

# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The Snow Woman



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Many years ago, a girl named Haru lived with her uncle Toshiro and aunt Yukari in a small village in the mountains.

She was nine years old when the Snow Woman, Yuki no Onna, the incarnate spirit of winter, descended on them.

She was working in her uncle's paddy fields when she felt a sudden chill on her skin and in her bones. She looked up the mountain, and in the depths of the forest saw a figure surrounded by a thick icy haze. As it came closer, Haru could see that it was a beautiful woman with shimmering white skin and long shiny night-black hair. And where she stepped, the grass became brown and dead, and the air turned to ice.

Haru was a brave girl, but she was not foolhardy. She ran to find her uncle and told him what she had seen.

At first, Toshiro said that she was playing a game. But when he looked in her eyes and saw that she was not, he nodded grimly and told her to wait in their house. Quickly, he gathered the men of the village, and they all went to greet their strange visitor. Through the gap in the door, Haru could see them talk and gesture and shout, though she could not hear what they said. The woman remained still and silent.

Finally, a young farmer named Ichiro, his patience exhausted, took the woman by the shoulder. At first, she ignored him even as he reared back in pain. Then she looked at him with dead eyes and reached out to him with her thin white fingers. As Haru watched in horror, the cold haze grew thick about the man and he screamed and stiffened, glittering snowflakes forming on his face.

Haru couldn't watch any more after that. She slid the door closed and dove into her futon, trying to drive away the memories of what she had witnessed.

Yet she could not forget. The next day, voice trembling, she asked her uncle about Ichiro. He frowned and set his lips in a thin line and did not answer.

So she asked again the next day, and the day after, and the day after.

In time, she learned that Ichiro had frozen solid from the touch of the Yuki no Onna. He was not alone: three of his friends had sought to defend him, but instead only joined him in death. The Snow Woman had continued to stand in the rice field for many hours, still looking around with sad and empty eyes. By the next morning she was there no longer, and the villagers hoped that she had moved on.

She had not. Again and again and again, sometimes after weeks, sometimes after mere days, the Yuki no Onna returned. Each time, the village became a little more frozen

and a little more dead. And each time, the cold spread a little further and stayed a little longer.

A month passed, and then a season, and then another. When winter should have given way to spring, it only grew stronger. When the village should have been preparing for the summer festival, the days were colder and more bitter than the worst winter any of the old people could remember.

And again and again and again, the Yuki no Onna returned.

Some brave or foolish or drunken men tried occasionally to talk to her or to fight her, but these attempts never ended well. Others, more sensible and more scared, began to leave the village, knowing it to be cursed.

Then the strangers arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

They came one dark cool evening in a strange blue temple, wooden but not of wood, which appeared amidst the thundering clamour like nothing Haru had ever heard before.

She was again among the first to see them, and at first, she hid warily behind the big cherry tree in the middle of the village. She saw two very strange foreign men emerge from the temple. The first was old and his face was lined, but his hair was still black, and he brimmed with the energy of youth. He wore strange, shabby, black and white clothing. As she watched, he clapped his hands together in childlike delight and smiled. "Oh, I say! Snow!"

His companion was fresh-faced and boyish, clad in a sort of short kimono of square-patterned fabric. His expression was decidedly less happy. "Och, not again. Can't ye land us somewhere warm for once?"

The older man's face fell in a manner that would have made Haru giggle, if she hadn't been trying so extremely hard to hide. "Now, Jamie," he said, "Don't complain. It's perfectly charming, if you ask me. Picturesque. And not even all *that* cold."

The boy – Jamie – looked down at his bare legs sadly. "Aye, well, it's cold *enough*." Then he glanced around with sudden curiosity, and asked, "Where are we, anyway?"

The older man looked around thoughtfully. "The Far East, judging from the architecture. Probably Japan. Oh, I haven't been here in centuries! Or perhaps I won't be here *for* centuries?" He chuckled at the thought.

"So ye don't know *when* we are, then?" Jamie asked.

"Well, I do have a rough sort of notion," the little man said huffily, "A few centuries before your time, I should think. It's certainly well before the country westernized, and a jolly good thing, too. This is much nicer!"

"Apart from the snow," Jamie pointed out.

"Ah, yes. The snow." The strange little man was suddenly very serious indeed. "That is actually rather odd, now that I think about it."

