

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

A CHRISTMAS STORY



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Published by Jigsaw Publications/The Doctor Who Project
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Published December 2007

A Christmas Story
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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

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Typeset in Century Schoolbook

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Trees *see* things, you know. Oh, they may not have eyes like you and me, but mark my words they can still see – drinking in sights through their great green canopies just as their gnarled, twisted roots drink in the moisture of the soil. But trees are not so very different from people (although you’d find yourself hard pressed to find a tree that would admit as much!) and while some are very observant, others see little but what is right in front of them.

For instance, there was once an oak. He lived a long time ago, if your point of reference is the span of an average human life, or not so very long ago if you think in terms of the age of the universe. But that is not overly important. A fine old oak he was, tall and proud, but he rarely saw beyond his (metaphorical) nose and cared little for the world outside the little knoll on which he stood. Now one day he saw a person, which was not something he had seen for a good long while as he was quite out of the way. This particular person was a young man in his late twenties, or perhaps his very early thirties, who appeared to be walking along in rather an absent-minded fashion, his brain seemingly otherwise occupied. He was dressed in the attire of a member of the middle-classes – a lawyer, perhaps, or a faintly successful artist of some sort – and his long, mousy brown hair bobbed up and down as he went. Now, had this old oak taken any kind of interest in literary matters it might have recognised this young, earnest face.

But alas! Trees may be able to see but reading remains beyond them for they have neither the cognitive abilities to decipher language nor the hands which are such an essential part of the process. And so the oak failed to recognise the young man, and indeed it determined that it was going to play a trick on him. Not a *particularly* violent trick - for the oak was not entirely malicious - but it certainly planned to trip him with one of its roots, or perhaps crack him about the head with one of its thicker branches. “Yes”, thought the oak. “I shall make fine sport of this young popinjay.”

And then, with the young man still a good many yards away, the oak exploded.

Now, it would be unfair of me to suggest that the oak’s unobservant nature was *directly* to blame for it being the victim of such an outrage. Because, being a tree and therefore somewhat lacking in mobility, it could hardly have moved even if it *had* noticed that a small but fast-moving piece of space debris was hurtling toward its knoll. But the fact remains that had it been a little more aware of what was going on around it, the oak might have at least had a few seconds to offer up a fervent prayer to whatever deity trees choose to worship. As it was, however, he was simply a fine old oak one minute and a pile of matchwood the next.

But there we must leave behind this talk of trees, for our story is concerned with the young man, and not the oak who is merely a peripheral character in a frankly rather inconsequential tale. Nevertheless, I tell the story because it was a *very* fine old oak - and not all bad despite its tricky nature - and also to act as a warning that the next time you suspect a tree of trying to trip you up it probably was and should be shunned in future.

Now, as the tree exploded our young man was thrown to the ground and sustained a painful, albeit not overly serious, knock to the head which rendered him unconscious for a number of minutes. On waking and discovering, to his very genuine relief, that he was still the proud bearer of four functioning limbs, he crept toward the smoking crater where the oak had stood. Peering over the edge, he saw that at the centre of the crater lay an object, something he had never seen before. It was spherical and about the size of a cricket ball. Beyond that he could tell little, except that it seemed to be metallic.

“Now,” he thought to himself, “What is such an object doing here, and how is it that it has caused such a lot of damage? I should think that this warrants investigation from the scientific community, and since they are not here to examine the article I suppose someone will have retrieved it and take it to them.”

Now I will tell you plainly that courage, at least in the face of physical danger, was not what this fellow was known for. It did not come naturally to him, and yet an overwhelming sense of curiosity was welling up in his young mind, and after a moment’s thought he had determined that he would climb down into the crater and fetch the object. Of course, getting into the crater was only half the story. When he had done so, with much flailing of limbs and not a little profanity, he wrapped the artefact in his handkerchief, slipped it into his pocket and proceeded to attempt to climb out. It was only then that he realised how high and steep the sides of the crater were.

Almost an hour later, as the last golden shafts of sunlight were beginning to fade, a filthy and dishevelled young man emerged panting from the hole and collapsed in a very untidy pile. After taking a moment to recover from his exertions, he slid the mysterious artefact from his pocket and turned it over curiously in his hands. It was indeed metallic, but what metal he did not know. It was far too smooth and shiny for iron, he supposed. It radiated warmth, too – not intense heat, as one would expect given that it had recently travelled through space, but the reassuring warmth of human body temperature. However, nothing about the sphere perturbed him half so much as the tingling sensation which he felt all through his body when he held it. The man remembered being in church as a child, when he first felt the spirit of God alive within him. Holding this sphere, he was experiencing a disturbingly similar sensation. A little afraid now of his discovery he half considered putting it back, but instead he smiled to himself at the notion that this small artefact could be in any way dangerous. Slipping the sphere back into his pocket, he set off again in the direction of the coaching inn where he was staying.

It was almost completely dark when he found his way out of the maze of winding hedgerows and back to the warm, inviting comfort of the inn, where he intended to eat a light supper before heading directly to bed. Suddenly, he heard a voice cry out: “Sir! Sir!”

It was Humbert, the inn’s proprietor. The young man groaned inwardly at the sight of the corpulent hotelier running up the road to greet him, apron strings flapping in the wind and his face looking like it was about to burst in a most unseemly fashion. “Hello Humbert!” he cried out.

Humbert eventually managed to overcome his considerable momentum and came to a halt shortly before he barrelled into the slender frame of our young hero. “Sir!” he panted. “I was just about to send out a search party. You’re so late back! And look at you, all covered in mud and filth!” He attempted to beat the dirt out of the shirt with his bear-like hands, much to its occupant’s displeasure. “So,” asked Humbert as he did this, “did you find anything useful for your book, sir?”

“Possibly,” came the reply. “But I am hungry and tired, Humbert, and I should very much like to get to bed with some supper in me. My train leaves for London at six o’ clock in the morning, you know.”

“Well then get yourself inside, young sir,” replied Humbert. “We’ll take good care of you. After all, it’s not so often we have as exalted a guest as your good self staying at our little place, you know.”

At this the young man smiled and allowed himself to be led into the rustic comforts of Alfred Humbert’s not altogether unpleasant establishment.

“Where *are* we?” asked Silver impatiently, staring at the small monitor on the TARDIS console. She could make out little but inky blackness interspersed with tiny points of flickering light. It did not instil confidence.

“It’s a surprise!” answered the Doctor’s voice faintly from the direction of the ship’s vast walk-in wardrobe. “But I’d wrap up warm if I were you!”

Silver nestled deep into the lining of her thick jacket and smiled. “I’m way ahead of you there!” she called out. “It doesn’t exactly look tropical out there.”

“And so it might not,” came the reply from directly behind her. Surprised, she spun around to see the Doctor’s face beaming at her from beneath a tall stovepipe hat. He was wearing his best formal outfit and carrying a smart looking silver-topped cane, with which he was gesturing happily toward the doors. “Go on,” he smiled. “Take a look.”

Cautiously, Silver crossed to the doors and, opening one a crack, took a tentative peek through it. Disappointed, she looked back at the Doctor. “I hate to burst your bubble...” she began. “But why have you brought me to a... slum?”

“What?” sighed the Doctor, grasping the door and peering through for himself. It certainly did look like a slum – half the gas lamps in the street remained unlit, bodies in various stages of drunkenness littered the cobbled floor (many still clutching their bottles of cheap, greasy gin) and as far as the eye could see their stretched squalid, rundown housing which appeared overcrowded and filthy.

“Well now hang it all!” exclaimed the Doctor. He returned to the control console and began examining various readouts. “Hmmm...” he said at length. “It seems we’ve only missed our target by a few hundred yards. There’s no point in drawing further attention to ourselves, so I suppose walking would be the best option.” He returned to the door and flung it open in a futile display of mock-theatricality. “Well, anyway... here we are. December the twenty-fourth, in the year eighteen hundred and forty-two. London, to be precise.”

“London at Christmas?” laughed Silver. “You know, Paris is more romantic.”

The Doctor harrumphed. “As it happens we’re not here for... ‘Romance’. We’re here to meet an old friend of mine, someone who I’m afraid I’ve been rather lax with of late.”

“And who is this friend?” sighed Silver.

The Doctor smiled at her. “That’s part of the surprise,” he chuckled.

The smell was atrocious - it hit Silver’s nostrils with the violence of a particularly feculent freight train. Sweat mingled with cheap alcohol, a dash of vomit and a soupcon of rotting vegetable matter seemed to be the recipe. She looked around warily and shivered. “Nice one, Doctor,” she whispered through gritted teeth. “It’s not even snowing! Some Victorian Christmas in London, have you never *seen* ‘A Christmas Carol?’”

The Doctor smiled and tucked the TARDIS key safely in his jacket pocket. “Of course I have. And whilst I admit the lack of snow is disappointing I think I can promise you that you’ll enjoy our trip nonetheless.”

Silver looked around in disgust. “Well, I can only hope it improves.”

The Doctor regarded her sadly for a moment before he spoke again. “Silver, these people are human beings just like you. There’s precious little pity for their plight amongst the upper classes, I would have thought you could muster some. After all, it *is* Christmas.”

With that the Doctor strode off jauntily down the alley, stopping only momentarily to deposit a shiny silver coin into the begging bowl of an elderly man, who would undoubtedly

have been more grateful had he not put the appearance of these two strange people and their blue box down to the quite heroic quantities of gin that he had been consuming at a steady rate throughout the day.

It was only a matter of minutes before the Doctor and Silver were back in a more desirable area of the city, the gas lamps blazing away merrily while several well-heeled young couples were taking a turn in the crisp early-evening air. Silver's modern dress attracted a few stares, but thanks to the Doctor's (at the time cryptic) suggestion that she wear an ankle-length skirt and avoid any tops cut too low, she avoided appearing *too* scandalous.

