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The Snow Maiden

2012 Christmas Special



Matthew James

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The Snow Maiden

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Part One – The Night Before Christmas

“I’ve got him,” muttered the elderly lady as she stomped down the corridor. “If he thinks he can get rid of me that easily, he’s in for a shock.”

Professor Ruby Tranter pushed passed a group of research initiates, grumbling at them to get out of the way. Ignoring their snickers, she stumped up the stairs and into the administration building. After a few minutes wending her way down seemingly endless corridors, she reached the door of the Director’s outer office and took a deep breath. “Right. Here goes.” She barged in.

Immediately a reception android floated up to block her way, its smooth voice apologetic but firm. “The Research Director is engaged. Would you like to make an appointment?”

“No, I would not,” she snapped. “Get out of my way.”

The Director looked up as his door flew open and smiled thinly. “Professor Tranter, do come in. I’ve been expecting you.”

Ruby noticed two pieces of paper and a pen sitting on the desk in front of him. Who uses a pen these days, she thought acidly. The man was a buffoon.

“I’m sure you’ve been expecting me. Well, I’m sorry to tell you your little coup d’état failed. The vote went in my favour. I’m here to stay. I still have some friends in this God forsaken institute.”

“The Research Director is engaged,” the soft voice of the reception android said from behind her.

“Yes, he is. With me.” Ruby shut the door on it. “No bloody ‘droid is telling me what to do.”

The Research Director smiled again and invited her to sit down. “You don’t take kindly to anyone telling you what to do, do you?”

“Why should I? Do you?”

He considered. “I hope I listen to all sides of an argument before reaching a decision. But with regards to the Institute, I make the decisions, not you.”

Ruby looked at him contemptuously. “One must be strong to make unpopular decisions and then strong enough to carry them through regardless. I know you don’t

agree with my new lines of research, but they have potential benefits for the human race that would be criminal not to pursue."

The Research Director smiled again. "You see yourself as the guardian of the human race, don't you, Professor? But no one lives forever. Who shall take on your grand legacy, I wonder?"

"I'm not dead yet," Ruby hissed.

"One wonders, as your opinion of us is so low, why you would wish to remain in this 'God forsaken institute'." He leaned forward, adopting a tone of reason and common sense. "Let me be plain, Professor. You won't be allowed to pursue your present research, even if you do stay. Why not call it a day? You've certainly earned it. Write your memoirs, subject to a security clearance, of course."

He was trying to annoy her, the only weapon he had left. She would not give him the satisfaction. "Is that what you're doing?" She gestured towards the papers and pen. "A bit old fashioned isn't it?"

"Good old pen and ink. Still best for the most official occasions."

"If you are writing your will I shall be delighted to witness it."

"Most amusing."

Ruby stared at him silence for a moment. "Why do you dislike me?"

"I respect your past achievements. But your methods have become unorthodox and your theories ill-thought out."

Ruby laughed scornfully. "I don't see the need to complete a check list for everything just so you can cover yourself if I have an accident. And I may be unorthodox, but I get things done! Have you seen the next generation coming through? Effete lackwits!"

"No, you do things. It's not quite the same."

Ruby took a deep breath and tried to forget how much she disliked the man. "I haven't used a pen since I signed my oath of office over fifty years ago."

"Quite," the Research Director said crisply. "In front of me are two letters. One is addressed to me from you, and the other is addressed to you from me. Your letter is informing me of your decision that, at seventy-eight years of age, you have decided to take your well-earned retirement. We shall give a dinner in your honour and talk long and proudly of your many magnificent achievements in helping the human race live among the stars." He paused for a moment, letting his comments sink in.

"The second letter dismisses you for gross misconduct. There will be no dinner, no honour - no anything. I recommend you sign the first letter, Professor Tranter." He held out the pen.

Ruby looked at the Director incredulously. This little man, this symbol of all that was rotten about the modern world, wanted to stamp her down because that was the only power he had. "Never!"

"Be reasonable." Opening a drawer in his desk, he took out a folder and placed it beside the letters.

Ruby looked down at it. She knew what it contained. How had he found out?

The Research Director picked up the pen and offered it to her. "Sign your letter, Professor. Or I shall sign mine."

She glared at him while she reached out with a trembling hand and snatched the pen from him. She bent over the first letter and scratched her signature at the bottom of it. She seethed. What choice had she? They had their "evidence" that her work had gone "beyond ethical limits". What tripe! So she broke some rules, ignored a few laws - so what? How could you make an omelette without breaking a few eggs?" She through down the pen and stared angrily at the director. "The place has no vision any more, that's the trouble. Everything is about cost! You would rather pay a hundred credits for a new computer than one hundred and one credits to design a better one. The current initiates are here because their parents can pay. You could not train one to the basic standard for all the gold on Vega. If it wasn't for people like me, no decent research would be done at all. Of course I push boundaries - no decent scientist worth their salt would act any differently. I gave this place fifty-three years. If it wasn't for my hydrogen replication standard we would never have colonised the Moon! I gave that place everything And this is my reward?"

Her outburst did no good. Later that night, alone in her flat, her defiance drained away and depression took over. She looked around. One bedroom, a box room filled with junk, a tiny kitchen, an even smaller bathroom and one big room for everything else. But she'd never needed more, never spent much time at home. Once she almost paired with a colleague and they talked about having a child but of course she couldn't face it - the time off work, the distraction... no, her work was all that mattered. What would become of that now?

The distant clamour of shouting children drifted from the footpath. Ruby sniffed. It would be Christmas soon and they were harassing people for money by banging on doors and threatening to sing. Christmas. Another of the old customs brought back to "unite communities" and try to break up the growing gang culture. Well it wasn't uniting her. Nothing but filthy hooligans who deserved a stint in the re-education centres. In my day children behaved. If I'd had a child I..." she stopped abruptly. "But I didn't did I? I didn't."

She went to the window and peered out. The TV news had promised snow, but none had fallen yet. No doubt that's what the children were waiting for, while they ran around and caused trouble.

Ruby despaired for the future. In recent years, the students who bothered to turn up to her classes seemed more hung over than interested in what she tried to teach them. Who would come after her now, to continue the great project of providing a pathway to the stars for humanity? All her knowledge wasted. With her brother long gone, who could she hand the work on to? Such a young age to die... if those children outside knew how lucky they were just to be alive.

Then it hit her. The solution. So obvious. Her life's work hadn't been wasted after all. Instead, it had lead up to this very moment.

* * * * *

It was snowing inside the TARDIS. A light, crisp powder, ideal for Christmas. Forming out of apparent nothingness somewhere near the ceiling, it wafted down in gentle flurries and settled onto the console and the floor. A thin layer covered the top of the time rotor and remained for a few seconds before evaporating.

"This is outrageous," the Doctor bellowed at his two companions. "Outrageous...and fascinating at the same time. Infuriating!"

He swung round. "Explain – come on, theories!"

"Um, there's almost enough to make a snowball," said Tom, somewhat lamely.

"Don't you dare," said Val. "I'm assuming nothing like this has happened before, Doctor? Is it a TARDIS malfunction an intrusion from outside?"

"Outside, obviously," said Tom, glancing at the ceiling.

The Doctor looked at him, an eyebrow raised. "Really? I'll have you know, Mister Brooker, that there are a multiplicity of things which could cause this, including a TARDIS malfunction. One should rule out the obvious before contemplating the unlikely."

"True," Tom brushed snow off a screen on the console, "but that thing out there could definitely explain it, don't you think?"

Frowning, the Doctor crossed to the screen and squinted at the stream of data.

Nudging Tom out of the way he switched on a scanner. "How long have you known about this?"

Tom shrugged. "I noticed that light flashing before the snow covered it. Always makes sense to rule out the obvious before speculating on the unlikely..."

Val cut in before the Doctor burst a blood vessel. "What are we looking at? It's just empty space."

"Empty space! Space is never empty. s," said the Doctor sharply. "The gaps between the molecules of your body are like the distances between the stars. ."

"Now for your written test," Tom quipped.

"What I mean is, what has the scanner identified? What are we looking at?"

The Doctor peered at the picture for a moment then went back to the readout screen and peered at that. "It's something artificial in the atmosphere The snow passes through it, changes, then enters the TARDIS How, I'm not sure. Yet. I can tell you one thing." He brushed at the snow and sniffed, then looked defiantly at Tom and Val. "I'm going to find out exactly what's going on."

* * * * *

On the TV screen three primary colour triangles smashed together to form the abstract shaped logo of LVN TV, while a noise like someone sitting on an accordion heralded the latest item.