Jamie frowned in confusion. "What're ye on about, Doctor?"

The man – the Doctor – gestured vaguely up the mountain and asked, "Well, look up there. What do you see?"

"A mountain?" Jamie asked with the uncertain caution of a man trading riddles with a demon.

"Well, yes, of course," the Doctor replied impatiently, "but what's *on* that mountain?"

Jamie shrugged. "Er... trees? Rocks? I dinnae ken what..." Then his eyes widened in realization and he said, "There's no snow."

Now the little Doctor smiled, and again clapped his hands. "Exactly! In fact, there's no snow anywhere off in the distance. Only here, around this village. I wonder why."

“Does it really matter?” asked Jamie. “It’s just snow.”

“Oh, I suppose so. Still...” The little Doctor’s voice trailed off, and he tapped his chin thoughtfully. Finally, he nodded and said, “Just a small sample, I think.” He then pulled a strange transparent urn (probably glass, though Haru had never seen any before and could not be sure) from somewhere in his clothing, knelt down and scooped some snow up off the ground.

“Doctor,” Jamie protested. “It’s just *snow*. Isn’t it?”

The Doctor shrugged. “Perhaps. But it’s odd that it hasn’t melted, isn’t it? I’d like to...”

Suddenly, he paused and began to stare wordlessly off into the distance. Haru felt certain that he was going to say more and approached a touch closer to the two men. But a little snap sounded from beneath her sandal, and she quickly ducked back behind the tree.

After a time, she dared to peek again at the strangers. Jamie was glancing around cautiously and waving a very short, very sharp dagger. “Doctor, something’s watching us.”

They had heard her! And even as she tried to decide whether she should run, the strange little man appeared before her, smiling. “Hello! My friend and I are strangers here; I wonder if you can help us.”

Jamie sighed in relief, “Och, it’s just a wee girl!” Now, Haru began to back away, and the boy added “Doctor, ye’re scaring her!”

The Doctor now looked at her with a pained expression. “I’m sorry, I have been a bit rude, haven’t I? We haven’t even introduced ourselves! I’m the Doctor, and this is Jamie.” He spat his friend’s name out in a curiously annoyed manner that made Haru giggle. The Doctor responded with a fox-like grin that only grew when she remembered her manners enough to introduce herself. “Well, that’s a lovely name! Now, I wonder if... oh, hello!”

Haru was surprised at the interjection, until she looked around and saw that she was no longer alone with the strangers. Her uncle now stood behind her protectively, the other villagers at his back. They glared at the two visitors with mistrust, and threateningly brandished a variety of farming tools. The Doctor merely smiled again and repeated his greeting.

The villagers were not appeased. They grabbed the two strangers and roughly dragged them into one of the houses vacated by those who had fled.

Uncle Toshiro pulled Haru away, and hugged her, and asked whether the strangers had hurt her.

“I’m fine,” she told him. “And I don’t think those men are evil.”

But he did not believe her. “You’re just a child,” he said. “You don’t understand adult things.”

For a time, the suspicious men of the village conferred among themselves. Who were these two visitors? Simple vagabonds or thieves? Perhaps (one man suggested) they were servants of the Yuki no Onna? If so (another said) then could they somehow be used to convince the Snow Woman to depart?

Finally, the men confronted the two strangers. Haru was not supposed to watch, probably, but the others had all but forgotten about her, even while they shooed away their wives and the other children.

Uncle Toshiro took the lead, harshly asking who the two were, and what their business was. The others followed suit, throwing questions and accusations so fast and thick that the Doctor seemed almost to shrink under their weight. Yet soon (and Haru had no idea how this happened), it seemed almost as though the Doctor was in command, and the men of the village were simply answering his questions.

Bit by bit, the visitors learned of the Yuki no Onna. When Uncle Toshiro revealed that Haru was the first to see her, the Doctor smiled at her hiding place and politely asked her to join them. He even politely called her Miss Haru, even though she was only a child and a peasant.

The little man grew ever more serious as the villagers (and Haru) haltingly explained about all that they knew. When they were done, he nodded grimly and said, "I see. Very odd. Very odd indeed. I do believe I should like to meet this lady."

"She will return in time," Uncle Toshiro assured them. "She always returns."