After a few moments more, the Doctor came to a halt outside a very well-to-do residence with a large, imposing black door and a fearsome knocker in the shape of a lion's head. Ignoring it, the Doctor rapped sharply on the door with his cane. He smiled warmly at Silver. "Just wait until you see who it is!" he chortled.

But when the door was opened, Silver did not recognise the well-dressed young man standing there at all. He was certainly a good looking guy, she supposed, but where the Hell she was supposed to know him from she had no idea. He certainly seemed to recognise the Doctor though, for the two men embraced each other warmly. "Doctor Smith!" cried the young man. "Why, it's been so long since I've seen you, or any of those relatives of yours!" This and many more greetings were exchanged before the mysterious young man finally noticed that his friend was not alone. Swiping away a lock of blonde hair from his eyes, he proffered his hand and said to the Doctor, "Who is this delightful creature you have brought to see me?"

"This," intoned the Doctor, "is my good friend and current travelling companion, Miss Rachel Silverstein, or Silver as she prefers. Silver, may I introduce you to Mr. Charles Dickens!"

Silver's jaw dropped as the young man pumped her arm up and down vigorously. She worked on mentally aging him, adding first a greying goatee and then a receding hairline. When she had finished, she had to admit that he certainly did look like the guy on the inside cover of the battered copy of Martin Chuzzlewit she'd been forced to study in seventh grade English class. She suddenly realised that she had been staring silently at Dickens for almost a whole minute. "It's... great to meet you, Mr Dickens!" she grinned, cringing internally at the lameness of her greeting.

But Dickens seemed not to have noticed her befuddlement. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "A colonial accent, eh? I've only recently arrived back from there myself, you know. A reading tour. Most exciting. Very pleased to meet you, Miss Silverstein, I mean Silver."

Finally he relaxed his grip. Silver breathed an inward sigh of relief, feeling that she had somehow survived an ordeal. She glared wolfishly at the Doctor. The Time Lord said nothing, but grinned boyishly at her, slipped off his hat and entered the home of Mr. Charles Dickens.

Inside the house was large and luxurious, but also rather devoid of life. It was decorated in what Silver took to be the cutting-edge fashion of the day and was certainly comfortable, but prior to their arrival it seemed there were no occupants but Dickens himself. For this, Dickens apologised and explained that his wife was spending Christmas in the country with family, and the servants had been given this night and the next off. He was somewhat

subdued as he explained all of this, and the boyish charms he had exhibited on the doorstep seemed suddenly to have ebbed away. The Doctor and Silver listened politely, nodding at the appropriate moments, but it soon became clear to both of them that some great melancholy had suddenly descended upon Charles Dickens. Or, perhaps, the melancholy had been there all along, and had been only temporarily lifted by the sudden and unexpected appearance of an old friend. Silver looked askance at the Doctor, but her companion's eyes were fixed on Dickens, full of curiosity and wonder.

After an hour of small talk and one or two small glasses of sherry, however, Dickens' mood lightened again. His cook, he explained, had visited that afternoon and prepared supper. There was more than enough for the three of them, though it was only a small selection of cold meats. Nevertheless, the Doctor accepted his invitation gratefully, and so Silver and the Doctor came to be sitting around the dining table of Charles Dickens that Christmas Eve.

At first they ate in silence, but after a while Dickens put down his knife and fork and made a half-hearted stab at conversation. "You really must thank the young Doctor for me" he said, shakily. "You know the cricket match in my first novel was his idea. 'Charles', he told me, 'you simply must put *cricket* in there somewhere'. He was right of course."

The Doctor grunted noncommittally. For a little while longer, the meal continued in silence. Silver could no longer bear it, and was on the verge of saying something herself, when the Doctor finally chirped up.

"My dear Charles," he said, mopping his lips expressively with a napkin, "it has been wonderful to catch up with you after all this while, but I'm afraid time has rather caught me up. Miss Silverstein and I must be leaving shortly."

Dickens slumped in his chair, a look of utter defeat etched upon his face. "Are you sure you won't stay for one night, Doctor?" he asked, trying and failing to make it sound as if he did not care much either way. "It's really no bother at all, you know."

The Doctor's eyes narrowed as he stared intently at his friend. "Come along, Charles," he said at last. "I know when something is troubling you. You are, if you will excuse the pun, something of an open book."

Dickens shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "My dear fellow," he frowned, "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about." So saying, he poured another large sherry and swallowed it in a single slug.

The Doctor smiled brightly. "Ah, well that's settled then. I must have been mistaken all along. Come along then Silver, if you'd like to fetch our coats from the hall then we'll be off."

Panic was now visibly clutching Dickens. He looked pleadingly from the Doctor to Silver and back again. Finally, with a look of acceptance, he sighed and said "Well, Doctor, I suppose the game is up. I always knew it was a fruitless pursuit, keeping secrets from a Smith. You're all so clever and insightful. Please, come through to the drawing room and I shall tell you everything."

And now, for a moment, we must leave behind this homely scene, and journey upward toward the heavens. There, beyond the Earth's atmosphere, drifted a ship.

It was not a large ship, but nor was it small. In fact its dimensions seemed to shift subtly the more that one stared at it, as did its shape – though most of the time it was perfectly spherical, and missing any visible entrances, windows or even engines. As it happens it did not require engines, for this was a Tele-Ship and was powered by thought

alone - materialising almost instantly in whatever location the ship's telepathic navigator concentrated their mind upon. Alas, the mental strain was considerable and any telepath working in this capacity was likely to spend (on average) ninety-six percent of their commission in a state of near-catatonia, unable to do anything but pilot the crew around. For this reason, any telepath signing a standard ten-year contract could expect to receive seventeen trillion credits by way of compensation. It was an admirable sum, and one that had tempted Serendipity Brown to throw in her lot with Magnus Khan and his crew.

As the ship drifted lazily in its orbit, Serendipity sat strapped into the navigator's chair, her brain connected to the ship's computer by means of several meters of wire and cables. A drip was inserted inexpertly into her left arm to keep her fed and an antiquated sprinkler system hung overhead which sprayed out soapy water at odd intervals in an effort to keep her naked body clean. Strangest of all, in front of her was a tray containing a good deal of soil and a single red rose. You see, the mental state attained by telepaths during their time onboard ship meant that they were more often than not in no position to follow direct orders relating to their course. It was the job of the captain, therefore, to find sensory stimulants which would unconsciously guide the navigator to their destination. It was not always a successful process – in the past Captain Khan had purchased what he believed to have been a bottle of Peladonian rum, only to find that its pungent contents led Rona instead to a small planet inhabited mainly by extremely libidinous giant female insects. Khan always shuddered at the thought of how he had had to suffer at their mandibles before they would let him and his ship leave. Still, he supposed, at least they were not the kind of giant female insects who celebrated the act by ritually decapitating the other party.

This time, however, Khan was delighted to see from the ship's computer that Serendipity had led him straight and true to his desired destination. The low light of the computer display lent his handsome, moustachioed face a slightly sinister aspect as he smiled and offered up fervent thanks that the outworld trader who had sold him the rose had not been as crooked as some of his competitors had proved down the years. Another glance at the tracking systems confirmed that he was within touching distance of Earth, and his prize.

Khan swept gleefully from the dark, cramped bridge and headed off in the direction of the cargo hold.

In the drawing room of the Dickens household the fire crackled away merrily beside a particularly large Christmas tree, festooned with gifts and candles. The scene and the sight of Dickens himself, however, were almost comically mismatched. Now that the time came for the celebrated author to tell the Doctor his story he seemed reluctant to do so, and he swirled his brandy around within its fine crystal tumbler as he tried to think of how to start.

Eventually, he looked up. "I suppose," he said, "that I should begin at the beginning."

The Doctor smiled. "An admirable idea," he said kindly. "And when you get to the end, stop."

That forced the trace of a smile from Dickens. The two men each took a large slug of the potent liquid while Silver looked on longingly, nursing her own glass of tonic water.

"It's just that, if I tell you everything I'm afraid you may think me a suitable case for Bedlam," sighed Dickens. "I know I'm beginning to. I told you that my household were all away for the holidays?" - The Doctor nodded - "Well, I'm afraid it isn't quite true. I... I sent

them away. Something is coming, Doctor. I don't know what, but I have an intense feeling that something is coming... for me."

"My dear fellow!" snorted the Doctor. "Why should you think that?"

Dickens set down his glass and looked intently at his old friend. "Oh, Doctor Smith," he said, "If it were anyone else I should not speak of it, but I have a sense that you may be able to help me in a way that no other man can."

So saying, Dickens crossed to a heavy mahogany sideboard, produced a small key from his pocket and opened it. From within, he produced a rosewood box held shut with a steel clasp. He placed this upon the table, and both Silver and the Doctor leaned in eagerly.

"And now, Doctor," said Dickens theatrically, "You shall see the source of my agitation!"

Dickens flung open the box and Silver had to stifle a laugh at the sight of a small, harmless looking sphere within. The Doctor, however, seemed markedly less amused. He picked up the sphere, but dropped it just as quickly with a slight yelp.

"What is it?" Silver asked, suddenly concerned.

The Doctor sucked his fingers thoughtfully. "I don't know," he said, "Whatever it is it contains an enormous build-up of energy. It's *hot* – almost white hot."

"And yet," interjected Dickens, "the lining of the box is neither scorched nor burned."

The Doctor produced a pen from his breast pocket and poked at the artefact. "Fascinating..." he whispered. "Where on Earth did you find it, Charles?"

"It was last year," Dickens sighed, easing back into his armchair and taking up his drink. "I was out in the country, researching my last book, Barnaby Rudge. It... it fell from the sky."

