There's still continuity, despite the changes imposed by regeneration. That is" – he searched for the right word – "*normal*, for us. We're accustomed to *that* type of change."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"The Daleks found a way to attack us through our ability to regenerate," said the Doctor. His face was bleak. "It's not the only time they've tried that. But this was their first attempt, very early on in the war. They came up with something new. Something that doesn't kill individuals, but has attacked our society instead. It has fundamentally affected our way of life – our society – our very existence – in a way that we had never considered. A totally new kind of weapon."

“What kind of weapon?”

“What we were talking about a moment ago. A virus.”

Ianto was puzzled. “Viruses aren’t new...”

“No. But the effect of this one has been completely novel,” said the Doctor flatly. “Something that could affect only Time Lords. No other race in the universe would be susceptible to what it does. They sprayed the whole of Gallifrey with it. Every single one of us has been – infected...” He caught Ianto’s look. “Oh, yes... even me...” After a pause, he went on, “We identified it as a virus, of course, but because it didn’t kill anyone we thought it was something that hadn’t worked, had failed to achieve its purpose. But it wasn’t long before we realized we were wrong.”

“Why – what happened? What did it do?” Ianto was subconsciously aware from the periodic repetitions of sound and vibration that the Dalek outside was still probing the TARDIS’s defences, but he barely registered the fact. The Doctor’s sombre narrative compelled his full attention.

“There are viruses that can integrate into DNA and insert their genes into the target genome,” said the Doctor. “That changes the sequence of the DNA. Changes how it behaves. This was one such virus.” He looked at Ianto. “Throughout our history, there have sometimes – but *extremely* rarely – been aberrations in the regeneration process, documented cases where this particular effect has been the outcome.”

Ianto frowned. “What sort of aberration?”

“Something that’s not unknown, but rare, very rare,” said the Doctor. “Like albinism in humans. It can happen, but not often. But albinism affects only individuals, not entire societies. This is something far more fundamentally disruptive. You see, Mr Jones, on Gallifrey, save for those few rare cases I mentioned, historically males have always regenerated as males, females as females, throughout each individual’s entire regeneration cycle. The Daleks’ virus has changed that. Now males can find themselves regenerating as females, females as males. And back again. Alternating. Or being the same gender for two or three regenerations, then switching again. Regeneration has become a lottery.” He fell silent, contemplating what he’d said.

“I can think of people who’d say that was a good thing,” Ianto observed, keeping his tone neutral.

The Doctor shrugged. “It’s what’s happened. Whether it’s a good thing, whether it’s a bad thing – only time will tell,” he said sombrely. “But those people you refer to – there’s something they might easily overlook.”

“What would that be?”

“That if the change had been *natural*, and *gradual*, society would have adjusted, as societies always do if given long enough. But this change was *not* natural. It was artificial, and it was imposed with a speed that hasn’t allowed for a measured adjustment. Imagine it, Ianto Jones, when it first started to happen, without warning, without any time to get used to the idea. A generation or more of children subjected to more than just the normal savagery of war, to the uncertainty of not knowing whether they or their father or their mother would survive the day, or be dead by the end of it. This was a generation of children who suddenly also had to deal with the concept that

the person who was their mother this morning was still alive but had suddenly regenerated into a man, the person who was their father had suddenly become a woman. Regeneration has always affected aspects of the personality to some degree, but this was childhood insecurity raised to unprecedented levels.”

“Yes, I – do see what you mean,” said Ianto slowly.

“I instanced albinism earlier. In addition to the obvious outward markers it can also have a range of unpredictable physical side effects. On Gallifrey, there’ve been unpredictable *psychological* side effects. The initial effect on families was chaotic, and the ripples are still spreading down through the generations.” The Doctor’s voice became pensive. “I sometimes wonder if what’s happened is the accidental by-product of an attack that went wrong, or whether the Daleks foresaw the effect it would have when combined with their other methods of attack... Because something history has proved over and over again, Mr Jones, is that if you have enough time and you want to destroy a civilization, you can do little better than to find a way to attack the cohesion of its family units. It seldom fails. When they start to disintegrate, so does the society on which they are based. Heaven knows the power they’ve wielded has made the Time Lords increasingly arrogant over the centuries. That was one of the reasons I left Gallifrey in the first place...” He broke off.

“But now?” Ianto prompted, after the ensuing silence had lasted several seconds.