"World Weather (UK Seasonal Division/December) guarantees snow for five days before and after Christmas. That's great, isn't it, Yarni?"

"It certainly is if you like snow, Miles, and fortunately I do!"

Miles Cooper smiled back at his feminised android co-presenter and desperately tried to keep the loathing he felt for it hidden. How the hell could a heap of tin score higher audience appreciation ratings than him? He looked back to the autocue and his heart sank at the next pile of rubbish he had to spout.

"Hey," Miles said with mock jollity. How he wished he'd never left the sports desk. "I hope you an' me can go out later and build a snowman. Then we can enter the great competition LVN TV is running in association with World Weather UK and The Friends of Raspberry Butter!"

"Sure can, Miles, but just for fun. Entering LVN TV competition is a strict no-no for LVN TV employees. But our intrepid team will be out later on to do the judging. So get ready kids, it's 'snow time!'"

Ruby smiled. "Off." The TV fell silent. She went to the window and looked out. "Snow, lots of lovely snow, just right for a competition," she murmured and smiled again.

A gang of children were rolling around in it, packing stones into snowballs and hurling them at cars. One man, old and scared, waved his fist and screamed abuse at them. They laughed louder.

"Have fun while you can," thought Ruby. "You'll be screaming soon."

* * * * *

After an embarrassing mix up the previous year, World Weather were pulling out all the stops. Snowfalls concentrated over public parks, with various coloured snow on the roofs of schools and play centres making them look like gigantic iced cakes. Responding to the mood, they had set up the competition with all the local TV stations and offered a prize to whoever sent in the best photograph of a snowman.

Olli and Lissa watched as their two boys ran round the garden noisily gathering up snow and clumping it together into a rudimentary shape. Olli laughed. "No way I'm going to win with a photo of that."

"Give them a chance, it's the first year they've been old enough to enjoy it." She put her arm round him. "Want a snowball fight or another drink?"

"Another drink."

She nodded. "We're no fun anymore, are we? When did we get old?"

"When those two turned up."

They watched as the strange shape began to look more human.

"They'll need stones for the eyes and a carrot for the nose. I've got an old hat somewhere."

Lissa giggled. "Taking it seriously, aren't you? Have you been watching Kiddie TV again?"

"Classic Blue Peter did have a feature on building snowmen.. Old episode from round 2070, I think."

"I don't know how you can watch old colour programmes."

"Things were better in colour, more artistic – and you couldn't smell 'em. Some of your cooking shows..."

"Mummy, Daddy. I made a snowman!"

"I made the snowman!"

Ollie shushed them. "Don't argue, you both made a lovely snowman. How about we find some eyes for it? And a nose, definitely. Maybe if you make it some arms and we could give it a walking stick? What do you say? Will we win that competition?"

"Yes!"

From her flat nearby Ruby could see them playing in their garden and hear them shrieking and laughing. They were good children, she had to admit, but they were young. Soon enough, they would go off the rails, join one of the gangs. Gang culture was spreading and the authorities did not seem able to control it. Yes, her little surprise would do them no harm at all. She went into the box room and made a final check. She smiled at the room's transformation into a sterile laboratory. Her guest would need special conditions. Could it work? Although her calculations left no doubt, Ruby was afraid to believe. But not to hope.

* * * * *

The Doctor was in expansive mood. "Basically what we are looking at is not deep space but a night sky. The TARDIS is drifting to the ground, following the snow one might say, almost as if she's trying to collect it. Certainly the defence systems are not registering it as a threat. And it isn't as such. But anything that can affect an otherwise common sense sort of TARDIS in this way is worrying. After I make the final descent we'll have to go outside and track the source.."

Val and Tom returned to the console room wearing warmer clothes against the chill enveloping the TARDIS. Hearing the door close, the Doctor turned round. "Excellent. And quite right, it may be quite a trek. I better put a jumper on; we may be in for a bit of a hike."

His companions exchanged glances. The Doctor made some adjustments at the console and then dashed from the room. Moments later he was back, a knitted dark blue sweater under his jacket.

"As you spotted the warning, Mr Brooker, I think you should lead the way."

Tom stepped forward eagerly. "Sure – " he stopped at the sight of the blocked doorway. "Oh, the snow."

The Doctor smiled. "First one clears a path. Chop, chop Mr Brooker. I'm sure an observant chap like you will have spotted a broom about the place."

Once the TARDIS doors were open the Doctor turned off the atmosphere. He ushered his companions outside. "Snow can't fall in a vacuum. If we let it continue we wouldn't be able to get the door open from outside against the weight."

As air hissed away, the falling snow faded. Most of what remained melted against the warmth of the lights. Deeper drifts remained, folding into themselves and making irregular shapes. If anyone had been there to see, they might have thought one of the

shapes very like a small arm, fingers moving blindly against the control panel, feeling for something...

* * * * *

Outside, the Doctor studied a compass-like object. Tom shivered. "More snow."

The Doctor grunted. "About two miles this way I think. Come on, quicker we get going, the quicker we warm up.."

Val put her best foot forward; they looked to be in the middle of the countryside though she thought she could see lights in the distance. "I don't know why you're so concerned. Surely it's some kind of weather control issue? I mean look at the snow over there, blue, green, all sorts. A simple weather generator to make the snow and then they've put something in that atmosphere belt to change it in various ways."

Sometimes the Doctor despaired. A bright girl Miss Rossi, with good cognitive powers, an excellent complement to Mr. Brooker's analytical one. But still a human, and humans will keep missing the obvious. He tried to make it simple for her. "And your point, Miss Rossi?"

"That there is something wrong with the TARDIS for letting the stuff inside but the snow itself is harmless."

Tom shook his head. "Trouble is the snow starts falling before it enters that belt so the weather station has already done its bit, including adding pretty colours. The belt is doing something more to its molecular make-up and that's what is getting into the TARDIS."

"Exactly," the Doctor said approvingly. "This snow that everyone is running around in so blithely isn't snow at all."

"Then what is it?" asked Val. She knew the Doctor was tiring of her questions but also knew his urge to correct her would get some rare answers out of him.

"Dangerous," he said grimly.

After fifteen minutes silent plodding, people and buildings came into view. Gradually, this grew into a busy residential area, Val looked at all the happy people. Parents helping small kids build snowmen, family snowball fights, older children tobogganing. So much snow, everyone covered in it, revelling in it. But if what the Doctor said was true, something terrible could be happening to them.

"Shouldn't we warn them?"

"And say what? Get out of the snow? We wouldn't have a hope. No, the answer is to find out who is responsible, and then stop them."

* * * * *

Olli was pleased. It might not be a winning snowman but it was a damn good attempt. "Angus, Ryan, over here. Let's take a photo!"

Inside the house, Lissa watched them and smiled indulgently. "My three little kids," she thought. "Honestly, a local TV competition with the winner probably chosen

at random and Olli was acting as though he was up for the Nobel prize for Snowmanship." She opened the window.

"No, no," Olli was saying, "I don't mean you smile, I mean make the snowman's face more smiley."

"Hurry up you guys," she called. "It's getting cold and it's nearly bedtime."

"Oh, Mum! Dad, tell her!"

"Won't be a minute love, nearly there. Right, say cheese!"

"Cheeeeeeeese!!"

Olli snapped the picture. "Thank you team. We have the winning entry!"

Across the way, Ruby was drawn again to her window by the shouting. Her father would have lost his temper if she and Robert had made so much noise. A tear pricked the corner of her eye. Robert had always made her laugh, always made things seem better. The times when their father was in one of his moods because she hadn't done well enough in an exam, or when she was finding work too much. She remembered Robert standing at her side, despite being so ill, when she received the International Medal for Services to Humanity. The tear fell.

"Shut up," she shouted behind the glass. One of the children looked up. He must have heard. No, he was waving. He'd seen her watching and he was waving. Hand trembling, Ruby yanked the curtain shut.

It was a few moments before she could get the strength to move away.

* * * * *

The Doctor, Val and Tom sat on a bench in the village centre listening to a voice on a large advertising screen telling them over and over that it was Christmas tomorrow and if they still needed some last minute ideas for presents, here they were. It then launched into a four minute long advertising bombardment before starting all over again.

"If I get told one more time the benefits I will derive from a seaweed and pond algae mudpack," hissed the Doctor, "I will put my foot through that screen."

Tom grinned. "At least we know the year, the time of year and how to feed a family of five over the festive season. I'm surprised Christmas is still going."

"I don't suppose it's what we would call Christmas," said Val. "I expect it's become one big marketing opportunity. Even more than our time, anyway."