"Did it indeed?" asked the Doctor absent-mindedly.

Silver piped up. "Why didn't you show it to anyone?"

Dickens looked up at her, eyes full of fear. "I wish to God that I had, Miss Silver. I meant to show it to some scientist friends of mine, but when I got it home I never seemed to find the time. To be completely honest I put it in that sideboard and forgot about it. I had books to write, tours to undertake..." he looked sadly at the thing on his table. "That is, until a week ago when I woke up to find the house full of whispering. I thought I had burglars at first, so I picked up a poker and came downstairs. It was then that I realised there was no one else in the house. What I could hear was coming from the sideboard. I remembered the sphere and took it out, but as the Doctor has discovered it was so hot I could not handle it. But it... sang to me. I knew then that someone was coming for it. It was calling out to its master."

"So why didn't you get rid of it then?" asked Silver.

"And condemn someone else to my fate? I couldn't. All I could do was remove the other members of my household from harm's way and wait until... *they* came."

Silver poked the Doctor in his ribs with a finger. "So... *what is it?*" she asked.

The Doctor looked up. "Like I said, I don't know," he admitted. "I will say candidly that this metal isn't found on Earth. Whatever it is, it's alien."

"So what are we going to do?"

The Doctor grinned first at Silver and then at Dickens. "Well, I don't know about you two but I'm going to bed."

Khan stalked the metal lattice of the ship's walkways like a tiger. He eyed the three cryogenic units before him and considered which of his crewmen might be best suited to this particular mission.

Eventually, he made his choice and threw a large switch beside the door marked "Aenis". From within the chamber, a dull glow emerged. With a smile, Khan crossed to a complex-looking set of controls at the far end of the chamber and fired up the transmat.

With a sigh, Silver lay down on the bed of the guest room as the Doctor kneeled against the wall, a glass to his ear.

"You didn't have to tell him we'd be sharing a room, you know," she said. "What must Mr. Dickens be thinking?"

The Doctor shushed her with a gesture. "If he's attacked in the night," he said at length, "I'd prefer you to be close at hand. I don't want to have to be running all over the house looking for you."

Silver sighed and nestled her head deeper into the sumptuous pillows. "Who says he's going to be attacked anyway?" she asked. "It's only a *ball* for God's sake. It's hardly worth attacking anyone over."

The Doctor looked agitated. "Sometimes the smallest things can cause the gravest problems. I remember once I was in medieval Italy when I heard of seven people being murdered over a *book* of all things. Aristotle's second book of Poetics, I believe."

Silver screwed up her face in surprise. "Seven people killed over a book? You're kidding, right?"

"No," came the answer. "But Aristotle was. In fact if I recall, that was the cause of all the trouble." With that, the Doctor resumed his listening.

Charles Dickens was lost in a dream world of exploding trees and balls of evil. Despite the less than summery weather, his sheets were soaked in sweat and tangled messily around his wiry form.

He heard a light footfall.

The sound had come from within the room. Dickens' eyes snapped open in horror, and he sat up in bed, his back instinctively pressed to the wall. Through the thick curtains that surrounded his four-poster, he could make out a faint but unmistakable glow.

Suddenly, the curtain twitched.

"I wish I'd asked him for a key to his room," said the Doctor as he laid out his selection of lock picks on the bed and examined each in turn. "I'm a little out of practice using these."

"So why didn't you?" Silver asked, sleepily.

"Because I didn't want to worry him unduly. His nerves are nearly shot as it is - I wanted him to think everything's going to be just fine and dandy."

"It's not though, is it? I mean, it never is where you're involved."

The Doctor looked a little hurt. "Well," he said at last, "I really don't know yet what we're dealing with. It may well be nothing. All the same, I'd like to think I can get in there quickly should the occasion demand it."

With a sigh, the Doctor tossed the tools back onto the bed and cupped his chin in his hands. “Maybe when we get back to the TARDIS I’ll build myself a new sonic screwdriver,” he said.

“A what?” Silver asked.

“Sonic screwdriver. It’s just a little tool I used to have for opening locked doors and so forth.” Warming to the topic, he sat down on the end of the bed. “Last time I was on Gallifrey, they were selling this new model. It can do everything from operating a TARDIS to reattaching barbed wire and even tapping into an absorption matrix.”

Silver, who realised her chances of getting any sleep that night was looking increasingly remote, looked up. “Well, why don’t you just get one of those then?”

The Doctor again sighed deeply. “I don’t know,” he said sadly. “It just seems like it would take all the excitement out of life.”

Silver collapsed back onto the bed.

Seconds later, a piercing scream resounded through the house.

The Doctor and Silver burst into the corridor, the Doctor holding aloft a candle. Swiftly they hurried along to Dickens’ door, and the Doctor, stooping, attempted to pick the lock. By an interesting combination of ill-luck and sheer clumsiness, he managed instead to burn himself with the candle and drop his lock picks. Another scream tore through the night, and as the Doctor scabbled in the dark for his tools, Silver sighed and put her shoulder to the door. It was a solid example of the carpenter’s art, but the same could not be said for the lock which buckled and broke with just a couple of hearty shoves from Silver. As it did so, a golden glow flooded into the corridor. Silver burst into the room, her arm raised to protect her eyes from the glare, and the Doctor followed a step behind her.

What they saw stopped them both in their tracks.

Beside Dickens’ bed, there was a monster. The most beautiful monster either of them had ever seen. Long, lustrous golden hair fell over its shoulders which - along with the rest of its body - were draped in a cloak of what looked like spun gold. It was impossibly thin, yet it still appeared perfectly proportioned and its face was bathed in light, so that only its large, sad eyes and thin slash of a mouth were clearly visible. But most notable of all was the top of its head, from which there rose *flames* - and this was the source of the ghostly light which gave the creature its radiant appearance. The only thing that did not appear to belong was a small silver item strapped to the creature’s wrist. It looked like the kind of old-fashioned watch that Silver’s father used to wear.

With an almighty effort, Silver managed to tear her attention away from this being, and looked down at the bed. Dickens appeared to have retreated under the covers, from whence emanated a whimpering noise.

Suddenly the creature raised its finger in a threatening gesture toward the quivering lump under the bedclothes that was Dickens.

Silver was never sure why she did what she did next. In years to come she would think long and hard about it, but it was simply one of those acts of extreme bravery and stupidity which defy any kind of logical analysis away from the heat of the moment in which they are performed. But the bald facts are these – Silver charged at the being, flung herself bodily at it and, due to a miscalculation of the weight of the thing or possibly a misunderstanding of the effects of momentum, the pair went crashing through the window.

The Doctor stared open-mouthed at this act of reckless defenestration, grimacing as something hit the ground three floors below with a dull thud. Dickens threw the covers

from his head and clambered unsteadily from his bed. With a horrified glance at the Doctor, he peered over the edge before gesturing the Doctor over to see.

After a moment, the Doctor moved over to Dickens' side and glanced down. Below, in an empty street now covered in shattered glass, there lay the creature, seemingly immobilised. Clinging to the window ledge by her fingertips just inches below them dangled an unhappy looking Silver. "Which one of you big, strong boys is going to pull me up then?" she asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

With much puffing and panting, Silver was pulled back into the room. As she dusted herself off, the Doctor looked down again into the street. The broken glass was still there – the body of the creature was not. "Do you have another way out beside the front door?" he asked Dickens.

Ten minutes later, three figures were running swiftly through the maze of alleyways between the Dickens homestead and the TARDIS. "Why are we running again?" asked Silver, after swallowing another lungful of smoggy London air.

The Doctor quickened his pace. "We have to get back to the TARDIS!" he yelled. "A tactical retreat. I can't see how we could fight that creature back at the house, I need to think!"

Moments later, they were at the door of the time machine. Handing the artefact (which he had hastily grabbed in their flight) to Silver, the Doctor hurriedly produced the key and threw open the door. He cast an apologetic glance at the confused looking Dickens. "Err... I think you ought to prepare yourself for a shock."

We shall forego the explanation of Charles Dickens' reaction to the TARDIS interior. Suffice to say there was much confusion, followed by a spell of fainting.

Later, as Charles recovered in an armchair, Silver hovered impatiently while the Doctor probed at the artefact with potentiometers, voltmeters and other machines which she did not recognise. "Any luck?" she asked after a while.

With a sigh, the Doctor put down his equipment. "I'm afraid not," he said sadly. "It's not like any piece of technology I've ever seen. I can't for the life of me work out what it does or why our friend wants it so badly."

He went back to his work, whilst Silver continued to watch. Suddenly, she became ominously aware of movement on the TARDIS monitor. Fascinated and terrified, she watched as a flaming figure slowly made its way down the alley before stopping at the TARDIS and – and this is what *really* freaked Silver out – sniffing the air.

"Doctor," she said, as calmly as she could manage.

"What? Can't it wait? I'm busy!" came the reply.

Silver shuddered as the creature began to pound on the double doors, its fists erupting into flames. A rhythmic thumping began to echo around the console room. At last the Doctor looked up from his work and registered what was going on. Silver gulped, while Charles looked on, aghast. Finally the Doctor said, "No. It can't wait, can it?"

"But it can't break through the doors, surely?" Silver squealed, almost hysterical. "You told me the TARDIS was impregnable!"

"It is! Sort of," the Doctor replied.

"What do you mean, 'sort of?'"

“You have to understand what we’re dealing with here,” replied the Doctor, his finger stabbing in the direction of the door. “That,” he cried, “is an Eisonis!”

“A what?” said Dickens and Silver in unison.

“A Eisonis, from the planet Eison. They’re... well, let’s just say they’re rather powerful beings. They’re incredibly intelligent and have immense strength. Possibly, given time, even enough to break into a TARDIS.”

“They must have some kind of weakness!” yelled Silver.