"Yes, Mister Toshiro, but *when*?" asked the Doctor. "You said there was no discernible pattern to her visits. It may take weeks for her to come back. I don't suppose anyone has tried to follow her, to see where she comes from? I think we'd all rather like to know who she is!"

"She is a demon," said Uncle Toshiro with absolute certainty.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. But it sounds to me rather like she's waiting for something, or *someone*. Aren't any of you worried about what shall happen if it arrives?"

The men blanched at the very idea, and Uncle Toshiro nodded.

"Well, then." The Doctor smiled wolfishly. "It seems to me that we shall have to find her. Beard the lioness in her den, as it were."

"What? You wish to go to her?" Uncle Toshiro exclaimed in horror. "We have already suffered enough under her curse without you—"

"Well, you don't want her doing this to your village for the rest of your lives, do you?" the Doctor asked sharply. "And she may be an even greater threat than you know! I can understand your hesitation, of course, but this *needs* to be done. Jamie and I can go by ourselves if you insist, but my mind is entirely made up. And to be quite honest—"

And then the Doctor was himself interrupted, as a frightful hubbub sounded through the thin walls and an icy chill settled in the air.

The little man's eyes glittered with a mix of fear and joy. "Ah. Is that her?"

Uncle Toshiro nodded. "Yes. She comes."

The Doctor rubbed his hands with a peculiar mix of fear and excitement. "Well then, shall we go and greet her?" He put his glass urn inside his clothes and took two steps towards the door. Then he stopped, coughed, and said, "After you, Jamie."

His friend frowned in response, but then drew his little dagger and ventured out. The Doctor and Uncle Toshiro followed him in short order. Haru tried to do the same, but a pointed glance from her uncle stopped her.

Outside (as Haru saw through the half-open door), the Yuki no Onna stood where she always stood, as cold, deathly, and beautiful as ever. Her hands were spread open in front of her as she gazed blankly up at the sky. The villagers congregated near their homes, none daring to approach.

The Doctor shuffled towards the apparition hesitantly, Jamie at his back. When she did not react, he cautiously cleared his throat. "Um, hello... Can you understand me?"

But the Yuki no Onna only stared at him.

"Can you tell me what you're doing here? Whatever it is that you want, I'm sure we can work things out if you just *tell* us. The people on this world are really genuinely nice when you get to know them!"

And still the Yuki no Onna only stared at him.

"And you've put them through an awful fright, you know. They think you've cursed them! I don't suppose you can tell me the *real* reason why you're freezing their little village like this?"



“Och, it’s no good, Doctor,” Jamie interrupted aggressively, his grip on his knife tightening. “She’s not listening.”

“Quiet, Jamie!” The Doctor shrugged his friend away, then turned back to the Snow Woman. “Look, if you can understand what I’m saying at all, then I do hope you *also* understand that if you continue to threaten these people then I shall have to stop you!”

The Doctor grew increasingly agitated as he spoke, but still the Yuki no Onna only stared at him.

Finally, the little man shook his head. “No, I don’t suppose you are listening. I’m not sure you can even understand me.” Suddenly, he turned to face the villagers. “Right, we shall have to drive her away. Mister Toshiro, can you please...”

And then a strange crackling sound came from behind the Doctor. An apprehensive look appeared on his face and slowly, carefully, he turned around.

The Yuki no Onna had moved. She stared with dead eyes at the strange little man, even as he shrank back in a panic. After a second, she took a single stiff step forward, accompanied by a crunching sound that made it seem as though every part of her body was breaking all at once.

“Oh, dear.” The Doctor’s hands quickly flew up into a placating posture as he carefully backed away. “Now, now, don’t let’s be hasty...”

Jamie bravely leapt in front of his friend, slashing forward with his dagger. The villagers mostly held back in fear, though Haru was a little proud to see her uncle tightly gripping a stout rice sickle.

“Do be careful, Jamie!” the Doctor shouted. “Stay away from her! Don’t let her touch you!”

The boy nodded. He swung the knife again quickly, then stepped back nimbly before the Snow Woman could react. At first she all but ignored him, until his dagger actually struck. A surprisingly solid little chunk of flesh came away from her outstretched hand, and she responded by swinging the chipped but unbloodied arm at him violently.