The Doctor leapt to his feet and flung the compass device in the direction of the screen. It fell into the snow with a plop. The thing had stopped working when they arrived in the square and the Doctor was tired of trying to fix it. "The trouble is, we are so close to the source and the snow is so thick I can't get a proper reading."

Val thought about this. "Would it help if we found a weather station? Surely someone around here would know?" The Doctor considered the suggestion. It wasn't a bad one. "Very well, let's give it a try. Miss Rossi, you come with me."

"Lucky me," Val whispered with a wink to Tom.

"Mister Brooker, you see if you can find the tracker."

"You just chucked it away," Tom protested.

"I know," said the Doctor, "but it was getting on my nerves. Maybe hitting the ground has done it some good."

Tom, shaking his head in disbelief, watched the Doctor stride off. "Talk about a Tom Brooker work creation project! First I'm shovelling snow, now I'm searching through it."

It took him two seconds to decide the Doctor could find his own tracker. "I've got a much better idea about finding whoever it is doing whatever it is with the snow."

Walking along, Tom noticed several androids. They mainly managed shops or carried parcels and looked pretty basic. Just a bunch of set actions and responses programmed in, he reckoned, and no reasoning power worth the name. He made a beeline for one. It seemed to be tidying up the snow into wheeled bins.

"Hi," said Tom. "What are you up to then?"

The android replied in a polite male voice. "Hi. I am supplied by your council to help make Fenurst a happy place to live."

"You're doing a terrific job. Seems like a lot of work, though. Loads of snow about tonight isn't there, mate?"

The android gave a couple of clicks as its brain sought the most appropriate reply. "Cleaning the streets is a full time job but a very necessary one. You can be assured that Environmental Sanitary Androids will never pause or deviate from their work until it is finished. Then they will stop and recharge, maximising the efficiency in which your taxes are spent."

Tom nodded. As he suspected, a very basic brain. This thing would keep on trying to clear up the snow until doomsday or its power cell ran out. "Why not have a tea break and let it melt?"

The android had no answer to that one. It moved away, collecting more of the falling snow. Tom jumped forward and stopped it.

"I'm fairly certain you're linked to a central point, just so they can keep track of you. Which means," he said, flipping open a panel, "that I should be able to hack in and find out who lives and works in Fenurst."

"Tampering with council property is an offence," the voice warned politely. "If you do not step away I will summon assistance."

Tom found the wire he was looking for and jerked it free. "No, you won't. Now then, let's see about getting into the local database."

After a few minutes Tom found the channel he wanted and then groaned at his own stupidity. Although the android's operating computer could access the data there was no read-out screen. The data went into the android's so-called brain and stayed there. Tom thought for a moment. The obvious solution would be to reconnect the vocal circuit, but that linked up to the distress signal.

"The question is, will the cops arrive before I've heard all I need to? On the other hand, what cop is going to rush to rescue a sanitary android at Christmas?" He reached in and reconnected the wire. Immediately the android's voice cut in, reading out a list of names and addresses. Tom told it to sift by occupation.

By the time the android read out a name Tom felt sure must be the right one, almost ten minutes had passed. "No sign of the plods, thank goodness. Okay Mr

Android, you can shut up now.” He pulled the wire and stood up. “Now, where have those two got to?”

* * * * *

Ruby never ran from a difficult decision. Assemble the data, distil the facts, consider your conclusion and then act. Naturally people like the Research Director resented her having the courage he lacked. Yet not to try, to shy away from action like those idiots at the Institute would be a crime.

“Theory is all very well but there comes a point when it must be tested. If it is sound then further theories can develop from it.”

“I owe the world this legacy. The world owes me!” It was late, only a handful of hours to Christmas Day. Ruby rubbed at her eyes then refocused on the screen, making another adjustment to the program rolling across it. It needed constant monitoring and only a human brain – her brain – would do. But soon it would be Christmas and the program would enter the final phase. She chuckled to herself at the thought of the chaos.

* * * * *

Val frowned at the empty square. “Perhaps we should go into one of the shops and see if...Doctor?”

“I’ll be back in a minute,” the Doctor called over his shoulder. He vanished around a corner and Val shook her head in amazement. Really, the cheek of the man!

Determined not to waste time, Val noticed a man rattling a collection tin across the way. Putting on a smile she went over and employed her best journalistic skills.

“Hello, my name is Valentina Rossi. I’m doing an article about Christmas. This snowfall is really impressive, do you have your own weather station here?”

The man shook the tin. “It’s for the Life Ships.” Seeing her uncertainty he shook the can under her nose. “Come on, reporters have plenty of money. You could be saving the life of someone you love.”

The one thing every journalist needed when out interviewing was money and Val did not have any. But she was not to be put off. “My technician will be here in a minute, he’d love some photos of you and your tin. Is the weather station far?”

“Not that far, about ten kilometres. But if you want to know about whether you don’t need to leave Fenurst. You know who lives here, don’t you?”

Val leaned forward, eyes wide, making the man feel the most important person on Earth. “No, who?”

* * * * *

A little way away the Doctor was trying to remember what he knew about 25th century Earth. Humans were out and about in the galaxy exploring, building bases and terraforming planets at an astonishing rate. The advertising screen had given him the year

but he could not recall if mankind was actually colonising planets yet. Certainly the Earth had become ever more crowded. In a few more years this quiet village would be gobbled up by the encroaching urban sprawl. The Doctor felt sad at the thought.

The Doctor stopped at the side of a shop and coughed. .

Two youths jumped to their feet and turned around, their faces white with panic. The security panel hung on its wires.

The Doctor clicked his fingers. "Of course, the rise in youth crime. Ultimately solved by the big corporations shipping the unemployed out to the stars. You have my sympathy."

"You got any tokens?"

"Tokens of what?"

"Come on, it's Christmas, everyone's got tokens."

In an age where money now meant credits on a computer screen, actual tokens of trade still lingered as much for sentiment as anything. "No, I haven't. By rights I should call the police. But since it's Christmas, all I'll do is ask a few questions. One, I – wait a moment! Come back!"

The Doctor sighed. When he first saw the boys breaking and entering he hoped they might be part of a resistance group fighting a tyrannical government or alien invader, which he could team up with to their mutual advantage. But then as he remembered more about the 25th century and saw how amateur their efforts were - just connect the blue and white wires and pull out the green and the door would open for heaven's sake - he knew they must be a product of the collapsing society and the eventual take-over by the big corporations. As governments faltered, , business moved in to provide security and employment, taking over the Earth more neatly than any Dalek.

But that was yet to come. Realising Miss Rossi would be getting nowhere without him, the Doctor hurried back. As he crossed the square he spotted the compass device glinting in the snow and picked it. He shook his head. So much for Mister Brooker! Now, who is Miss Rossi talking to?

Just as Val was about to get an the Doctor bustled up. Spotting the logo on the tin he said, "Ah, the Life Ships, what a worthy cause. Our brave space lads facing the terrors of the universe to build us new worlds." He reached into his pocket. "Here you are." Something clattered noisily into the tin.

"Was that a button?"

"I was just asking," said Val, wishing the Doctor would go away, "if they have their own weather station in the village."

"Only you get to recognise the sound of buttons when you've been collecting as long as I have," said the man with a glare.

"But it seems you have something better than that in Fenurst?" Val went on. "A local expert of some sort?"

The man seemed pleased, proud even. "Professor Ruby Tranter lives in Fenurst. Not far from me in fact. Can't get better than that for a local expert, can you?"

"Oh, and where do you live?"

The Doctor was beside himself. "Ruby Tranter? The woman who got the moon atmosphere up and running? The woman who stabilised the Typhoon Hendricks when World Weather USA lost control if it in '96?"

"Yes."

"Well, that answers a few questions doesn't it, Miss Rossi?"

"It sounds like it," Val turned back to the man. "Thanks so much for you time. Now about the address..."

"Here," the man tugged at the Doctor's sleeve, "don't you want my picture?"

* * * * *

Away from the square the streets and houses lay in darkness. The snowmen stood silently in gardens, parks and on pavements. Clean-up droids, programmed to leave them alone, did their best to shovel up the surrounding snow.

Inside houses, parents relieved their offspring were at last asleep, relaxed with a festive drink or two. About to go to bed, Lissa took a last look through the window at their snowman. It now had a hat and a cane, two shiny pebbles for eyes and a carrot for a nose. Foil Vito bottle tops made a shiny row of buttons down the front. "Maybe it will win," she thought.

Then her eyes widened at the sight of so many other snowmen lining the street. Great ranks of them all up and down the road – had there ever been so many? It would be impossible to pick a winner, it must be a random thing. She sighed. The kids would be so disappointed not to win. She had a good mind to complain to the TV company if they didn't.