“They do!” the Doctor shouted back. It was becoming almost impossible to be heard over the constant pounding noise. “Their energy is drawn from the flames, if they’re extinguished then the Eisonis becomes powerless. But we’ll never get close enough before we’re killed!”

With that, the pair heard a crash and turned to see Dickens again lying prone on the floor. Suddenly, with an ominous groaning, the time rotor began to move slowly up and down. The Doctor scurried hurriedly over to the console and began jabbing at buttons and examining readouts. “I don’t believe it,” he said. “He must have hit the randomiser as he went down.”

“The *what?*” Silver asked, confused.

“It’s a device for randomly selecting destinations. I used it for a while once when I was in a spot of bother but it hasn’t been activated for years. I don’t even know if it still works properly!”

The groaning became more intense. Just as the creature on the viewscreen faded from view, Silver could have sworn she saw it aim a spiteful kick at the disappearing TARDIS.

Silver chewed her lip, nervously. “It seems to be working, right?” she asked after a while.

The Doctor looked up, worry written across his face. “I hope so,” he said earnestly, “So far it seems okay, but if there’s the slightest malfunction it could materialise us inside a star, or out in deep space. I have no control at all over where we’re going to end up!”

Still standing in the alleyway, the Eisonis relayed its report telepathically to the ship orbiting thousands of miles above. Then it waited as the ship’s computers deciphered its message and delivered it to the Captain, who stabbed a button on the communications console.

“Temporal displacement?” he asked, incredulously. “That’s impossible. This is listed as an E-grade civilisation, they don’t have that kind of technology!”

More words appeared on the screen in front of Khan. He blinked and read them again. “A Time Lord, here? What the Hell is going on?”

Khan stroked his impeccably groomed moustache as he pondered the situation. Eventually he leaned forward and jabbed again at the button. “That artefact is too precious to lose,” he said sniffily. “I’ll put a trace on the machine and fire up the time corridor. Stay right where you are, I’ll beam you back aboard momentarily. Don’t worry, there’s nowhere they can go that I can’t send you after them.”

Khan switched off the communicator with a click. This news troubled him. He was here to do a simple job, and the idea of a Time Lord getting mixed up in the deal was a headache he really didn’t need. Still, Aenis knew his job. And if things did go wrong, there were always others to take his place. Satisfied that this was nothing more than a minor setback, Khan turned on his heel and headed deeper into the bowels of the ship.

Charles Dickens, writer of popular fiction, awoke to find himself lying on the floor of a large, white room decorated with roundels and with a strange construction in the centre which was covered in switches and dials as well as dozens of other things Dickens did not recognise. At first, it seemed to him that he was dead, and that at any moment Saint Peter would be along to work out where to put him. Remembering his mother telling him about the importance of appearance in making a good impression, he looked down at the nightgown he was still wearing with a sigh. Still, he supposed, a lot of people die in their beds – these people were probably used to such attire. He ran a hand through his long hair and waited, hands clutched nervously behind his back, to see what would happen.

It was only much later when he heard the sound of voices coming from a connecting room that he realised he was still, in fact, very much alive.

“I think we’ve landed,” said the first voice, that of a female.

“I know that,” replied the second, male voice. “But the question is *where*? I’ll need to take a look at the monitor and check if the air is breathable before we even think about leaving the TARDIS.”

Suddenly, the night’s events came back to Dickens and he shuddered. He remembered it all now. During their dinner, Doctor Smith and the girl had obviously plied him with some kind of poison which had led to him having visions of a flaming creature in his room. He had been persuaded to enter the pair’s lair whilst still under the influence of their potions, and now here they had him as their prisoner! It must have been strong stuff too, because although he was clearly in a large, well lit room he could swear he remembered it being only a small box, just a few feet wide, from the outside.

At that moment, the Doctor and Silver entered and both smiled warmly at him. “Hello there Charles,” said the Doctor, in a disarmingly friendly fashion. “Is everything okay now?”

Suddenly, Charles realised that the doors were directly behind him. If he could remember which switch the Doctor had used to close it and assuming the same control would open it again, he could make a run for it. As Silver advanced upon him, a hand outstretched in mock reassurance, he lunged for the large red switch which his memory told him was the one. He pulled, hard, and with a reassuring hydraulic hiss the doors behind him opened. Ignoring the warning shouts of his captors, Dickens turned and sprinted for the alleyway.

Except it wasn’t the alleyway out there. It was something altogether different.

Khan smiled as the shape of Aenis formed within the transmat beam. Silently, the alien stepped from the platform onto the cold metal grille of the floor and looked to Khan for instruction.

His captain patted him on the back warmly, taking care not to singe his hand. “We’ve tracked the temporal disturbance. Don’t worry, they haven’t gone far.” Aenis shrugged as if to indicate that he was never worried, while Khan stabbed at the bewildering array of switches on the command console. Suddenly, against the far wall, a shimmering mist swam into view, accompanied by a sound like the very fabric of time and space being torn. As the pair watched, it resolved itself into a rough circle. Beyond the whirling, silvery mists a scene was now visible - an old schoolroom with wooden desks arrayed in neat little

rows and a blackboard affixed to the wall at the far end. In the corner sat a Christmas tree, enthusiastically if inexpertly decorated. The scene was dark, and totally deserted.

With a sigh, Aenis stepped through the wispy veil and into the scene beyond. He grunted at the familiar sensation of time corridor travel, which is something akin to having your entire body pulled inside-out through your nostrils, and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he was standing in the schoolroom. The musty smell of old books assailed his sensitive nose, and the floorboards creaked as he stepped lightly across them. The room was still dark, but the flames emanating from Aenis' head cast long shadows all around him. Concentrating hard, he sniffed again. This time, among the books and chalk dust, he fancied he could make out the same two humans, and their Time Lord friend, that he had smelled earlier. His eyes narrowed in determination as he slunk off in the direction his nose was leading.

Dickens stood aghast as the Doctor and Silver raced out of the TARDIS after him. Horrified, he spun around to face them.

"What is this?" he asked, his voice cracked and broken. "Why have you brought me here? How?"

Silver wagged an admonishing finger in his face. "Never mind that! What the hell are you doing wandering off? Don't you understand how dangerous it could be?"

Dickens sniffed. "What danger could there be here?" he said.

Silver looked from Dickens to the Doctor and back again, confused. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Dickens began to laugh, mild hysteria creeping into his voice. "You mean you don't know where we are? But you brought us here!"

The Doctor interceded. "No, Charles," he said softly. "*You* brought us here."

Dickens snorted loudly. "What are you talking about?"

The Doctor sighed. "Just before we left, I checked the coordinates. We've only displaced by twenty years and a few miles. I think the TARDIS has been using its telepathic gifts. Rather than just dump us in a random location, it's brought us to somewhere Charles would feel safe and secure. Unless I miss my guess, this is the William Giles School, circa 1823. Am I correct, Charles?"

Dickens blanched. "I don't know how you come to know so much about my life, Doctor. But yes, that is certainly where we are." He gestured along the row of dusty desks toward a small Christmas tree. "And guess what time of year it is!" he laughed. "I always loved it here so much. All these books, all this learning to be done. And every year at Christmas my mother and father would come and collect me and take me home. In many ways, I was always sad to be leaving!" Lost in his reverie, Dickens sat down upon a nearby desk. "I remember, there was always one little boy who's parents didn't want him. I can't remember his name now. He had to stay in the school every year; he was always such a sad little boy. I seem to remember hearing he'd gone into business for himself, and was doing rather well. Engaged to a lovely girl, they said, but he broke it off to concentrate on his work. Now what *was* his name? Anyway, I wonder if we'll see him about?"

Delicately, the Doctor sat down next to Dickens. "So you accept that we have travelled back in time?" he said.

Dickens laughed. "Why not? I've seen so many wonders tonight. Flaming men, and boxes which are bigger within than without. What's one more miracle? But I did so love this place, Doctor. This is where all my love of words and ideas come from. But it all ended the

day my father went to prison, and we were disgraced, and I had to leave here and go to work with other boys my age, which is where I learned what it means to be poor. I've led an interesting life, Doctor Smith, but I fancy not as interesting as yours."

At that point, the door exploded inwards, showering the small classroom in sparks. In the smoking remains of the doorway stood the shape of the creature that had pursued them in the alley.

Immediately the Doctor pulled Silver and Dickens behind him, and as one the three began to back slowly away from the creature. "How has it followed us?" Silver gasped. "What does it want?"

"First question - I don't know." whispered the Doctor. "Second question - I think we can safely assume he still wants the artefact. I left it on my workbench in the TARDIS, but he doesn't know that. We have to keep him away from it!"

So saying, the Doctor scanned the room and checked his exits. There were three - one in the far wall next to the blackboard, and one each in the two walls to either side. The wall which the three time-travellers were now pressed up against was clearly the outer wall since it contained a large window which in daylight hours would have illuminated the large blackboard nicely. He checked the three doors again. If this was indeed the outer wall, then it could be taken as a working hypothesis that the door opposite led to a central corridor of some kind. The other two were more problematic. They could lead to adjoining classrooms, or to tiny broom cupboards which would leave the Doctor and his friends even more hopelessly trapped than they already were. Dickens would know of course, but there was no time to discuss it. The creature was advancing on them menacingly, and a decision had to be made fast. Already the creature was almost on them - completely cutting off their route to the far door, as well as the TARDIS, although the Doctor had already discounted that as a means of escape. He sensed there was nowhere he could go that the creature would not be able to follow. A stand had to be made. Left or right then. Left or right...

"Go right!" he yelled, The creature spun around to cut off this route, but even as the Doctor shouted he began pulling Silver and Dickens to the *left*. The fraction of a second that the creature's confusion bought them was sufficient to make it to the door. They threw it open and piled inside, just as a fireball shot from the creature's fingertips and struck the wall where they had been standing moments before.