Even as she did so, Uncle Toshiro rushed forward from another direction. “Leave us be!” he cried angrily, hacking away at the Yuki no Onna repeatedly with his sickle. At last, he made an attack so powerful that the sickle stabbed deep into her side and stuck fast. He pulled at it feverishly for a time, until the Snow Woman turned towards him with sudden speed, accompanied by a symphony of loud crackles.

And faster than Haru had ever seen her move, the monster knocked Uncle Toshiro back with a single movement of her uninjured arm. He fell back with a horrifyingly solid thump, his face frozen, literally, in fear and anger.

Jamie ran to kneel at the fallen man’s side even as everyone else stood petrified. Haru distantly heard a scream, but she couldn’t tell whether it came from herself, Aunt Yukari, or someone else entirely.

The Doctor scampered forward and knelt down beside Uncle Toshiro. Haru dared hope that he might be able to help; that was, after all, what doctors were *for*. But the little man only shook his head grimly. “Dead, I’m afraid.” Then he stood up and drew himself up to his full height, which suddenly seemed a lot taller than before. “Now look what you’ve done,” he said sadly to the Yuki no Onna. “You’ve killed this poor fellow! And he was only defending his home. Is this really what you *want*?”

As ever, the Snow Woman made no reply. She merely stared at the Doctor for a moment and then stiffly began to approach him. The little man gulped, and again began to back away. “Ah,” he said under his breath, “Oh dear.”

Jamie again gathered himself to jump to his friend’s defence. But then the Yuki no Onna simply blurred forward with another impossible burst of speed. Before the boy could

even get to his feet, her surprisingly gentle hand lay against the Doctor's cheek. The little man worked his jaw soundlessly, then again muttered, "Oh, dear." He dropped to his knees, pathetically hugging himself for warmth even as Haru could see ice actually forming on his skin.

Haru screamed, closed her eyes, and screamed again. Instantly, she felt ashamed of her childish terror and tried to open her eyes. But she could do nothing other than mourn her uncle and the funny little man with the wise old eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Haru awoke to the sound of someone whispering her name, even though she had not meant to fall asleep. She opened her eyes to see the concerned face of Aunt Yukari. Haru tried to talk about what had happened, but the older woman only shook her head mutely.

After a slight and joyless breakfast, Haru left her aunt to her grief and headed into the village. No one *else* seemed to want to talk to her either, but it also seemed that no one else had fallen to the Yuki no Onna's touch.

She eventually found Uncle Toshiro stretched out in one of the abandoned houses. He was very cold and very dead, and something caught in her throat at the realisation that last night had really happened.

Beside him lay the Doctor, and beside *him* lay a sleeping Jamie. Haru thought that she should probably let him rest, but instead she shook him awake. The boy looked up at her blearily, then sat up with a burst of energy. "How's the Doctor?"

Haru frowned a bit at that. She obviously understood how the boy felt at the loss of his friend, but no one had ever survived the Snow Woman's touch. "He's dead," she said. "Isn't he? He must be!"

"Och, what do you know?" Jamie asked contemptuously. "The Doctor's a tough wee fellow. We've been in worse scrapes than this."

Haru's frown deepened. "Everyone else that the Yuki no Onna ever touched died," she reminded him. "Why should your Doctor be any different?"

"Well... he was moving around for a bit after she got him, wasn't he? Has that ever happened before?"

"Well, no," she admitted. "But he can't be all that strong! Many of the men she's killed were young and strong – in the prime of their lives. Still they all died. And so has your friend."

"Have I really?" asked a sly voice. "Oh, dear."

Haru gasped in surprise. The Doctor *was* alive!

It seemed to take Jamie a few seconds to realize that his friend had spoken, but then he knelt down and helped the older man sit up. "Doctor! You're all right!"

"Yes, of course I am. Why are you so surprised, Jamie? Weren't you just saying... oh, my head!" He clutched his temple and grimaced. "It's like there's lots of little fingers crawling around inside it. And my coat is all messed up too!"

Haru was not entirely certain how he could tell the difference, and Jamie chuckled when she said so.

Yet the conversation soon turned serious. "I don't understand," Haru said, "*how* did you survive? When everyone else..."

"Well, I suppose I'm simply a bit more resilient than your species," he answered glibly. Then he looked at Haru compassionately and said, "Miss Haru, I am sorry about your uncle. He was a brave man."