* * * * *

"She's called Professor Ruby Tranter..." Tom came running up to join them.

"Thank you Mister Brooker, we know."

"How?"

"We asked."

"So did I."

"Unfortunately," Val interrupted, "we don't know where she lives. That man didn't give us the address."

Tom looked smug. "Flat 44. Mayfield Road."

The Doctor beamed. "Excellent. You see? Never leave a job half done, Miss Rossi. There is hope for you yet, Mister Brooker."

Val controlled her temper and pulled a face. "Hope for you yet, Mister Brooker," she mimicked.

"Don't blame yourself Val," Tom whispered back, "if everyone was a genius who'd do the washing up?"

She gave him a not so friendly poke in the ribs. Quickly, Tom bent down, scooped up a handful of snow to lob at her.

"Mister Brooker! What have I said about the snow? It's dangerous! Don't act like a stupid adolescent. Incidentally, I found the tracker myself while you went off to play about with androids. Come on!"

Refusing to catch Val's eye and red with embarrassment Tom trudged after the disappearing Doctor. The snow fell thicker than ever.

Moments after they left, two police droids glided into the square.

* * * * *

As it happened, Lissa was wrong to think the organisers weren't taking the competition seriously. LVN TV, which had the job of picking the winner in the Fenurst area, could not afford to fall out with its audience. So it was that two of their junior reporters were roaming the streets at midnight incognito to find, if not the best snowman, one that belonged to an impaired child or one with a life threatening illness. Parents often added such details to their entries in the hope of gaining the sympathy vote.

But Pushki and Degs, the two reporters assigned, did not propose to waste too much time in their search. It was, after all, cold, snowing and their families were at home waiting for them. "Hey, that one's not bad," said Degs, pointing.

Pushki shook his head. "The carrot is mouldy."

"Since when did we start checking carrots?"

"Well, it's no good picking one with an obvious defect. At least try to make it look like we put some effort into it."

Degs sighed and scrolled through some of the entries on her phone. "Here's one I saw that's pretty good. And they live in the next street."

"What do we know about them. No gang connections?"

She laughed. "I don't think those gits will be entering a snowman competition, do you? No, according to this a ten year old boy made it. He's nothing special but the snowman looks a bit like Miles Cooper."

"Great, lead on. This snow is getting worse! I reckon UK Weather cocked up again. It shouldn't be this thick."

"I can hardly walk through it..."

Struggling to get one foot in front of the other Degs stumbled and fell head first into the snow. Pushki laughed and reached down to haul her up. "Come on, you can play later."

Reaching down, Pushki grabbed Degs' shoulder and turned her over. He flinched at the mask of snow which completely covered her face like a mask. Alarmed, he tried to wipe it off with his gloved hand. The body went limp. "Degs! What's wrong? Don't mess about, what's the matter?" He recoiled in horror. There was no face under the snow, there was nothing but snow.

Before Pushki could scream, the pile of snow at his feet began to move, growing in size. In a moment it had covered his legs, immobilising them. A few seconds more and it was up to his shoulders.

By the time a cleaning droid whirred past there was nothing left to see, apart from a brand new snowman. The android ignored it as programmed and glided on.

* * * * *

The Doctor glared at Val and Tom and wondered why it was wherever he went he got either shot at, arrested or ignored.

"What a stupid thing to do. Tapping into a security network via a cleaning android. You didn't think that would set alarm bells ringing somewhere?"

Val sighed. Not another row. "We don't know what the charge is yet. It may not be Tom's fault."

"Cheers."

"You know what I mean. Perhaps we've been arrested for loitering." She shot a glance at the Doctor. "Or putting buttons in collection tins."

"Those buttons are solid silver," the Doctor snapped back. "Came from Admiral Nelson's dress uniform." He jumped to his feet and started pacing round the watching android. Its head rotated 180 degrees to track him. "If this is what they call 25th century justice I'm very disappointed."

He pointed at the police droid. "How long are you keeping us without charge?"

The droid repeated what it said when it brought them in. "You are required to remain here until an appointed officer is available to interview you. Thank you for your patience."

The Doctor laughed scornfully. "Any flesh and blood officer isn't going to drag themselves over here till after Boxing Day. You have no right to hold us here you metal moron. Listen, we both know it's Mister Brooker you want, so why not let us go and keep him?"

"That's not funny, Doctor."

"Oh, save your breath Val," said Tom miserably. "I mean it's bound to be my fault isn't it? Always is my fault. Can't imagine what gets into me, eh Doctor? Don't know why you put up with me. Fancy tampering with an android."

The Doctor clapped him on the back. "Yes, I do fancy tampering with an android. No point sitting here feeling sorry for ourselves." As he spoke, the police android, patiently blocking the exit, keeled over and hit the ground with a crash.

Val and Tom gaped. "How did you do that?"

The Doctor produced the tracker. "While you two were wallowing in self-pity I was finding the right frequency to jam the android's senses."

"That's why you walked round and round it!"

"Precisely. Let's go before a real police officer turns up."

"It's a bit late to go calling on Tranter now," Val said.

The Doctor was having none of it. "Criminals keep long hours. She'll be up, mark my words."

* * * * *

Once midnight passed the snow eased. The moon shone palely on the many different snowmen with their eyes of stone, their vegetable noses, their hats and sticks, the scarves and pretend coat buttons made of this and that. They looked like frozen sentinels waiting for the signal to move.

And then they did move. The stone eyes blinked open peered into the dark. and started to look around them. Their noses twitched, breathing in the cold air and liking it. Their arms, moulded to their bodies, pulled apart and swung wide; their legs forcing themselves forward, shedding snow until they could walk effortlessly. They did not move far, only to the front door of the nearest house. Here they stood, waiting for morning and the excited children who would come running out to play with them.

* * * * *

The Doctor stared at the tracker in disbelief. "I'm too late. The evil has begun."

"Evil?" Val asked.

"There!"

The Doctor pointed at the misshapen snowman in front of him. "There is human DNA mixed up in that thing, three traces in fact, which means two people died."

Three traces but two people? Then Val realised what he meant. "Oh - you mean the third DNA was already present in the snow? So this snow is alive? Alive, and it killed two people!"

The Doctor nodded sadly. He spotted Deg's mobile phone in the snow and bent down to retrieve it. He studied the logo on the case. "LVN TV. Well they won't be reporting this story, will they?"

"That's a terrible thing to say!"

"I don't think the deaths are intentional, the snow was inquisitive, uncontrolled. But she should've realised this might happen. What's she doing it for, Val? Is she insane? Or is she so blinded by her own cleverness she doesn't realise what she's creating?"

"Doctor - "

The Doctor let the phone drop to the ground. "You think I don't care, Miss Rossi? You couldn't be more wrong."

"I know you care, Doctor."

"Come on then you two, follow me!" The Doctor marched off briskly and Val had to run to catch up with him.

"Wait - "

"Miss Rossi there is no time to wait. There may be other deaths."

"That's what I'm worried about, Tom isn't here!"

The Doctor stopped. "What? I thought he was with you."

Val shouted at the top of her voice. "Tom!"

The Doctor hurried over flapping his hands. "For goodness sake be discreet. Remember, we are fugitives from justice."

"I don't care. He could be in trouble."

* * * * *

Tom knew he shouldn't do it but he couldn't resist a look at the deactivated android. Sometimes the Doctor left this sort of thing to him, mucking about with computers and programming and Tom liked to think it was because the Doctor appreciated his skills. However at other times, like this, the Doctor demonstrated that his skills left Tom for dead. Tom couldn't help wondering if the Doctor's real opinion of him was of a bright child to be given the occasional patronising treat. He wanted to know how the Doctor jammed the signal and if he could have achieved the same result. And preferably better.

Unfortunately whatever the Doctor did had been was temporary. At Tom's and at his touch the android reactivated. Tom cursed, knowing he'd get the blame. He ran to the door and followed the two sets of footprints. This made him grin, the Doctor hadn't thought of that. "The coppers will follow them as easy as I can."

He needn't have worried. The snow shifted and obscured the prints. slewed around the prints, almost like it was alive, and rearranged itself. "He must have known about the footprints after all," he thought glumly. "Ow!"

Tom ran straight into a snowman. "Where did you come from?"

The snowman did not reply. What it did do was move towards him, twisting its body from side to side in a slow shuffle to propel itself forward. Another snowman loomed up behind it. From the corner of his eye Tom saw more movement. He swung round to look. Other snowmen were on the move, marching in a macabre rolling gait up the paths and gardens of the houses to stand waiting at the front doors. Waiting for what? Gripped by fear, Tom turned and ran.