Once in the next room, Silver, Dickens and the Doctor paused only momentarily to gauge their bearings. In the half light, they made out a schoolroom of similar dimensions to the one they had been in previously. Panting, the Doctor said, "Charles, you remember the layout of the school?"

"I think so," sighed Dickens. "If I remember rightly, the corridor is curved, like a crescent moon with the main hall at one end and the dormitories at the other."

At the Doctor's insistence, they set off in the direction of the main hall. A moment later, the door they had just come through was blown off its hinges by a jet of flame. The chase was on.

The Doctor insisted they follow a crazy route, cutting through classrooms, doubling back on themselves occasionally and at times splitting up altogether before reconvening in the corridor but all the time heading for the main hall. The reason, he explained as they went,

was that the Eisonis navigates by smell. If they could confuse the olfactory trail they were leaving, they could buy themselves some time. Silver, for her part, created a more physical obstruction by scattering chairs and desks behind her as she went. Dickens simply followed along with the two of them, occasionally using his knowledge of the building to keep them all heading in the right direction.

It was not long before they found themselves in the grandiose main hall. It was truly cavernous, so large that in the poor light they could only just make out the far wall which seemed to consist of a raised stage with a great lectern in the shape of an eagle which stood before a vast Christmas tree, looking slightly forlorn with its candles all extinguished. The ceiling was dizzyingly high, and along one wall were a row of tall stained glass windows which reminded Silver more of a church than a school. Along the length of the hall ran long wooden dining tables, set up for the final feast of the term. It was strange to think that only days ago the hall would have resounded with the sound of hundreds of young boys - it was now absolutely silent, and their voices echoed loudly back at them however quietly they tried to whisper.

"Why have we come here Doctor?" asked Dickens, puzzled. "There is only one way in and out, we're trapped!"

"Yes," mused the Doctor. "But better to be trapped here where we have room to manoeuvre than in one of those infernal classrooms where he can corner us with no difficulty. Besides, we could hardly lead the creature toward the dormitories, where there might be innocent people. Now, I just need a plan..."

Dickens threw his hands into the air. "What plan? What can we do against such a powerful being? It's all up with us Doctor, you've led us to our tomb!" He sat down petulantly at one of the long tables, his head cradled in his hands. "To think," he said, "that I should be snuffed out like this, in my prime!"

"What did you say?" said the Doctor, looking up.

"I said I'm in my prime!"

The Doctor gesticulated wildly. "No, before that. You said 'snuffed out!'"

"Yes. What of it?"

Silver looked up at the Doctor, a broad grin on her face. "You mean...?"

"Yes," replied the Doctor. "Charles, what do you know of fire?"

"I know it burns," replied Dickens sullenly.

"Yes, but what does it *need* to burn?"

Dickens thought back to those far-off science lessons, conducted here in this very building. "Well... oxygen, for one thing."

"That's right!" laughed the Doctor. "Oxygen! Look at the candles on the Christmas tree, they're all extinguished. Why? They've been snuffed! Deprived of oxygen! Now, if we had a huge snuffer, then we could put out the Eisonis's flames, and deprive him of his powers!"

"But where would we get a snuffer that big?" asked Dickens.

"Do you happen to remember if there was a broom cupboard anywhere in this room? Somewhere the caretaker kept all his equipment?"

"Yes, there's one just down here if I remember rightly..." Dickens led the Doctor to a dark corner of the hall. A deep red, velvet curtain was hanging there. Dickens pulled it back to reveal a cornucopia of brushes, brooms, dustpans and various bottles of eighteenth century cleaning fluids. Ignoring all of this, the Doctor lunged straight for what he had come for. A fire bucket, filled with sand. Hefting it, he grinned broadly at Dickens. "My boy, we're about to do something I haven't done since *my* schooldays!"

Moments later the Doctor, Dickens and Silver were crouching behind a table peering at the door which was slightly ajar, the fire bucket resting precariously on top.

"Is this going to work?" asked Dickens, nervously.

"It always used to," whispered the Doctor. "Of course, it was water in the bucket back then, but the principle's the same."

Silver shushed them both. "I think something's coming!" she whispered harshly.

She was right - a faint glow was creating an aura around the open door, one which grew stronger as the source of the glow came closer. Soon the three friends sensed that the presence was directly outside the door, where it stopped. In the dead silence of the hall, they could distinctly hear a sniffing sound coming from the other side. Then, with a creak, the door slowly began to open. A second later the form of the Eisonis stood in the doorway, a terrible anger etched on its face. But no one was watching the creature - they were all staring at the red fire bucket which remained perched on top of the door, wobbling first one way and then the other. Each willed it to fall toward the outside of the door, rather than the inside where it would simply clatter uselessly to the flagstones. Eventually, after what seemed like an age, the creature took a step forward and, miracle of miracles, at that exact moment the bucket pitched headlong toward it, landing squarely on its head.

A screeching noise emerged from underneath the metal bucket as the creature thrashed around in a blind panic, desperately clawing at its new headgear in an attempt to free itself. In its desperation, the creature began to lose fireball after fireball, but fortunately none struck anything flammable, impacting instead against cold stone. Slowly the creature's struggles grew less and, after what seemed like hours but was in fact probably no more than a minute, they ceased altogether and the Eisonis lay still on the cold stone floor.

It was several minutes before anyone dared leave their hiding place to check that the creature was indeed incapacitated. Eventually the Doctor crept from behind the table, crouched down beside the prone form and gingerly lifted the bucket. Underneath the alien's face appeared peaceful and almost happy, but its beautiful golden hair was now dull and matted with sand.

"Is it dead?" asked Silver, who had by now emerged from her hiding place.

"No," said the Doctor. "Just sleeping. He'll be fine when he's recovered enough energy to relight himself."

Silver shivered. "Can we just get away from here before that happens?"

The Doctor dusted his hands off on his trousers and stood up. "I think that might be prudent," he said. "We just have to hope that he takes this as a warning and doesn't try to follow us again. I wouldn't like to face him now we've made him *really* angry."

With that, they made a sharp exit the way they had come, headed back through the corridor to the TARDIS and left. Not an hour later, the door to the hall opened once again, but this time it admitted a small boy. His mousey brown hair stuck up at crazy angles, and his eyes were glued together with sleep, but there was something he had forgotten to do, and if it was not done quickly it would be too late. He stopped in his tracks when he saw the strange looking man lying on the floor, and the discarded fire bucket. Then, to the boy's amazement, the man first glowed brilliant blue, then disappeared altogether.

The boy was not unduly perturbed, however. Determined to complete his mission, he trotted barefoot to the hall's great stone fireplace and pulled from underneath his nightshirt a stocking upon which was embroidered the name 'Ebenezer'. This he hung by the chimney with care, before turning round and leaving the hall at speed. Within minutes he was back in bed and dreaming of sugarplums.

Khan looked down at the sleeping form of his employee with a sigh. Pulling him manually out of the time corridor had been risky, but necessary. Who was this Time Lord? Why was he interfering? Khan didn't know, but the whole thing was beginning to give him a bad feeling.

Still, he considered, there's more than one way to shell a Macra. Perhaps a more blunt instrument was the way to go? He flicked lazily at some more switches, and the second of the three doors was illuminated. This one was much larger than the first, and above it could be read the legend 'Lombur'. Slowly, the door slid open. As it did so, Khan turned his attention to the bank of monitors. The Time Lord's ship was returning to its previous location, just as Khan had banked on it doing. Grinning, he once again activated the transmat.

Accompanied by its traditional groaning noise, the TARDIS again materialised in the alley. The door opened and, with a flourish, Dickens strode outside. "Well," he said, rubbing his hands together, "that's that then. All's well that ends well, as they say!"

He extended a hand to the Doctor; a clear gesture that, although he was grateful for the assistance he had received, he would be more grateful still if the two of them would disappear forthwith. The Doctor took the hand and shook it warily. Then he reached into his pocket and produced the now-cooled artefact, which he had retrieved from his workbench whilst the TARDIS had still been in flight. "There's still the question of what to do with this, Charles," he said.

"Keep it!" Dickens laughed. "Call it a souvenir!"

"I don't know," frowned the Doctor. "I'm still vexed by the question of what it is. I could do with running some tests."

"Well, I wouldn't know anything about that." said Dickens. "Goodbye, Doctor Smith! Miss Silverstein! Please don't call again next Christmas!"

With that, as the Doctor and Silver watched helplessly, he walked straight into the giant that had materialised soundlessly behind him.

With his feet up on the command console, Khan leafed through a battered copy of Machiavelli's 'The Prince'. The more he read about these Earth people, he decided, the more he liked them. Leaning back in his chair, he began to daydream about what he was going to spend his earnings on. Those who were paying him to retrieve the artefact certainly seemed desperate - the final deal had been struck at 100 trillion credits, but he had the impression that, if squeezed, they would go a few trillion higher still. It was enough for him and his entire crew to live like kings for the rest of their natural lives. Still, compared to what the artefact represented to these people, the cost of its recovery was but a drop in the ocean.

A movement behind the frosted panes of the last of the three doors caught Khan's eye. He stared at the door, smaller than the other two and yet he feared it so much more. He gulped audibly and offered a silent prayer that he wouldn't have to use what was behind it. He shook his head, banishing such thoughts from his mind. Lombur may be a lot of things, he thought - violent, unstable, thick as two short planks and not entirely house

trained - but he was a professional through and through. Khan picked up a steaming, sugary cup of tea and took a big, refreshing swig before going back to his reading.