He was, but Haru had promised herself that she wouldn't cry.

“However,” the Doctor continued after a lengthy silence, “Would you mind terribly if I took a look at him? It may help us understand what we’re up against.”

After Haru nodded, the little man nodded gratefully and then shuffled over to Uncle Toshiro. He pulled a peculiar glass instrument from somewhere in his clothing, then began to poke and prod and hmm at the body from every possible direction, occasionally muttering absent-minded comments that Haru barely understood.

Finally, he sat up again and said, “Yes, I see. There are symptoms of extreme frostbite, even though the poor chap was barely touched. This Snow Woman produces temperatures far lower than are normally found on Earth. Even the eyeballs are still frozen solid. And there is something else unusual about the eyes. Take a look.”

Jamie bent over Uncle Toshiro’s body, holding the little piece of glass awkwardly. “There’s lots of wee little sparkly bits in them.”

Haru took a turn afterwards and was astonished to learn that the Doctor’s little device made things look bigger. “They look like tiny silvery ice crystals!” she said.

“Yes, exactly. Ice crystals. I think your Snow Woman injected something into him to do all this. There’s also a peculiar pattern here.” He pointed at a red-green blotch on Uncle Toshiro’s chest. “That could be the entry point.”

“That’s where he was hit, Doctor.”

“Yes, Jamie, I know! Unfortunately, I can’t tell exactly *what* was injected. I can’t be certain about anything, really, not without the proper laboratory facilities. And they won’t have those here for centuries.”

Haru could just about understand what had happened, even if many of the Doctor’s words confused her. But one big question remained unanswered. “But why did she kill Un... all those people?”

The Doctor stopped to think for a long time. “I don’t know,” he finally said. “She doesn’t seem actively hostile, somehow. She only attacks in self-defence. And yet she’s very much lethal, so... well, who knows? It’s impossible to be certain of anything when we can’t communicate with her!”

“So what now?” Jamie asked.

The Doctor turned to Haru. “I imagine she left after last night?”

“I think she did.”

“Well, then we shall have to track her down, shan’t we? I can’t imagine it’ll be too difficult. Everything she touches seems to freeze solid, so there’ll be a very obvious trail to follow. Now, Miss Haru, perhaps you should...”

He didn’t get to finish the sentence. Before he could *think* of asking her to remain behind, Haru proclaimed with absolute truth that she was going with them.

The two men were easily convinced. True, Jamie did derisively snort that monster hunting was not women’s work, but he gave in as soon as Haru directed her best glare at him. And the Doctor simply shrugged and said, “Oh, very well then.”

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The Snow Woman’s trail was indeed easy to follow: a wide strip of winter wended its way through the summer forest. Jamie and the Doctor were a bit surprised to learn that it *was* summer, which Haru found entirely impossible to understand. “Where have you been, not to know *that*?”

“Oh, around,” said the Doctor.

Haru was trying to figure out how to extract a better answer from the little man when Jamie saw a flash of animal movement off in the distance and the three somehow became diverted into an extended discussion of the local wildlife and spirits.

Haru was halfway through reciting the story of the tanuki, the farmer and the rabbit when the Doctor abruptly shushed her.

She stopped and shivered, for it had suddenly become far colder. When she looked around, she saw that they were approaching the crest of a small tree-covered hill, though the trees had no leaves. She felt a sudden chill in her bare toes and glanced down to find the grass barely visible under a blanket of heavy snow.

The Doctor put a finger to his lips and then pointed off into the distance. Jamie nodded and drew his dagger. Haru nodded too and wished that she had a weapon to draw.

The three walked the few steps up to the top of the hill. None of them were surprised to find the Yuki no Onna there. She lay on the ground like a discarded marionette, looking as cold and perfect as ever, and also a bit sad.

Jamie approached her carefully. The Doctor hung back, looking around with a touch of confusion. "I don't understand it. There's nothing here."

Haru looked at him questioningly. "What do you mean, Doctor?"

"Well, I was rather expecting to find a spaceship or escape pod or something of the sort," he answered, without at all clarifying matters. "She can't have simply floated down all on her own, could she? I don't understand."