* * * * *

"I can't wait, I shall have to leave you here."

"What if something's happened to him? We have to go back!"

But at that moment Tom came running towards them, slipping and sliding in the snow. She thought about the two dead bodies encased in snow and shivered.

"Doctor," Tom panted, "look at the snowmen - they're alive, they're bloody well alive!"

Part Two – Christmas Day

The Doctor slapped a hand to his head. “Of course they are, how stupid of me. That’s what she’s doing, making golems out of snowmen.”

“What?!”

“Putting the raw genetic material in the snow and programming it to a set of actions, the first being to seek out the nearest human life form and take samples and then replicate that DNA. These two people got picked on too early in the process, their DNA was not copied so much as torn apart. But what is she doing it for? Some sort of golem?”

“She must be mad,” Val whispered.

Tom got the bit about DNA, but Gollum? Wasn’t that some pug ugly troll from a kid’s story? “OK, Doctor, you are going to have to explain that one.”

Val recognised the reference. “A golem, creature from Earth mythology – it can be made of anything, a lump of clay, a wooden image, a straw man...the ancient magician would build one in human shape and put a secret sign on its forehead. Say the magic words and the thing, the golem, would come to life. Lumbering, silent creatures; slaves to the master who created them.”

Tom shuddered. “And Ruby Tranter is the evil magician?”

“I don’t know, we have yet to find out. Although you are correct to say a golem is created to be a slave, Miss Rossi, it is not unknown in legend for them to turn on their creator.”

* * * * *

Nothing remained to do but wait. Ruby locked the door of the lab, took a last look at the computer to confirm the program was running properly, then took a sleeping pill and went to bed.

Conscience never troubled Ruby but tonight her dreams did. Perhaps it was the drug but her mind could not rest.

“Why are you doing it Rube? They haven’t hurt you.”

"I'm only scaring them Robert, they'll be okay. Do them good."

"They are children..."

"How can you of all people think that? They acted like animals."

"But Ruby, how can you possibly control what you've unleashed. This thing will spread until it devours the Earth.

"It can't, the program..."

"The program is running wild, you can't stop it now! The Research Director is right."

"No Robert, not you too. Don't say that..."

But her brother had gone, replaced by the mocking figure of the Research Director. "You are an abomination and shall be cast down!"

Ruby woke with a start. For a moment the dream terrified her, but common sense quickly took charge. "Abomination? The Research Director couldn't spell the word let alone say it. All the same, an odd phrase for my subconscious to dredge up."

She went to the computer and checked. Nothing wrong there, another silly subconscious anxiety nothing more. The time on the screen showed 3.00am. She looked out her window. She smiled. Yes, there they were, standing guard at the front doors. In the morning the children would run out, gasping in surprise to see their snowmen had moved. Then see how those jobs liked being helpless and afraid.

Ruby went to the incubation room, but didn't open the door. Everything was proceeding as it should but this could not be viewed, not yet. It needed time. "No point in trying to sleep again. A cup of tea I think."

Before Ruby could reach the kitchen the intercom buzzed persistently. Then someone started hammering on the outer door.

* * * * *

They found Mayfield Road without difficulty. Number 44 lay straight ahead. Before they could approach it, a noise cut through the stillness of the night. A high whine of a travel car. The Doctor pulled his companions behind some trees and put a finger to his lips.

A travel car with the insignia of the town police unit skidded to a stop outside the Professor's flat and two police officers leapt out. After a perfunctory ring of the bell they began hammering on the door.

"This is interesting," whispered the Doctor.

"Perhaps they've found out what she's doing. They're making enough noise about it."

One of the police officers angrily kicked some snow out of his path and shouted something to his colleague. Both stepped back a few paces and peered up at the windows trying to work out the one for flat 44.

"I think they're at the end of a long shift and not in the best of tempers," said the Doctor. "And I don't think they are here for the same reason we are. Mister Brooker, I..."

"He's gone again," Val whispered.

"Honestly, he's doing this a lot today. At least I can rely on you."

Val beamed. "Thank you, Doctor. Hang on, something's happening."

The second police officer was saying something through the intercom. He seemed to be arguing with someone. With a loud click, the door unlocked and the police officers went inside.

"I dare say she could have done without this," said the Doctor thoughtfully. "Bad luck the police turning up on the crucial night."

Val wondered where Tom had got to this time. "Are you sure they aren't here because of the snow?"

Before the Doctor could answer Tom reappeared. "Those coppers are after us," he said grinning. "According to the police car computer, someone finally twigged that I wasn't a second rate vandal bashing up sanitary droids, but a master criminal hacking into the record of Fenurst's greatest citizen. Those two came round to make sure we haven't harmed her."

"That's great," said Val, "now we'll never get near her. She's got a police guard!"

The Doctor bent down and rubbed some of the snow between his fingers. He looked up at the sky, less dark now. "Not much longer..." He stood up. "Professor Tranter won't want them hanging about in her apartment. So, they'll likely spend the night watching from their car. And we haven't got time for that. Miss Rossi, you are with me. Mister Brooker, stay here, keep out of trouble and do not touch any computers."

"Charming," said Tom as the Doctor and Val weaved their way, tree to tree, towards the block of flats. She shivered. Why did he have stand there until the Doctor condescended to come back? You have to keep the body moving in this weather, keep the blood circulating. "I'm not staying here."

But where to go? He had to keep in sight of the flats because he had no idea how long the Doctor and Val might be. He had to watch out for the cops in case they did return to their car. Then an idea came to him. He had better hurry, the cops could come out at any moment. With a lolloping run, Tom headed back to the police car.

* * * * *

"What are we going to do?"

"Talk ourselves in of course," replied the Doctor.

"But won't the police recognise us? I mean they'll have photos."

The Doctor reached the last tree available and peered round it. "We'll have to break cover here."

Val wouldn't be put off. "If we go out there we'll be arrested. What good will that do?"

"And what good will we do hiding here? I can't do nothing," the Doctor snapped. "She's done this for a purpose and the longer I tarry here the less time I will have to put things right."

Val would have loved to pick him up on the word tarry but thought better of it. And he was right, they had to do something. "Why don't I break cover and let them come after me..."

"No, no, they might catch you and then I've got two problems. Bluff is what's needed, Miss Rossi. You can be sure Professor Tranter is as keen to be rid of those two as we are. If I turn up claiming to be an old friend she will jump at the opportunity of endorsing it and sending them on their way. Photos or no photos, old friends of the Professor pose no threat and are not worth making a big fuss about. Naturally the Professor will then try to send me on my way, but she won't find that so easy."

Val heard a clatter from inside the lobby then the door flew open and the two police officers pushed and shoved each other to get back to the car first. She clutched the Doctor's arm. "How did she manage that!"

The two men ran right past their tree, arguing as they did so.

"We were told to watch her," one said.

"This takes priority," the other yelled back. "How many times do you get a Code H in a lifetime? Something big is going on."

"But all the way to Marlborough – in this weather!"

The argument continued but they got into the car and sped off as quickly as they dared, slewing into the main road.

"Something tells me Brooker has been tampering with their onboard computer," said the Doctor, allowing himself a smile.

Tom did a gleeful little hop as the cops raced off in their car. Code H, proceed immediately to the following destination – he'd picked a town 30 miles off – and maintain communications silence. Severest emergency.

"Couldn't be more perfect. Now Doctor, you'll be wanting to thank me I'm sure."

Cautiously he broke cover and crossed the road. The Doctor and Val were now standing at the door trying to get past the intercom. "Can I help?" he grinned.

The Doctor ignored him.

"He's got it covered," Val said. "Don't you ever do what you're asked?"

"Luckily not. Electronic locks Doctor, easy to bypass if..."

Val shushed him "Don't wind him up. He's worried."

The door clicked open. "I do not get wound up, Miss Rossi, I am not a clockwork mouse. As for electronic locks young man, I was dismantling them while your ancestors were still picking fleas out of their eyebrows. And yes, I am worried, there's a lot to be worried about."

* * * * *

The arrival of the police had given Ruby a scare. Had they found out? How? And yet, what could they charge her with? A practical joke at Christmas? Something to scare the kiddies, better suited for Halloween maybe, but no snow then is there? Oh yes, she could talk her way out of it. They did not know what she really planned.

But they had not known anything. She had been a fool to think they might. Just two stupid police officers worrying over some stalker who wouldn't have the guts to ring her bell even if he/she did get hold of the address.