With a yelp, Dickens retreated back toward the relative safety of the TARDIS. The giant eyed him dumbly. It was at least ten feet tall and almost as wide, and was dressed almost comically in a green fur coat and leggings of a similar hue. Coarse red hair sprouted from its head and from a thick bushy beard, as well as growing in clumps from his nostrils and ears. It raised a fist the size of a prize ham and thumped it to the ground, causing a minor tremor which woke several of the slumbering drunks who littered the alley. Given that three time-travellers being set about by a giant was no more out of the ordinary than what many of them saw after a hard days drinking, they duly turned over and went back to sleep.

The Doctor turned to discover that the door of the TARDIS had clicked shut behind them. In the seconds it would take to unlock it and get everyone safely inside the giant could have crushed them all to a pulp several times over. His mind raced through the available options, but only one seemed open. "When I say run..." he said. A few seconds elapsed during which the giant continued to stare menacingly at them. Suddenly, it took a lurching step forward. "Run!" yelled the Doctor.

So they ran. Flying down the alley, with the giant lumbering along in hot pursuit, they jumped over the bodies of the unfortunates who inhabited the alley like Olympic hurdlers. Behind them, the giant stopped momentarily to acquire a weapon, grasping one of the many unlit gas lamps and snapping it from its base like a twig. He let out a feral roar as he swung it like a club and set off again at pace.

Moments later, the Doctor, Dickens and Silver reached a dead end. A faded poster was glued to the high brick wall, advising passers-by that the circus antics of the Great Baldini Brothers would soon be in town. A crude drawing of the Baldinis showed them leering mockingly over their expansive handlebar moustaches, taunting the three friends.

"Run away?" Silver yelled at the Doctor. "That was it? *That* was your brilliant plan?"

But the Doctor didn't answer. He was listening intently to the crashing footsteps that heralded the imminent arrival of the giant, a look of worry etched on his face. For a moment, Silver thought that this was it - there was no plan, no way out. They were all going to be squished by a *giant* and for once there was nothing the old man could do because he'd run out of ideas. But then she saw that the Doctor wasn't listening to her because he was *thinking*. His brow was creased not with worry but with concentration, and when she saw that look fade to be replaced by the serene, ever-so-slightly self-satisfied look which heralded the spark of an idea, she suddenly felt her despair evaporate, replaced by love and admiration for the man before her. As the ground shook again, signifying that the monster was close, the Doctor pulled Silver and Dickens into a huddle.

"There isn't much time," he whispered. "I have an idea, but I need you two to distract him. I know it's dangerous and I'm sorry to ask, but I will come back for you!"

Silver, mustering up the closest she could get to a smile, nodded whilst Dickens just stared glumly ahead. "I'll do my best," he said.

"Good man," smiled the Doctor, patting his old friend on the back. "Now remember, he's incredibly strong but he's also slow. If you can keep yourselves alive for just a couple of minutes, I'll be back."

So saying, he slipped into the shadows out of the flickering gaslight, just in time to avoid the creature which lumbered into view around the corner at that very moment. With

a guttural roar, it raised its makeshift weapon above its head and charged for Silver and Dickens - completely missing the Doctor who was crouching behind a handily placed dustbin. The moment it was past him, the Time Lord sprinted off into the darkness.

For a moment, the giant stopped, and simply stood and regarded Dickens and Silver blankly in the half light. Then, with another terrible roar, it lunged toward Silver, the lamp raised in readiness to strike. Silver dived to the right as the weapon crashed down, hitting the wall behind her and rending the aged brickwork. With a grunt, the giant pulled its club free and switched its attention to Dickens, who ducked just in time to avoid the swinging weapon.

Hampered by the nightdress he was still wearing, he attempted to roll out of the way as the giant moved to strike again. The manoeuvre ended with him flat on his back - Silver pulled him clear just as the gas lamp came crashing down right where he had been, gouging a deep rent in the floor of the alley and breaking cleanly in two under the force of the blow. Casting it aside, the giant now decided to set about the pair with its bare hands. It swung for Silver first, who threw herself to the ground and began to scabble away. But before she could go far, the creature caught her, pinning her to the ground with one enormous finger. It leaned in toward her, leering horribly, and as it did so Silver caught a whiff of the smell the creature was giving off. It made what she had smelled in the alley earlier seem like lavender and rose petals. As it smiled unpleasantly at her, she saw a row of decaying teeth the size of playing cards, some green and some black but all with clumps of foul-smelling meat wedged between them. Determined not to scream, Silver closed her eyes and waited for the death-blow.

It never came. A moment later, with a yell, Dickens launched himself at the creature's head. It swatted him off like a fly, and he hit the brick wall hard, crumpling to the floor but the momentary diversion was enough for Silver to pull herself clear. For a moment she contemplated running - she told herself she would be going to find the Doctor, that she would come back and save her friend, but deep down she knew she meant to run away, save herself at the expense of the man who had saved her. Realising she couldn't live with herself, she instead grabbed hold of a leg the size of a tree trunk and bit down hard into the thick, leathery skin. The giant howled in pain. Silver drew her mouth away and was surprised and delighted to find that she had drawn blood. An instant later she was flying through the air, landing with a yelp on top of the prone form of Dickens, who appeared to be out for the count. With a roar of triumph, the creature lumbered over to where the pair lay, but there was no strength left in Silver's body with which to fight. And then she noticed something strange. The creature wasn't attacking - it was simply sniffing the air absent mindedly. Silver's mind, still groggy from having been tossed around like a rag doll, struggled to take it in. What the Hell was it *doing*? And then there was something else - a whistling sound. It was warm, familiar. Through bleary eyes, Silver saw the Doctor emerge from the darkness clutching a large parcel wrapped in greasy paper and held together with thick knotted twine. It was the package that had so singularly attracted the attention of the monster.

"Hullo!" yelled the Doctor, holding the package before him as if he were offering tribute to a god. "Look what I've got here!" he produced a small pocket knife and cut the twine. The parcel unfurled to reveal a mass of meat - steaks, sausages, thick rashers of bacon. Flies buzzed around them and some of the cuts looked greasy and bad, but this did not put off the giant, whose attention was now focussed entirely on the Doctor and his gift. Smiling, the Doctor tossed a lamb chop to the creature, who swallowed it whole and began gesturing for more. Happily, the Doctor continued to throw his treats to the smiling giant. Each was eaten whole, and when the Doctor threw the final item, a string of sausages, the

Giant smiled happily and patted its sizeable paunch. Then, suddenly, with a howl of pain, it collapsed to the floor and after quivering for a moment, lay still. Finally, exhausted, Silver passed out.

It was hours later when Silver awoke. She was in her room inside the TARDIS. She looked around at the detritus of her life. Piles of clothes were stacked in every corner along with various items of Wiccan paraphernalia, books by everyone from Patrick Susskind to J.K. Rowling and CDs by the likes of Tool, Radiohead and Bloc Party. It wasn't much, but it made the place feel a little more like home nonetheless.

Stretching, she climbed out of bed and realised with a smile that she was still wearing the same clothes she had been all night. Clearly neither the Doctor nor Dickens had mustered up the nerve to undress her before she was put to bed. Suddenly, at the thought of Dickens, she remembered all that had happened - remembered his body slumped in the alleyway. She hurried out of the bedroom and headed for the console room.

When she arrived she was greeted by the sight of the slumbering giant, stretched out the whole length of the floor. Around him flitted the form of the Doctor, and Dickens sat glumly in a nearby armchair. A keen looking bruise was coming up on the side of his head, but otherwise he was showing no ill effects. Silver smiled at him, and he smiled back weakly. Suddenly the Doctor noticed the new arrival and grinned broadly.

"Did you enjoy your bed rest?" he said happily.

"I did," Silver yawned. "You cut it fine there, you know," she said, gesturing toward the creature. "What exactly did you do?"

"Well, it suddenly dawned on me what the creature was. He's a Gigantor of Clonus, and if they have one defining attribute it's an insatiable appetite." The Doctor sat down on the TARDIS console, clearly enjoying having an audience as both Silver and Dickens leaned in to hear all about his cleverness. "I think we can assume that he was also under orders to retrieve the artefact. The only thing that was likely to make him forget that mission was the chance of a good feed. Anyway, I recalled that we'd earlier passed a butcher's shop on the way to Dickens' house, which it seemed to me ought to back onto the alley. That was where I went to when I left you, and when I got there I discovered a dustbin full of old pieces of meat, which was just what I was banking on. I don't know what day the dust cart comes round there, but it was clear that there was several days' worth of spoiled meat in the bin. I picked up the parcel and came back to find the two of you in trouble. As I'd banked on, he forgot about the two of you the moment he saw the food, and scoffed the lot. But even his iron constitution can't hold half a stone of rancid meat without feeling some ill effects, so down he went and whilst he was vomiting I managed," - at this point the Doctor pulled from his waistcoat a small silver fob watch - "to hypnotise him. His species are particularly susceptible, and he was out like a light in but a moment. By now, the estimable Mr. Dickens had woken up and was feeling reasonably well, if a little sore, and so the two of us carried you to the TARDIS, put you to bed and then went back for him. And now, by examining him and certain items about his person I do believe that I will have gotten us a little closer to the bottom of the affair."

"Oh?" smiled Silver. "And how do you plan on doing that?"

The Doctor grinned and waved toward the TARDIS console. There, amid the familiar array of switches and dials that surrounded the time rotor (which was gently rising and falling, indicating that the ship was in flight) she noticed something strange. It was a silver device which appeared to be designed to wear on the wrist, and it was identical to

(though considerably larger than) the one she had noticed the first time she had seen the Eisonis.

"What is it?" she asked.

The Doctor strode over to the console and looked down at the object. "It's a lot of things," he said. "It's first and foremost a communications device. It also seems to be able to monitor the vital signs of whoever - or whatever - is wearing it. But it's most interesting feature is that it acts as a homing device."