He now scampered forward, Haru at his heels. She soon saw that the Yuki no Onna was not of flesh and blood, but rather of seemingly solid ice. Her flesh and kimono (which seemed one and the same) were a translucent white through which Haru could see the faint outline of bones and organs, and what Haru had always taken to be long black hair was actually thousands of incredibly thin black icicles.

"I think I understand," the Doctor said thoughtfully. "She's human. Or at least she was."

"What're ye talking about, Doctor?" Jamie asked. "Just look at her!"

"She's been possessed, Jamie. Something got inside her and turned her into this living ice sculpture. I don't suppose there's really anything human left now. Poor girl."

"It's horrible," Haru decided.

"Yes," the Doctor agreed. "A particularly nasty form of parasitism."

"D'ye know what did it, Doctor?"

"I've no idea, Jamie. Some sort of virus, perhaps. Or a weapon." He shrugged and then wistfully added, "I suppose I shall never find out now. Whatever it is, it's too dangerous to just leave here. We shall have to go back and..."

But an icy crackle broke through the Doctor's speech.

"Doctor," Jamie said slowly, "I think she heard ye."

"Oh dear," the Doctor said warily. "You may be right."

As the three backed away cautiously, a further series of crackles came from the figure lying before them. A touch clumsily, like someone unused to *manoeuvring* the human body (which was precisely what she was, Haru belatedly realized), the Yuki no Onna arose. Slowly but with increasing confidence, she took several shambling, stilted steps towards them. With each, her icy joints popped and reformed.

The Doctor frowned in concentration and then muttered something under his breath. Then, astonishingly, he began shouting at the creature. "Ha! A bit clumsy, aren't we! Not used to the human form even after all these months? That body looks rather the worse for wear too! Practically falling apart!"

Haru wasn't certain that taunting the Yuki no Onna was a clever idea. "I do hope you know what you're doing..."

"Of course I do!" the little man yelled, even as he nimbly dodged away from the oncoming figure.

Soon, Jamie began throwing out insults as well, calling the Snow Woman a witch, a hag and a bean-nighe (whatever that was). Haru immediately decided that she could not let the two men have all the fun and joined in as well. She even threw a few improvised snowballs at it; for some reason, that seemed the thing to do.

After a time, she realized with happy astonishment that the Yuki no Onna was slowing down. Slower and slower she moved until finally she stood completely still, arms and legs halted in mid-motion as though part way through some grotesque dance. Then, without warning, she shattered into thousands of tiny shards.

Jamie instantly let forth a victorious whoop. "You did it, Doctor!" he cried.

But the Doctor looked worried, not proud. "Have I, Jamie?" he asked. "That shouldn't have happened."

"Then why did you do all that?" Haru asked.

"Well, she was hibernating, yes? That was presumably to conserve energy, so I gambled that if I exhausted her, she'd shut down, as it were. I wasn't expecting her to just... fall apart like this!"

"What does it matter, Doctor?" Jamie asked, "We've won, haven't we?"

"Oh, I suppose so, Jamie," the Doctor replied.

As the two men spoke, Haru approached the remnants of the Yuki no Onna. It seemed scarcely possible that the monster that had cursed her village for so long had been so easily defeated. Yet why had its defeat come at the cost of her uncle's life? How would Aunt Yukari survive? Even as such thoughts flitted through her mind, Haru knelt down and poked at a few of the fragments, half expecting them to jump up and attack her. They didn't, of course; they were just ice. Odd ice, certainly, with strange patterns and markings, and still covered with a heavy cold haze, but still just ice.

And yet, the haze seemed to visibly be getting thicker and heavier. Eventually it began to swirl around purposefully. As though it were alive.

"Doctor!" Haru shouted. "Something is happening!"

The little man frowned and took a step towards her. Then his eyes widened in horror, and he cried, "Oh, no! Back away, both of you!"

Haru quickly jumped back, rabbit-like. The cold haze gathered into a misshapen cloud and began to weave around like an old man over-indulging in sake during the New Year.

"I should have realized!" the Doctor added. "It didn't just fall apart. It heard what I said about the state of its body, and so abandoned it!"

Just as he stopped talking, the Doctor had to duck hurriedly to one side as the cloud of ice darted at him with a sudden unearthly burst of speed. It paused afterwards, as though to gather itself, then slowly circled around for another attempt.