"And where I live is hardly a secret," she told the officer, "I receive threats from time to time and paeans of adoration. I treat both with scepticism."

"Even so," the officer protested.

"Good night. Or rather, good morning. I'm sure you will want to get home. Have you any children?"

"Can't be doing with 'em. Deal with enough kids at work every day. Joe's got a kid."

"His first Christmas and I'm on duty. I've some photos, if you'd like to see."

"What I'd like is some peace and quiet."

"Can't do that, Professor."

Then their beepers went and they rushed away. "So much use if I really was in danger," she thought scornfully.

Ruby checked on the computer. Everything was perfect. She looked at the time: 6.30am. It would be starting soon, maybe already had, the children running out. Then data would flood back to the computer and the real work begin. She hurried over to her lab and listened at the door. She wanted to go in and see but it would be too cold and there was no need. The temperature would increase soon enough and besides, why not sit at the window and watch the fun?

* * * * *

Morning. Still early but not so early that excited children weren't leaping around the house tearing open Christmas presents. Not so early that weary parents don't button their offspring up in winter coats and send them out to play in the snow for an hour.

"Go and see how your snowman is doing," Olli mumbled from under the duvet. "We'll do big presents after breakfast."

Lissa agreed. "But don't go out of the garden. Plenty of snow there."

"Have we won the competition?" Angus demanded to know.

"Daddy will check later," said Lissa. Olli groaned. The competition was fun yesterday but today the thought of dealing with the disappointment if they didn't win was daunting.

Steaming out towards the garden Angus and Ryan got to the front door and skidded to a halt in amazement. Their snowman was right outside, almost blocking the entrance.

"He's moved," said Ryan in awe, sliding round and stepping on to the front path..

Angus thought about it. "Snow drift. He's drifted."

"That's stupid."

"You're stupid. He's thicker too. Let's get Dad. Dad!"

Beneath the duvet Olli groaned again. "Can't they play quietly for half an hour?"

"If we keep quiet," whispered Lissa, "maybe they'll go away."

Ryan pulled Angus outside too, brushing him against the snowman as he did so. "No, shut up." He pointed across the street. "Look, their snowman has walked too. Lots of them have!"

Angus knew this was impossible but he couldn't argue with evidence of his own eyes. Up and down the street all the snowmen had moved to the nearest front door. Other children were running to see, older ones, mystified, suspecting some prank, unable to work out how it had been done. The youngest running and squealing in delight. Ryan went up to their snowman and nudged it. "Are you alive, Mr Snowman?"

Angus sneered readied himself to deliver a withering put down. He kicked the snowman's base. The snowman's eyes swivelled to look at him. The scooped out hollow for a mouth twisted into a sort of grin and the arms that Olli had shown the boys how to mould lifted up and opened as if in welcome.

Ryan gave a shriek, part terror part excitement. Across the street others were shrieking too.

The snowman's arms opened wider, it moved forward pressing Angus against the door. Then the bulky white arms closed, embracing, engulfing him. Before Ryan could draw breath the snowman turned to him. It's mouth opened wide until it became a white cave. It bore down, swallowing him.

All over their street and in every street, snowmen were coming to life. They hugged the children who made them, hugged them close until nothing was left, nothing to see, nothing to save. Desperate screams drowned in snow.

* * * * *

Someone tapped on her door. The police again! Furious, Ruby raised her voice, "I won't tell you again. I'm perfectly all right. Go away."

The door opened.

"How dare you!"

But it wasn't the police. A man, not much taller than she walked in. He could only have been in his thirties yet he possessed a presence that dominated the room. He was followed by a younger man and a woman, both dressed in that retro way students went for these days but with old fashioned winter coats. Surely that wasn't fur? Even if it were legal, there weren't enough animals left for the real thing.

"Get out or I'll call the police."

"I thought you didn't want them here," said the strange man. He had an air of authority Ruby found unsettling. It was a long time since she felt second best to someone. These must be the people the police warned her against. How did they get in so easily? Would they try to harm her? Angrily she pulled herself together. She thought of the pistol in her desk, ready for just such an occasion. She started edging towards it. "They will be back soon. I should get out while you can."

"We won't hurt you," said the girl, "we need your help. You may not realise what you are doing. With the snow, I mean. It's not safe."

“What do you know about it? Are you from the Institute?”

The eerie man, with his sombre face and judgemental stare, laughed. Ruby realised he was at the computer, reading the data.

“Stop that! Come away!”

“She realises all right, don’t you Professor? Why is it? A hatred of children, one big ego trip? Or both?”

To Ruby’s horror he crossed over to the lab and put his hand to the door. “What’s in here? The ultimate monster?”

“How dare you. Get away.” She rushed forward, caught him by the shoulders and flung him back. “What do you understand about anything?”

From outside the flat distant sounds of shouting became louder and more panicked. The man straightened his jacket. “I’m the Doctor. This is Miss Valentina Rossi and this is Mister Tom Brooker. If I don’t understand Professor, then perhaps you’d better explain. And it better be good.”

* * * * *

Lissa and Olli mingled with the others, everyone calling their child’s name. But the snowmen stood lifeless again, silent prisons. Olli hurled himself at their snowman and tried to pull it apart, but under its fluffy white exterior it was solid ice, impervious. One man came running from his house with an axe, raised high. Before he could strike his snowman in two a low wailing came from inside, then a frightened cry. Through the snowman’s glassy, opaque eyes could be glimpsed the terrified, shiny eyes of its victim. slowly freezing and suffocating to death. The man fell to his knees and sobbed. Cries came from the next house. Soon the street was filled with the keening wail of trapped children

“There must be something we can do,” yelled Olli, “we can’t stand here doing nothing!”

“Heat,” said Lissa, “get heaters, melt them!”

Grabbing a fan heater, they unravelled an extension cord back into the garden and aimed a blast of hot air at the snowman. After a minute, Olli swore in frustration.

“It’s not working, the ice is getting thicker!”

Lissa ran out carrying a bucket of boiling water. Together they lifted it up and poured it over the top of the snowman. It froze on contact. Ruby, had she been there, would have smiled at the ingenuity of her creation. The program she had designed would not permit the snowmen to melt until the appointed hour. Any heat instantly reacted with the surface of the snow and caused the temperature to compensate back to freezing.

* * * * *

“Listen to those people! Is this what you want?” demanded the Doctor.

Val could see Ruby was not the sort of woman to back down to criticism. Quite the reverse. The Doctor's attitude, justified though it was, would not get answers. She moved forward, motioning for him to let her try. She expected an argument but perhaps he too realised Tranter might respond better to a sympathetic approach.

"It isn't what you want, is it? No one goes to this much trouble just to scare children, and I can't believe you want to hurt them."

"They won't be harmed! All that snivelling – they should be ashamed of themselves. There's sufficient air within the each snowmen, and their core body temperature is being maintained. After an hour or two the snowmen are programmed to melt. What a lot of fuss about nothing."

The Doctor interrupted her impatiently. "You are a scientist, if you do something there is a purpose behind it. So tell me Professor Tranter, what on earth are you trying to prove here!"

"The Doctor says the snow is alive," Val persisted. "What did you really make it for?"

Ruby ignored them. She looked through the window again, muttering as much to herself as anyone else. "They don't rule the world. Young people think they can do what they like, that they are invincible and no one else matters. Well no one is invincible. If things go on as they are the world will be run by jobs who terrorise their neighbours and laugh at order. I shall leave my mark on this world, I shall give it hope."

"And how exactly will this pantomime let you leave your mark on the world?" asked the Doctor

"The snowmen are simple data gatherers. I need something to be in contact with children for a few hours. At this time of the year, snow and children are practically inseparable."

Val joined her at the window. "Listen - they think their children are dying. The children think they are too. How can you listen to that and not care?"

"Did people listen when my brother lay dying in the street? Did they care when he cried in pain and fear?"

All this time Tom had been standing behind the Doctor, studying the computer set up over his shoulder. He glanced up now. "Is that why you are doing it? Revenge for your brother? You don't think massacring everyone under the age of twelve's a bit OTT?".

Val glared at him.

The Doctor went over to Ruby and spoke very quietly. "You need to concentrate on my voice, Professor. You have built a fantasy for yourself and now nothing matters to you except making it come true. But the real world is here and now; you can't use people like bits of a chemistry set. Do you realise two people died tonight? Your clever snow tried to do some data gathering early and completely absorbed them."

Ruby looked shocked. 'It couldn't have stabilized properly. It would be a minute or so before the structure was fully formed enough for the computer signal to home in

on it. If someone was tampering with it, it might try to gather data before knowing the limitations.”