Silver looked up at this. "You mean so that the creature's movements can be tracked?"

"Partly," nodded the Doctor. "And partly to act as a signal for a transmat beam."

Dickens got unsteadily to his feet and wandered over to the Doctor. He looked at the device. "Would you mind explaining this again for those of us not so well versed in such things?"

The Doctor sighed and rolled his eyes. "A transmat is a means of moving objects or people great distances instantaneously," he said. "But, for obvious reasons, it requires the exact location of the target object in order to work properly. A slight miscalculation and you start doing things like only transporting half a person and leaving the other half where it was which, as I'm sure you can appreciate, gets messy."

Dickens nodded, and Silver was impressed to see that he genuinely appeared to understand, or at the very least he was trying his best to. After a shaky start, he finally appeared to be coming to terms with the strange turn his life had taken.

"So," continued the Doctor, "to overcome the problem, modern transmats are fitted with a device which is able to track the exact co-ordinates of the target. Now, on some models this is built into the machine. On others," he gestured toward the device, "it is in the form of a separate item which the user must carry. And lucky for us this is the type that this fellow is using."

"Lucky in what way?" asked Silver.

"Because when the Gigantor's vitals dropped due to my having hypnotised him, whoever is controlling him attempted to transport him back. Fortunately, I was able to realise what was happening and got the device off his wrist before the transmat was able to get a definite fix. It's keyed in to his DNA so if he's not in contact with it then it'll go nowhere. However, the TARDIS computer can establish where the signal originated and we can work backwards from there. I've wired in the device to the navigation systems and it's taking us back to the source of the signal as we speak!"

He stood up triumphantly, ready to accept the plaudits of his companions for a very special bit of cleverness. Instead, Silver and Dickens were looking at him, aghast.

"You mean, we're going where *he* came from?" gasped Silver.

Dickens nodded his head in agreement. "It seems awfully dangerous, Doctor. Rather like deliberately putting one's head into a lion's mouth."

The Doctor stood up and looked the two of them in the eye. "And where do you propose we go? Whilst we have the artefact they can track us, and until I know more about what it is and what it does there's no way I can just hand it over to them. So what choice do we have but to confront them? None of us are safe until this is sorted out!" Flushed with anger, the Doctor gripped the edge of the console. "I've spent all night running away from this. The time has come to go on the offensive."

"But what if there's more of them?" argued Silver, gesturing at the sleeping Gigantor. "There could be a whole army of them up there ready to invade!"

"I don't think so," snorted the Doctor. "For a start, the technology we've seen on display tonight is far beyond what the Gigantors are capable of producing. And secondly,

where would the Eisonis fit into such a scheme? No, both creatures were doing the bidding of someone else."

"But who?" asked an enthralled Dickens.

"That, my dear boy, is exactly what we're going to find out," said the Doctor grimly as, with a thump, the TARDIS landed at its destination.

A confused Khan stared blankly at the viewscreen. There were no longer life signs coming from Lombur's device. Was he dead? And if so, how? Perhaps, he mused, they had underestimated these humans. Nervously, he stroked his moustache.

Suddenly his eye was caught by something. With increasing unease, he stared as the readout showed the device was moving *toward* him. He knew he hadn't hit the return switch on the transmat, and he could see only one other explanation.

They had found him.

Khan sat back in his chair. He estimated there were still a few moments before his pursuers arrived, and he was too experienced a captain to spend them panicking. Instead, he calmly stood up and moved to the door controls. Alongside the two buttons which controlled the cryo-chambers containing Aenis and Lombur was a third, which was larger and blinked occasionally with a pulsing red light. Unlike the others it was behind a clear plastic guard which prevented it being pushed by mistake. Perspiring slightly, Khan flicked up the guard and jammed his thumb decisively down on the button. Immediately the third of the three doors set in the far wall hissed and began to slide back into the wall. From behind it curled wisps of steam as the extreme cold of the chamber met the warmth of the control room. Then, as Khan watched, a pair of glowing red eyes appeared from within the gloom.

This was the last resort, the one crewman Khan had never dared let loose on the ship before. Uncertainly, he peered through the gloom. "Hello?" he called, determined not to let the strain in his voice show. "Are you there?"

He was answered by a blast of laser fire which incinerated a monitor right by his head. Khan was flung to the ground by the blast but rolled as he hit the floor. Pulling a small laser pistol from a holster attached to his leg Khan remained in a crouching position, his back pressed to the wall, as he scanned the area for his assailant. "X'ttolth!" he called, trying to remain authoritative and keep the edge of desperation he was feeling out of his voice.

"This is your captain! You will stand down now!"

There was a hum and whir of motors accompanied by the clomp of metal feet on the grilled floor of the control room. Khan looked up. Before him stood a creature made of a kind of silvery metal. Beneath its metallic ribcage beat an organic heart, and eyes that were all too real stared blankly from within the gleaming silver skull of the creature's head. It wore only a long cloak, as black as midnight, which was topped off with a hood. Khan realised that the creature was not about to attack him again and got unsteadily to his feet. He regarded the metal being with something between sadness and disgust before speaking again. "X'ttolth, I have a little job for you..."

With its trademark thump, the TARDIS landed in the control room. The door opened, and gingerly the Doctor stepped out, followed equally cautiously by Silver and Dickens.

"Doctor, what is this place?" Dickens gasped in awe.

"I think it's where they keep the transmat." said the Doctor. "Don't touch anything."

Dickens did as he was told and stood with his hands in his pockets as Silver and the Doctor examined the room. It was in the shape of a large rectangle, maybe twenty feet by forty, and dominated by a central console covered in banks of computers and various readouts and displays. The whole place had a very utilitarian look - bare wires hung from the ceiling, a thick layer of grease covered many surfaces and virtually everything was coloured a dull, gun-metal grey. Against one wall were lined three doors all in a row. Each stood open and the rooms beyond were empty, although an icy swirl rose occasionally from the rightmost one. Above each was a notice, in illuminated red letters written in a language Dickens could not read.

"Well well well!" shouted the Doctor. "Look at this!"

Dickens craned his neck to see what had grabbed the Doctor's attention. It was another bank of switches and dials, as incomprehensible to Dickens' Victorian mind as any of the others here. "What is it?" he asked.

"It looks like our friends here have access to some time tunnel technology. Nothing as advanced as that TARDIS of course, but I think we can now understand how the Eisonis was able to follow us back in time."

Dickens shrugged. To him this was all further gobbledegook to add to all the rest he had been bombarded with this long, long Christmas Eve. He thought of the Christmas log burning merrily away in his hearth, and of the wife he might never see again, and sighed deeply.

Suddenly Silver, who had been examining the other side of the room, appeared at the Doctor's side. "I've been wondering about something..." she said. "This looks like some kind of ship, so how come there's no engine noise? It's as silent as... well... the grave."

The Doctor smiled. "Of course," he said slowly. "I knew there was something odd but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. This must be a Tele-Ship!"

Silver sighed. "A what?" she asked.

"I'll explain later," grinned the Doctor. "Suffice it to say, this is extremely advanced stuff. Now, you'll have to excuse me, this is rather a delicate operation."

So saying, the Doctor raised his cane and brought it down hard on the time tunnel controls. Silver and Dickens backed away with a gasp as a shower of sparks erupted from wherever the Doctor's anger found an outlet. In a few moments the control panel was a smoking mass of sparking wires, broken monitors and smashed circuit boards.

The Doctor regarded his companions with a chuckle, noting their shock. "Well, whoever they are, this should slow them down" he smiled. "And now, I think, for the transmat."

But as he strode confidently toward the relevant controls, lots of things seemed to happen at once. A laser beam erupted from underneath the metal grille of the floor, followed almost immediately by an ear-splitting noise as the ground beneath the Doctor's feet exploded and a creature from Hell leapt into the air. The shot missed the Doctor by a fraction of an inch, the heat enough to singe his hair as it whistled by, and he fell backwards - clumsily bringing down Silver who was trying to rush to his aid. Landing with a metallic clang, the creature eyed the two prone humanoids eagerly. Whipping back its cloak, it revealed the insanely large proton cannon built into its arm. Its heart visibly quickened as it raised the weapon toward the Doctor and Silver.

Horrified, Dickens could do nothing but watch, knowing all the time that whatever the creature was about to do to his friends, he was in for more of the same as soon as it had finished with them. He screwed up his eyes and waited for the inevitable screams of pain...

And then he felt something hard and heavy nudge his foot. He opened one eye and looked down to see the artefact – the damn thing that had started all this, the thing he should have left lying in the dirt where it lay. It must have rolled from the Doctor’s pocket as he fell, he supposed. Nevertheless, maybe it could do some good after all?

Hoping against hope that this would work, he picked the small silvery ball up – he was relieved to find it was still quite cool – and whistled in the direction of the creature. At once he knew he had its attention. Its human eyes locked immediately onto the artefact and the creature lost all interest in its intended victims. It began to stalk toward him, its gun aimed squarely at his chest. When it had covered half the distance that separated them, it stopped and let out a blood-curdling electronic roar, halfway between a feral animal and a particularly bad piece of avant-garde electronic music.

Dickens looked up to see the Doctor on his feet, beckoning with his hands. It took Dickens a moment to understand what he wanted, then realisation sunk in. He tossed the artefact underarm. The Doctor caught it expertly, and once again, the creature’s attention shifted in an instant. It aimed another bolt of energy toward the Doctor, who dodged it and threw the ball to Silver. Another shot, and another, but in its anger the creature was firing blind. Sparks and falling equipment rained down around Silver. She tossed the ball back to Dickens who once again laid it off to the Doctor.

“We can’t keep this up forever!” yelled Silver.

“It’s just for as long as it takes me to think of something!” the Doctor called back reassuringly as he threw the artefact to her again.