For a second, the Doctor looked at it steely-eyed and it, somehow, looked back at him. Then it again flashed forward, but this time the little man had ample time to dodge the quick movement.

Again, the cloud slowed. It sat just off the ground, bobbing up and down, mere feet away from its target. The Doctor in turn stared intensely at it, brow furrowed. After a while, he smiled in delighted realization, clapped his hands, and cried, "Yes, of course!" Then he rose to his feet and began to pat himself up and down, poking hurriedly through every hidden hole in his shabby outfit. "Oh, where *did* I put it?"

The sound of his voice seemingly attracted the cloud's attention. It again charged drunkenly at him, forcing him to abandon his search and jump awkwardly aside. "Can't you two make yourselves useful?" he yelled angrily. "Distract it!"

Haru and Jamie looked at each other in confusion. Then the boy suddenly bent down and picked up a handful of wet snow. It took Haru a second to understand what he was doing, but soon they were both throwing snowballs just as quick as they could.

At first, the cloud ignored the two youngsters and circled around for another attempt at the Doctor. But the first snowball made it hastily break off its flight, and it then became wary. Apparently, the cloud didn't enjoy being pelted with snow now that it was a cloud any more than it had when it was a woman.

Again it tried to circle towards the Doctor, who just blithely stood there. Yet it was now slower and more careful, and a few more snowballs made it retreat. One throw (which Jamie and Haru both afterward claimed as their own) even managed to go right through its heart, causing it to go into a drunken zigzag.

Then without warning, the Doctor straightened up, leapt forward and swung something right through the cloud. "Ha!" he shouted, and then, "Oh, no!" A second and third time his hand flashed, and then he finally relaxed.

"There," he smiled, "Got you!" Triumphant, he held up his little glass urn. Inside was a small, thick cloud of white. He displayed it to Haru and said, "There's the source of your troubles!"

"This cloud... thing?" she asked.

"Not quite. Why don't you take a closer look?"

She nodded and peered at the urn more carefully. At first, she could see nothing tangible within the cloud, but eventually she made out a tiny greyish speck circling the bottom of the container. Looking even closer, she could just make out a pair of glinting wings.

"Some sort of insect?" she asked.

Beside her, Jamie shook his head and snorted. "All this 'cause of a bug?"

The Doctor shook his head, still smiling. "It's not an insect. It's made of metal. And see those faint little sparkles? That's electricity. It's a spaceship!"

Two pairs of eyes widened – Jamie's in surprise, Haru's in confusion.

"It's a sort of palanquin for travelling between worlds, Miss Haru," the Doctor clarified.

"But it's such a wee little thing!" exclaimed Jamie.

"Like time, Jamie, size is relative. I'm sure it's quite big enough for whoever's inside. I think it must have crash-landed here. Then it buried itself in that poor girl for protection and set about sending out a distress signal. That's why it kept going down to the village – no trees to interfere with reception!"

"And the ice...?"

"It probably draws on heat for power. Eats it up, so to speak. It may do something to prevent it all from melting too. I wonder." He tutted and shook his head. "Shame I never did get to look at that snow sample."

"What about... all the people it hurt?" Haru mostly meant Uncle Toshiro, of course, but she found herself quite unable to say his name.

The Doctor sighed sombrely. "I'm not certain, but I think it was trying to communicate, or maybe just to explore. It was sending little probes into anything it comes into contact with... those little specks in your uncle's eyes, remember? It may not have even known that it was hurting anyone."

"How could it *not* know?" Haru asked with a sudden flash of anger.

“It couldn’t talk to anyone, remember? So no one could tell it what it was doing! In any case, people are simply a lot bigger than it is. It may not even have realized they were alive, let alone in pain. If this whole mountain were actually a living thing, Miss Haru, would *you* be able to tell?”

“Perhaps I would not. But it seemed to understand *you*, there at the end.”

“Aye,” Jamie agreed, “Ye said so yourself.”

“Well, I am rather good with languages,” the Doctor shrugged. “I may well have been the first being here it *could* understand! That’s probably why it was so focused on me.” Then his face fell. “Still, if it had kept in contact with me for much longer than it did, I’d have died too. Such a shame.”

“Right,” said Jamie sceptically. “And what now?”