“Tampering with it? It’s snow! What do you expect?” The Doctor shook his head incredulously.

To his surprise, Ruby laughed. “You storm in here lecturing me - me - and yet you know nothing about what I’m doing. Those people will be held in stasis, totally useless as a source of data but preserved just like the children are. When the computer signal is transmitted they’ll be reconstituted. Now, get out!”

For once the Doctor was taken aback. He’d been sure the purpose of the snowman had been to create some kind of independent creature, a golem like he and Val had discussed. So sure, he had not looked further.

“If what you say is true Professor, you have earned yourself a second chance. And I don’t give those very often.”

“I said get out.”

“I could send that signal, Doctor.” That was the younger man again, tampering with her computer. Ruby hated him.

But the Doctor didn’t seem to be listening. He paced the room, thinking out loud. “Data gatherers, eh? So the snowmen are not just frightening children. They’re bonding with them, processing their biological make-up, reading them. But they’re a genetic compound too, designed to adapt to the information they take in. That can’t be your intention... so what is the pattern for?” He stopped at the door to the incubation room. “The only thing one could make from such a pattern is growing inside this room. Am I right?”

“I have nothing to say.”

“Did it not occur to you,” the Doctor continued, trying to keep his voice calm, “that the absorption of the data from the children for your computer to create what is in that room will also be assimilated by the snowmen? You have become so obsessed with your plan you no longer see the truth. By attacking those television people the snow demonstrated not so much the enactment of its function, but an inherent compulsion to gather data from any human contact in order to adapt and survive. When the computer program kicked in that compulsion was dampened, but it is still there. While those snowmen last, they will not only gather data but try to use it themselves.”

“The computer program is...”

“Your simple computer program is being supplemented by all the thoughts and energy and excitement that makes a child. That is why they will not be released when the time comes. The snowmen are using them to become human.”

“Is that possible?” asked Val horrified.

Ruby closed her eyes. Why wouldn’t the screaming stop?

The Doctor’s cool snapped again. “Of course it’s not possible! Do you expect a snowman to understand Harsham’s Genetic Model of Constructive Reproduction? Once the program stops controlling their temperature, come the first bit of sunshine they’ll melt just like any other snowman, but by then the children inside will be dead,

absorbed like those poor souls from the TV station! Professor Tranter, stop this or I shall!"

Could this frightening man be right? Were her snow creatures developing a survival instinct and a compulsion to develop beyond the limits she had set? If they did not melt the air would stop filtering in, the temperature fall... and the children would die, but... "All this is speculation! Plausibility does not equal inevitability. Let the program run its course and everything will be fine."

"Fine?" the Doctor exploded, "do things sound fine? Stop the computer program now so those things stop gathering data, stop trying to understand it and let the children break free."

Ruby moved nearer to her desk. "If I do what you ask I won't have the data I need. That data is essential. I'm sorry, I don't accept what you say. And don't think you can stop it, the program is protected by a security profile."

"Mr Brooker."

"On to it, Doctor."

"Get him away from there!" Ruby made a dash for the pistol in the desk drawer but the Doctor blocked her way. "Don't let him touch that, he doesn't understand."

"Open the door to that room, Professor," he said firmly, "I think it is time to see for myself."

* * * * *

Inside the room the walls were lined with metal and coated in ice. The temperature was tolerable, just. Only a couple of hours ago it would have been impossible to enter without freezing to death but the temperature had risen incrementally. In the centre of the room sat a tank. At first Val thought it was filled with dry ice but then she saw a tiny figure lying inside and the clouds of cold vapour radiating from it as a fire radiates heat.

"Is it human?" she whispered.

"It's a long way from that," said the Doctor.

"This is my child," said Ruby and her voice cracked with emotion.

Val peered through the mist to see the creature more clearly. A perfectly formed body of a baby seemingly carved from ice; very tiny, very lifeless.

"It looks dead," she shuddered, horrified.

"No," Ruby retorted crossly, "he is becoming alive. Every minute the computer feeds in data the chemical equation adjusts to build this perfect copy, a better copy. My child!"

"And as each scrap of data is taken from real, living children, the snow creatures develop too, develop a survival instinct. The data tells them they are flesh and blood, they begin to think they are the children they have trapped. If we don't stop this all those poor children will die.

"I disagree." Ruby pointed to the tank. "If I do what you want he will die! I gave everything to make the world better, but look at it, look at the crop it produced!"

Most of those children are scum, degenerates. My brother lay dying in the street, a sick man. A sick man who was attacked for a few tokens by a gang of kids. And why? Money for drugs? No, they did not even have that excuse. They did it for fun, they stood up in court and told me to my face that they were bored and did it for fun! Let them rot! Here in this tank is a brilliant, pure thing. I shall make him perfect. I – I deserve this gift of life!”

The Doctor struggled to control his temper. “It isn’t alive yet, it has no brain function, no feeling. Believe me, Professor, I understand how you feel, but your choices were made years ago. You can’t have everything, life is about making do. We all make sacrifices.”

“Then let them be sacrificed!” Ruby swayed slightly, the mad words spoken without thought. Now they rang in her ears cruelly.

The Doctor looked into the tank. “What quality of life can this child have? Will it ever be able to live out of the cold? Not for long periods I suspect. How will it react to the heat of your arms? I don’t think you’ll be able to hold it in any meaningful way. How can you give it the love it needs when you can’t cradle it.”

“That’s enough, Doctor,” said Val angrily.

Ruby let out a sob. Then she staggered and Val rushed forward to support her.

“Ruby, you must stop this, you do see?”

“You don’t understand, you haven’t my vision. It won’t be like he says! I’m developing new techniques all the time.”

The Doctor left the room. Val guessed he was going to see how Tom was getting on, probably take over if he hadn’t got it cracked by now. Partly to keep Ruby from interfering but also because Val felt sorry for this lonely woman, Val tried reasoning with her.

“Won’t you help them? Those kids can’t all be bad. And even if they are, they deserve a chance - to grow up, to learn. Don’t they?”

“Is he right?” Ruby wondered, talking more to herself than Val. “Am I condemning the child to an empty life, as empty as mine? I don’t have the right to live forever. Trying to live again through this boy is wrong.” She gazed down at the shape in the tank. “It’s nothing more than a shell waiting to be animated with data. I might as well buy myself a damned android!”

Val did not know what to say, how to sympathise. Perhaps it was better not to, to make Ruby accept the reality and not to try and sweeten it with kind words that might then soften her against what she had to do.

Ruby turned her back to the tank. “A clinical decision is needed. The Doctor is right, it will be no life, it would not be able to live in a way it deserves. I don’t know what I was thinking of. He – it – isn’t alive yet. It has no brain function until the program is complete. Even then the outcome is not certain. Brain damage is a possibility. My calculations allow for it, but it is an evolving process, impossible to give guarantees...” She shuffled around the room as she spoke, her thoughts tumbling out. Then with sudden with purpose she ran back to the main room.

Val reached the door in time to hear the Doctor say, "Well done Mister Brooker. Shut it down."

Ruby leapt forward. "No!"

"Tom - do it."

Val ran forward too. "Wait Tom, just a second," she turned to Ruby and said gently, "you want to do it, don't you Ruby?"

Ruby nodded. "Yes, I can't let you. I must be the one."

The Doctor stepped back, his voice sombre suddenly but not scolding. "Then it must be now, there is not much time left. You must be brave."

Ruby's hand fell against the keyboard and caressed it slightly. "It's so unfair..."

Tom was looking at the time. "Doctor - "

"Wait. Val?"

Val went over to Ruby. "Go on."

Ruby moved to the keyboard. Tom shifted back to give her room. She gazed down at it and then looked back up. "I can't."

"Doctor!"

"A moment, Mister Brooker. Professor, I'm waiting."

The seconds passed. Soon there would be no time left. Then, just as the Doctor was about to take over, Ruby lifted her hand and tapped in six digits on the keyboard. "Click, click, click..." she whispered, "and it all ends."

"Tom?" demanded the Doctor,

"Nothing's happening. I see - it should be ten digits, she's done six. I can't work it out in time now!"

"No need to panic, Mister Brooker."

The Doctor crossed over to the keyboard where Ruby still sat. "I know the numbers. I gave you a second chance. It ends in five seconds."

One, two, three, four... the Doctor reached over to the keyboard.

"No, wait." Lifting her hand again, Ruby tapped in four final numbers and the computer program stopped dead. The word 'error' scrolled down the screen in an endless blur. Ruby fell into Val's arms, sobbing.