Silver, deciding to mix things up a bit, tossed it straight back to him and saw him pass it in his turn to Dickens. By now the creature had given up attempting to follow the artefact and was simply standing between the three of them, watching and waiting patiently for an opening. Suddenly, it pounced.

Silver had just caught the ball and was about to pitch it baseball style to Dickens. The momentary hesitation was enough. As the Doctor and Dickens watched in horror, the creature launched itself at her, hitting her squarely in the chest. Her whole body screamed out in pain as a metal fist smashed into her stomach, knocking all the wind from her and putting her flat on her back. Before she blacked out, she saw the creature’s arm raised, ready to deliver the killing stroke. The Doctor was shouting in the background, she could hear him still but it was becoming fainter. As her consciousness slipped away, she felt something large and clumsy in her hand. Though she knew it was important, she no longer had the strength to hold on. She finally passed out, feeling the artefact slip from her fingers and roll away as she did so.

When she came to, it was to find the Doctor and Dickens standing over her, smiling. “What the Hell happened?” she croaked.

“You let go” chuckled the Doctor. “I’d been shouting at you to let go of it. If you hadn’t, that thing would have killed you.”

Silver considered this for a moment. Getting up should, she supposed, be a priority but she was still feeling very delicate and in any case she wanted to know just what the Doctor had done. “So I let go,” she started. “What then?”

“As luck would have it the artefact rolled onto the transmat. The creature went to collect it and as he was doing so I gave the machine some rather... unusual instructions.”

“Oh?” said Silver.

“Yes. I asked the transmat to make part of him appear there,” he pointed to the far wall, against which was propped a headless metal body, “and the other part here.” The Doctor bent and picked up a gleaming skull, a pair of very angry looking human eyes burning from within its sockets. “It – whatever it is – isn’t dead, but I’ve examined it and all the motor functions seem to be controlled by the brain. Until someone reattaches it, it’s just a very unhappy disembodied head. So now we have the artefact,” – by way of proof, he produced it with a flourish – “and if anyone’s left on board I’ve taken care of their time travel capability and now their transmat. All in all a successful night’s work I think. Now, I believe we have a peculiarly unwell giant to remove from the TARDIS, then it’s all back to Charles’ house for a hearty breakfast!”

Shortly afterward the TARDIS wheezed into existence in the alleyway. The door opened, and triumphantly the Doctor emerged. Silver followed and Dickens was at the rear, the huge bags under his eyes and an unhealthy pallor making his exhaustion all too obvious. The Doctor fussed over the locking of the door and smiled. “Well,” he said, “I am a doctor after all, and I prescribe a few hours bed rest for us all, followed by sausages, bacon, eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, black pudding and whatever else we can rustle up!”

“But Doctor,” said Silver, “What about the artefact? What are we going to do with it?”

“Glad you should mention it!” said the Doctor with a grin. “Whilst we were up on the ship I noticed that the sensors were being used to search for it. I’m convinced that these people harbour nothing personal against Charles, or any of us. That much should be obvious from the way that last creature appeared to have been instructed only to attack whoever held the ball and ignore anyone else. I think that as long as we take the item, Charles here will be safe. As for what we do with it... we’ll toss it into a volcano, or better still a dying star. They’ll never find it. But come, they can’t come after us until they’ve fixed their equipment, can they?”

Silver moved to follow the Doctor, but a sudden thought stopped her in her tracks. “Doctor?” she asked, shakily.

Her companion turned round and smiled. “Yes?”

“It just occurred to me, Doctor, that you said they could travel in time.”

“That’s right, what of it?” said the Doctor, an edge of impatience creeping into his voice.

“Well, I just thought... if they want this thing so badly, what’s to stop them from repairing the time travel equipment at their leisure and then using it to travel back to here?”

The Doctor’s face fell. Just as he was about to tell Silver that this was a very good point and he wasn’t sure how he had come to overlook it, he felt a gun being jammed into his back and saw the look of terror in his friends’ faces.

Calmly, his hands in the air, the Doctor turned around to look at his assailant. He was a handsome man, perhaps in his late thirties or early forties. Keen eyes stood either side of a proud nose, below which lay a thin moustache and a mouth which was twisted into a triumphant leer.

“Well well well,” laughed the man. His accent was thick, and the Doctor could not place it. “Finally I have the three of you where I want you. You’ve been most troublesome, you know.”

The Doctor nodded. “I pride myself on it,” he said, not allowing a trace of fear to creep into his words. “Might I ask who you are, sir?”

The man laughed. “You may. I am Magnus Khan, of Khan’s Intergalactic Recovery Agency!” he bowed low, but his eyes never wavered from the three friends and his grip on the stubby laser pistol he carried never loosened. “And now, I have to ask you what exactly the three of you think you’re playing at, abusing my crew in the way you have. I have an Eisonis with barely a spark left in him, a Gigantor with food poisoning, and the less said about X’ttolth the better. How I’m going to get him fixed I haven’t the foggiest.”

Silver clenched her fists and shouted back. “They attacked us first! They would have killed us if the Doctor hadn’t done what he did!”

Khan sniggered loudly. “No they wouldn’t! They were only ever given orders to retrieve the artefact! And that reminds me,” – he raised the gun so that it was aimed directly between Silver’s eyes – “Please be so kind as to return it.”

The Doctor stepped calmly between Khan and Silver. “No!” he said, coldly. “I refuse to hand over something that for all I know could be a weapon of enormous destructive power!”

Khan lowered the gun, his face betraying abject surprise. “You mean... you don’t know what it is?”

The Doctor blanched at what he took as an insult to his intellect. “I haven’t worked it out quite yet, no. But you seem so desperate to retrieve it... I reasoned that it *must* be a weapon of some description.”

Khan smiled, and for the first time it seemed a friendly, genuine smile. “It’s far more valuable than that, Time Lord. It’s an atmospheric manipulator.”

Dickens looked at the Doctor, and saw the light of understanding illuminate his friend’s face. “A what?” he asked.

Khan holstered the gun and laughed again, long and loud. “My clients... their planet is dying. They decided to leave and terraform a new one which they could inhabit, but the device they used to regulate atmospheric conditions was lost in transit when the ship carrying it was attacked by space pirates. The crew jettisoned the device, and it landed near here.”

“You mean they only had the one?” Silver asked.

“You have to appreciate,” said Khan, “these things are not easy to come by. Government scientists had spent years making this one – there was no time left to manufacture another. The original had to be found, and for that they hired me. It was supposed to be a routine job – until you got involved.”

Dickens raised his hand. “I’m still not too sure what it does,” he croaked.

Silver smiled and withdrew the device from the Doctor’s pocket. “I know what it does, and if this guy knows how to make it work, I can show you now.” She strode over to Khan and placed the silver ball in his outstretched hand before leaning over and whispering something to him. Khan smiled and began to rub his fingertips delicately over the surface of the artefact. Almost at once, a single snowflake fell from the heavens and landed at the Doctor’s feet. He smiled, but said nothing. Soon, that one was joined by two more, and not long after that the air was alive with flurries of large, soft flakes which settled wherever they landed.

Silver smiled at the Doctor. “Now,” she said, “*that’s* Christmas!”

And after that, dear reader, there is not much more to tell. Khan returned to his ship, with the apologies of all concerned for the damage they had caused. He in turn, having heard their side of the story, apologised for the rough behaviour of his crewmen, who he assured them would be punished severely.

Dickens awoke the next morning hoping that all he remembered had happened in a dream, but found that it had not. What was worse still was the realisation that he had, out of concern for their welfare in the snowy conditions, invited the denizens of the alleyway to stay with him over Christmas. They were all camped out in the hall, eyeing up the silverware, when he came down. He had them cleaned up and donated large amounts of his own clothes to the cause before sending a passing boy to the butchers, with instructions to return with the fattest turkey he could carry. And so as the candles danced away merrily on the hearth, the Doctor, Silver, Charles Dickens and all their new friends tucked into a Christmas dinner fit for a king, to the consternation of the cook, who had arrived that morning expecting to feed only one mouth.

Later in the day, as they were singing songs around the piano, Mrs Dickens returned, stating that Christmas with her family was interminably boring and she wished to spend it instead with her husband. She was delighted to find his strange melancholy had lifted, albeit less so to discover her house was full of vagrants. But she soon joined in the games, and Dickens appeared mightily relieved to see her again.

And then it was time for the Doctor and Silver to leave. They said their goodbyes and headed for the front door, followed closely by an excitable and slightly tipsy Dickens. As he opened the door and they stepped out onto the snow-covered steps, he took the Doctor's hand and shook it firmly before kissing Silver delicately on the cheek. "Thank you both, for all that you have done," he smiled. "I feel like I can go on with my life again now, and I am full of renewed wonder at the strangeness and variety of nature after all I have seen with you!"

"You're very welcome, I'm sure," smiled the Doctor. "I'm only sorry that, after taking such advantage of your generous hospitality, we have no presents to leave for you."

"But you have!" laughed Dickens. "You've given me the most marvellous present anyone could give! An idea for a new book!"

Silver thought for a moment before smiling to herself. "Good luck with that," she said. "I'm sure it'll do well."

And then after several more goodbyes peppered with numerous pleas to stay over until New Year, Dickens closed that heavy oak door and returned to his guests. Silver spied him through the windows, dancing with his wife around the Christmas tree as the great Yule log burned away in the fireplace.

"Merry Christmas, Doctor." She said, squeezing her companion's hand playfully.

The Doctor squeezed back and turned in the direction of the TARDIS. "And God bless us," he chuckled, "every one!"

Silver groaned and the pair marched off through the thick London air, their feet crunching in the snow as they went. "Silver," said the Doctor after a short time.

"Yes?" replied his companion absent-mindedly.

"Do you think *I* would look good with a moustache?"