The Doctor sighed. “But now,” he resumed, “those first generations of children have become adults, and the ones who’ve been unable to make the necessary emotional and social adjustments show signs of going beyond arrogance to the point of becoming sociopathic. What the long-term effects may be is something on which I do not care to speculate. Time Lord society has been irrevocably changed. It remains to be seen what it will mean for the future. For all our futures...”

The Doctor fell silent, a silence that remained unbroken for several seconds. Then the TARDIS vibrated again to the latest attack from the Dalek outside, and the Doctor looked up and squared his shoulders.

“But for now, what we need to do is to make sure that Cardiff, at least, *has* a future,” he said briskly. “So we need to disable that contaminator bomb.”

“Disable. By which you mean kill the Dalek.” Ianto understood the Doctor’s desire to look away from that image of what had been done to Gallifrey and focus on the here and now, because after what he’d heard, that was exactly how he felt himself.

“If we can,” agreed the Doctor. “But it’s well protected in that casing. It won’t be easy.”

“What have you got in mind?”

“If I can get close enough, I can open the casing” – the Doctor waved his sonic screwdriver briefly – “and get to the energy source. Shutting that down will disable the bomb and sever the Dalek from its life support. But, as I said, that’s *if* I can get close enough. The question is how.” He regarded Ianto thoughtfully.

Gradually his meaning dawned on Ianto.

“You need a goat for the tiger,” he said, his voice level.

“Yes,” agreed the Doctor. “I do.” Then, unexpectedly, he smiled. “But don’t worry, Mr Jones. I’ve thought of a way in which the goat might survive the encounter.”

Ignoring the fact that its weapon was proving useless against the TARDIS, the Dalek nevertheless could not bring itself to cease its attack, knowing that the most feared enemy of the entire Dalek race was within. Obsessively it continued to assail the rectangular blue box that had come to represent what the Daleks feared most – defeat. Defeat by the man who travelled in it. Every fibre of the Dalek’s being compelled it to keep trying to find some point of weakness that would prove fatal.

But then it realized that the TARDIS was dematerializing. The Doctor was leaving! No – fleeing! He was running away from superior Dalek weaponry – there was no other explanation.

Except that there must be. Because seconds later, the Dalek’s scanner showed that the TARDIS had rematerialized, only a short distance away, two buildings back. The attack must continue...

The Dalek pivoted itself to face the wall that ran alongside the road outside and blasted a hole through it. Ignoring the dust and debris, it piloted itself out through the hole and turned to the right. Within seconds it was once again facing the double fire doors of the building in which the Doctor and his unknown companion had taken refuge a short while before.

But this time, something was different. Before, the doors had been shut. Now, they were open. Hovering only a couple of feet above the roadway, the Dalek paused. But the scanner showed clearly that the TARDIS was within. Cautiously the Dalek moved forward, between the two doors standing so invitingly wide on either side.

What transpired then only took seconds. Moving from the bright sunshine outside to the gloom within, the Dalek’s own eye tried to adjust to the difference in light levels transmitted through its eye stalk. The adjustment had not yet been completed when it realized that the TARDIS was directly in front of it, and beside it, a man – not the Doctor, but the other man – and he was raising a hand weapon to point at the Dalek. Instantly, the Dalek fired at him.

There was a shattering sound, and the man disintegrated into a thousand splinters.

Before the Dalek could process the unexpectedness of that, it felt the weight of a body suddenly leaping onto its outer casing – heard a short burst of sound – felt the access panel into the part of its casing that housed its power source and life support being opened – sensed that something fatal was happening to it.

Then the power died – and shortly afterward, it itself died, too.

But not before it had had time to realize that it had been defeated, and that, once again, the Doctor had triumphed...

Ianto looked for a moment at the automatic pistol in his hand. Despite the Doctor’s earlier dismissiveness, it had indeed turned out to be more useful than he’d thought, just as Ianto had prophesied. Without it, the Dalek wouldn’t have thought it was under threat and therefore fired before it had had time to fully assess the situation.

As he restored the automatic to its holster, he looked thoughtfully at the shattered remains of the full-length mirror the Doctor had so carefully positioned to reflect Ianto from where he had been standing behind the left of the two fire doors, making it look as though he was in fact standing beside the TARDIS. The Dalek, confused by the sudden contrast of light levels, hadn't had time to realize what it was looking at. Ianto's mirror image had been more than sufficient distraction to allow the Doctor, waiting behind the other door, to leap out and complete his ambush.