“I should probably repair it. Or at least drop it somewhere where it can signal its friends without freezing anyone to death.”

“But it killed people!” Haru yelled angrily.

The Doctor looked at her sadly. “I know. But I don’t think it meant to. Still, you could always just smash it to pieces, if you want.”

He held the glass urn out to her. She looked at it for a long time, and then shook her head.

\* \* \* \* \*

They found the villagers gathered, awaiting their return. The Doctor greeted them cheerily, though he and Jamie both seemed ill at ease. Even Haru sensed that the people could easily turn on them, if anyone said, did, or thought the wrong thing.

But then Aunt Yukari rushed out of the crowd and hugged Haru fiercely. With relief she cried, “I was so worried! I am glad that you are all right!” That seemed to release the other villagers from their dark mood, and soon all were laughing and joyful.

Bit by bit, Haru explained what had happened. Or rather, she explained simply that the Doctor had driven off the Yuki no Onna, never to return; for she knew that tales of palanquins from the stars would only confuse people.

Indeed, she could see that her neighbours doubted even the very few details that she could tell them. Already they whispered among themselves, “Can the Yuki no Onna *truly* be gone?” She felt sure that soon one of them would say that as a mere child (and an excitable one, at that) she could not possibly know the truth of things.

So she turned away from the crowd and cried, “Doctor! Tell them!”

There was no answer. She looked around in confusion but could not see the Doctor or Jamie anywhere. Then, off in the distance, she heard a howling clamorous noise. It took her a moment to recognize the sound, then she ran full pelt to the big cherry tree in the centre of the village.

But there was nothing there. The strangers had gone.

## Also From The Doctor Who Project

### **FURY UNCHAINED** by John Swagger

Once, rigs like Rig Delta Seven One could be found all over the northern expanses of the Pacific Ocean, drilling for oil and lining the pockets of the Delta Petroleum company. In these more enlightened times, they sit empty and purposeless, to be carefully decommissioned by Professor Caroline McAllistie and her team of experts so they can do more damage. Caroline believes her greatest challenges are from her corporate-minded colleague Leo Kwouk, who would prefer the rig to be swallowed into the sea and who fears the reprisals of the extreme environmentalist organizations in the area. But then Caroline finds the body of a fisherman, his flesh enveloped in seaweed and apparently merging with it to create a new and terrifying lifeform. Also on the scene is a mysterious beachcomber called the Doctor. The Doctor has come prepared. He knows this seaweed is a manifestation of a foe he defeated long ago—but whose origin and purpose he has come to understand more deeply in the intervening lifetimes.

However, another malefactor lurks in the background, who intends to unleash the Fury purely to enjoy the chaos it will wreak on Earth.

### **FROZEN ASSETS** by James Kyle

It is shortly after the TARDIS has left the Great Fire of London, and Adric is only feeling more dejected and isolated from his fellow travellers. Arriving on an ice planet, the Doctor decides to take Adric's mind off his malaise by investigating a secret tunnel. Before long, they are trapped inside and at the mercy of not one but two of the Doctor's deadliest foes, working together to pull off an unlikely heist. Meanwhile, Nyssa and Tegan attempt to move the TARDIS to help them but only fall afoul of other visitors to this world.

### **THE BLACK SHIPS** by David N. Smith

Japan, 1853. An important milestone in the history of both Japan and the United States. The TARDIS has arrived on a beautiful Pacific beach, but the Second Doctor, Ben and Polly are about to be reminded that during their adventures through history, such tranquil locations can be far from safe. Jamie is the first to see Samurai.

Sometimes, just arriving somewhere, can be a crime punishable by death...

### **THE UNRAVELLING** by Selim Ulig

Strange things are happening. Earth tremors and changes in the properties of material and light itself. To top it all off, alien creatures are attacking UNIT HQ. Can the Doctor identify who's behind this before the Earth is destroyed?







“For a time, the suspicious men of the village conferred among themselves. Who were these two visitors? Simple vagabonds or thieves? Perhaps (one man suggested) they were servants of the Yuki no Onna?”

Medieval Japan.

Haru's sleepy little village is under siege by the legendary Yuki no Onna, the incarnate spirit of winter—even though it should be the height of summer. Is the scruffy little man from the strange blue temple really their only hope?



This story features the Second Doctor as played by Patrick Troughton