He felt the shape of the automatic against his ribs, and found his mind replaying the words he'd said to the Doctor, when the Doctor had scorned its usefulness against the Dalek. *"Somebody told me once there are no dangerous weapons, only dangerous men. It might be more useful than you think..."* By that yardstick, what had just happened, what he had just done... it put *him* – Ianto Jones, the coffee boy – into the category of 'a dangerous man'.

He knew what Owen's reaction to that concept would be. But what about Jack's...?

The Doctor rose from where he had been checking that the contaminator bomb and the Dalek inside it were both truly lifeless, and thrust the sonic screwdriver into one of the loops of his bandolier.

"Well done, Mr Jones," he said with satisfaction. "Thanks to you, we've succeeded."

Ianto turned his eyes away from the remnants of the shattered mirror. "That's something to reflect on," he said, straight-faced.

The Doctor emitted a short bark of laughter. "As I said before. Few words, but to the point." His eyes returned to the grey casket studded with sensor globes, and the brief moment of humour was banished.

"What are you going to do now?" Ianto asked, watching him carefully.

"Get this thing away from here. Dispose of it somewhere safe."

"And then...?"

"I've lived to fight another day," said the Doctor grimly. "The war's not over. Sometimes I fail to see any way in which it can ever be over."

"Don't give up hope, Doctor," said Ianto impulsively. "There's always hope. There has to be."

The Doctor emitted a sound in which scepticism and despair were combined. "Hope! I used to give other people hope. I can't do that anymore. I can't give people what I've lost myself."

"Perhaps you'll get it back. Hope can be reignited."

"What's the point? A single candle in the universe is soon snuffed out."

"But a single candle can light a lot of other fires," Ianto persisted. "Remember that rose we saw? Perhaps there's always a rose, and it's just a case of finding it. Looking in the right place, so you can see it's there. A reminder that it's possible for something good to grow even out of something bad."

"Trite," said the Doctor dismissively. "Very easily said by someone who's not lived through the reality."

“Even so,” said Ianto stubbornly. “Perhaps there *will* be a rose in the ruins for you. You were the Doctor before. Perhaps you will be again. Perhaps you just need to be ready to seize the moment, when it comes.”

Inexplicably, the Doctor stiffened at those last words, as if something had struck him unexpectedly. His face went still, and his eyes had the look of someone focusing not on what was in front of them, but on what was behind them. “The Moment...” he repeated softly. “Seize the Moment...” Somehow, the capitalization of the initial letter was clearly audible, and suddenly – though he didn’t know why - Ianto felt very uncomfortable.

“Doctor? What are you thinking?”

The Doctor turned his head toward him, that unsettling look still on his face. “That the Moment *should* be seized. *Must* be,” he said slowly. “If there’s no-one left to fight, the war stops. Collateral damage to the innocent stops. All collateral damage, everywhere...”

Something in his voice was making Ianto extremely uneasy. He did not know what the Doctor knew – that the Moment was a weapon in the Time Lord’s arsenal, the only one that had not yet been used, and what the devastating consequences of seizing it and using it would be. He only knew that his attempt to offer comfort had gone badly wrong, though he didn’t know in what way. Just for an instant he had a vision of himself and the Doctor facing each other, not as mirror images, but as opposites. The young man who still believed in hope, the old man who no longer did. He felt an unexpected pang of grief colour his disquiet – grief for the loss of something that he couldn’t even name...

The Doctor saw his reaction, and the expression on his face visibly changed.

“It’s largely thanks to you, Ianto Jones, that there was no collateral damage to the innocent here,” he pointed out. “I hope you’ll remember that.”

Ianto shrugged that away. “It’s my job,” he said.

“Well, you can tell the leader of your team – whatever it’s called – that in my opinion you do it very well,” said the Doctor. He smiled at Ianto. “And now, as one final favour, perhaps I might impose on you for help to get this thing into the TARDIS?”

“Right. Yes,” said Ianto.

It didn’t take long. The casket was much lighter than he would have thought, so it wasn’t hard to manhandle it in through the TARDIS doors and shove it into a corner. That done, Ianto and the Doctor straightened up and faced each in silence.

Then the Doctor put out his hand, and Ianto shook it.

“Thank you,” said the Doctor. “I – and Gallifrey – are indebted to you.” His words were gracious, but Ianto could see the world-weariness had returned to his face, that look of having seen too much death and destruction that had been there when they first met.

“I wish there was something –” he began impulsively, then stopped.

“No, Mr Jones, there *isn’t* anything you can do,” said the Doctor. “Not beyond what you’ve done. But – thank you. Goodbye.” The last word was said gently, but with finality.

Ianto nodded – hesitated – then accepted his dismissal, and walked out of the TARDIS.

He heard the strange groaning, wheezing sound that told him it was dematerializing, and paused to watch it go.

And then it had.

Time for him to go, too.

As he scrambled back out through the gap in the chain link fence, instinctively attempting to preserve the integrity of his suit despite the filth that covered it, he heard the roar of an approaching engine. An SUV was racing up the road toward him. It screeched to a dramatic halt inches from the rear bumper of his own vehicle. The driver's door was flung open, and Jack emerged.

"Ianto! You okay? Couldn't raise you," he rapped out, coming out to meet the younger man halfway across the road. The blue eyes registered the condition of the suit, and he grinned, momentarily diverted. "Hey! Look at the state of you! Where's the real Ianto Jones, and what've you done with him?" Then, returning to the business at hand, "What's been goin' on?"

"It was here," said Ianto. "The source of the energy signatures. But don't worry. It's been sorted."

Jack looked at him strangely, partly as if not sure whether to be impressed or not, but partly as if he was trying to suppress some kind of excitement – or anticipation...?

"Sure? The rest of us drew a blank. Then, picked up a second signal coming from here. Looked familiar. Like the signature of the TARDIS..." He was trying to sound casual, but Ianto could see in his eyes the urgency, the hope, the *need*. "Wasn't, was it?"

Ianto looked at him, and suddenly knew that he wasn't going to tell Jack the truth.

Not the whole truth, anyway. Because the whole truth would hurt, and it suddenly hit Ianto that, whatever reservations the man in front of him might still harbour about his membership of the Torchwood Three team, nevertheless he didn't want to see Jack hurt that way. He'd listened to his stories about travelling with the Doctor, seen the look in his eyes, the tone of his voice. The Doctor that he, Ianto, had just met wasn't the Doctor that Jack knew, the Doctor that was so important to him. That Doctor inspired hope. This one had lost hope, forsaken it.

To be told about this Doctor would utterly destroy the image of the Doctor that Jack held so dear.

So he couldn't tell Jack about this Doctor. He didn't want to be the one to wipe that look from Jack's face. Didn't want to be shot as the messenger. Didn't want to cause Jack the unhappiness that would inevitably result from telling him the truth.

"Couldn't tell you," he said. Which was true. Because he couldn't. He really couldn't. Whatever he did tell Jack was going to need careful – not to say extremely creative – editing. Like some of the other Torchwood files. The ones he didn't think Jack knew that he knew about. The ones classified as 'lost', for various reasons. But Ianto knew they weren't lost. They just weren't – as far as everyone else was concerned – there. Except that he, for one, knew where they were. Because he'd found them. Not on purpose, but he had. Not that he was ever going to tell Jack that...

Ignoring the change of Jack's expression, the slight drop of the shoulders inside the blue RAF greatcoat, he went on, "My PDA went down. So did my phone. That's why you couldn't get through to me. But, like I said – it's been sorted."

"You? By yourself?" Jack raised his eyebrows. "Owen's never gonna believe that. He was sure whatever it was would've got you, not the other way round."

"I don't have any difficulty imagining Owen's views on my ability to cope with a crisis," said Ianto expressionlessly.

Jack cocked an eyebrow at him. "Guess not." Then his face split again into a grin, and he clapped a hand on Ianto's shoulder. "Okay, let's go. You can fill me in back at the Hub."

Don't think so, Jack, Ianto thought to himself. There's too much about what happened today that you wouldn't want to hear. For your sake, this is definitely going to become one of Torchwood's 'lost' files.

But he said nothing. Nor would he. Nobody was ever going to know about his encounter with the Doctor – not unless, one day, he himself decided to tell, of course. So – not very likely, then. He wasn't much of a talker. Everyone knew that...

"Boy, is it hot!" Jack commented gratuitously, as they headed toward their respective vehicles. Pausing with a hand on the door of his SUV, he glanced across at Ianto with a look that Ianto knew very well; he knew exactly what Jack was about to say.

And, yes, he did. "Dry's a bone, Ianto. I could really do with a coffee."

"Of course," said Ianto. "Coffee. Coffee's what I do best, don't you think?"



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