"It's all right, we understand," whispered Val. "Doctor, she did it."

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, well done."

Outside, the snowmen were crumbling as hands thrust through from inside. Parents rushed to help. Olli and Lissa tore their snowman apart and cried and laughed with joy as their two boys fell into their arms.

* * * * *

The Doctor came out of the laboratory and shut the door.

"She's sleeping," said Val. "What did you do in there?"

"Tidied away."

"It wasn't alive was it? We haven't killed it?"

"Of course not. It was only a shape waiting for life. And not much of one at that. Synthesised DNA, its responses derived from a computer program. More android than human, and not even flesh and blood. She was fooling herself, and she knew it at the end. Well done Valentina, she wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for you. And I needed her to do it. By making her face the truth she'll be able to face reality."

Val smiled wearily.

"She's got a real downer on the younger generation," said Tom, "lucky she wasn't the judge when I got sent down or I would have got the death sentence. What a loss to the universe that would be. She's not right up here, Doctor," he tapped his head. "We can't leave her free to cook up another crazy scheme."

The Doctor walked into Ruby's bedroom and closed the door. She lay on her side, curled up, eyes closed.

"If you were awake," he said casually, "listening to the laughter outside and realising all the bright, hopeful futures each child might have, and if you heard Mister Brooker's poetical discourse on his life and times, not to mention analysis of your mental state, I think you might realise what your future could be. For once don't find a theory to fit the facts, alter the facts. Take those children and give them hope." He smiled. "If you were awake that is."

Ruby heard him leave and opened her eyes. That boy nearly cracked the code, would have done if the Doctor had let him; an ignorant boy wet behind the ears, exactly the type she expected to find in a gang. Her arrogance shamed her and her ruthless shocked her. How could she have been so blinkered? The Doctor was right. There was a way to hand on the best of what she was, an unselfish way.

* * * * *

Degs opened her eyes and wondered why she couldn't move. She breathed in, the effort hurt her lungs and she let out a little cry. A face appeared and looked down at her. "Pushki?"

"Yes."

"You look as bad as I feel. What happened? Why can't I move?" She tried not to sound frightened.

"Don't panic."

"I didn't think I was. Oh, well."

He grinned. She'd be alright. "We got buried somehow, don't understand it. I managed to dig my way out. I'll have you free in a few minutes. Where's a bloody android when you want one?"

"Perhaps we should call Yarni? About all she's good for. Hey, where's my phone?"

Pushki cleared enough of the snow for Degs to sit up. "Don't worry about that!"

"They'll charge me."

"So we'll sue them for sending us out in dangerous weather conditions."

Not a bad idea, Degs thought as she struggled to her feet. Suddenly she remembered the competition and surveyed the street in surprise.

"Where have all the snowmen gone?"

* * * * *

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* * * * *

As the three walked back to the TARDIS Val watched the happy groups playing and laughing. No one quite understood what had happened that day. The popular theory was that someone had played a sick joke. Fortunately, it was over and so everyone rejoiced. "She thought she wanted a child so much, but she didn't really. She wanted to be young, to start all over again," said Val.

"Tranter needed to stop thinking like a scientist and remember that she is a human being," replied the Doctor. "She'd written off the next generation instead of trying to help it. Keep up you two."

Tom laughed. "Scientists are humans too. Well, some of them. It was being alone that did it, sends them a bit potty." He leaned closer to Val and whispered, "That's why he keeps us round the place."

They both looked at the Doctor, striding out ahead, stamping down on the remains of the snow with a purposeful air. Every now and then he bent down to gather some and throw it up into the air.

"He was potty long before we got here," said Val. They laughed.

The Doctor turned round, snow cupped in one hand. "Two things to remember. One, I have excellent hearing. Two, you are with me to learn and develop your skills. Now, I'm conducting a simple test to ascertain the rate which this substance turns back into ordinary snow. The quicker it falls, the better it is. For example."

With a lightning speed the Doctor hurled the snow at them, managing to catch part of both of them in one go. "Howzat? My, that takes me back."

Reaching the TARDIS, the Doctor put the key in the lock and paused. "Now the atmosphere will be coming back and the key will turn when it's safe."

"You're sure Ruby is okay?" asked Val.

"She passed the test. I think she sees the way forward."

"One question, Doctor?"

"One question, Thomas Brooker."

"How did the snow get in the TARDIS? We never did find out."

"The TARDIS never really gets the credit she deserves for her cleverness, do you old girl? It scanned the snow and deduced its data gathering capabilities. Rather than become encased in it the TARDIS decided to let it pass through where it would melt safely. As I said, clever. " The lock clicked as if in answer. "Ah, it's safe to enter. . Come on."

The Doctor disappeared inside.

"He's the limit, isn't he?" said Tom.

Taking a last look at the village, Val was reminded of an old fashioned Christmas card, ironic considering how far in the future they were. All that was missing were the carol singers. "I wonder if they sing carols these days."

Tom shrugged. "Tone deaf, me." He entered the TARDIS and stopped abruptly. "What on earth is that!"

Val pushed past him. "What's happening? Oh my goodness!"

Tom was staring at the Doctor. "You're holding a baby," he said in amazement.

The Doctor chuckled. "Very good Mr Brooker, your observation skills are coming along nicely. It does seem to be a baby. Here, hold her. The look on your faces is almost worth the problem of what to do with her."

Val peered at the tiny bundle in Tom's nervous grasp. "She's so cute."

"And cold," said Tom. "She's one of those ice creatures."

As he spoke the baby made a whimpering noise and wriggled slightly. "Oh, she is cute," Tom grinned.

"I thought girls are meant to be the soppy ones," said Val. She looked puzzled. "Where did she come from and what are we going to do with her? She's hungry. How do we feed a baby made of snow?"

The Doctor cleared his throat. "Quite right. Mustn't get carried away – practicalities. It's just the scientific achievement of it all I find rather stimulating. The snow in the TARDIS developed like the snowmen did, but took its information not from Ruby's limited computer program alone, or only from analysing human DNA. It took it from the TARDIS. That's why the TARDIS let the snow in, because it recognised a life form trying to grow." He patted the console. "You are an old softy at heart."

"What did you say?"

"I was saying that this child goes far beyond what Ruby tried to create. It will adapt and grow. I've only just disconnected her from the TARDIS life support but already she is twice the size she was. Put her down Mister Brooker before you drop her."

Tom did so. "You're right, she's almost a toddler." A nasty thought struck him. "Is her life span accelerated then? It will be awful if... oh, I can't watch her get old and die!"

"No question of that." The Doctor worked busily at a terminal on the console. "I've regulated the flow of data and stabilized development of organs and senses in relative equilateral balance."

"Which means?"

"Which means, Miss Rossi, we have a young snow maiden on our hands of approximately six years of age, human terms, who will now develop at normal speed."

She needs teaching, looking after, caring for and, if I'm not mistaken, changing. Any thoughts?"

* * * * *

The Robert Tranter Centre for Learning and Excellence. Ruby's pride and joy. Now in its sixth year and achieving remarkable results. The building dominated a hilltop overlooking Fenurst. Its campus cascaded gently downwards to the town. At the centre of the main hall was an open space, water trickling from the fountain and glittering like diamonds under the sun.

A training centre for the young was how she promoted it. The human mind seeks constantly to occupy itself, a young person's mind particularly, Ruby had become fond of saying. Fail to engage their interest, fail to stimulate their imagination and all that energy and inventiveness turns inwards and corrodes. It was a place for peaceful contemplation and Ruby often sat beside here, remembering.

At least normally it was quiet, but today the peace was shattered. An elephantine trumpeting split the air, rose to a crescendo and then died away.

"Who put that box here? If this is someone's idea of wit I shall be happy to lend them my dictionary. In fact they can copy the thing out in detention. Droid."

A service android glided up. "I am happy to help."

"This ugly thing; get it moved. It's an eyesore."

The droid did a weight calculation. "Please wait while I fetch assistance."

"While it's doing that," said the Doctor as he exited the TARDIS. "We can have a chat. How are you Professor Tranter?"

"Doctor! I never expected to see you again. Are you checking up on me?"

"Do I need to?"

"Of course not. All the same, it's six years, a funny time to reappear for no good reason."

"Six years? Excellent, exactly right then. And I do have a good reason." He looked round appreciatively. "It's a nice place you have here. Do you live in?"

"I have a small apartment on the top floor."

"Stairs might be a problem. Other rooms you could use?"

"I'm not that old. Eighty-three is nothing these days. One of my staff is a hundred and two!"

"It's not being too old I'm talking about. It's being too young."

Ruby shook her head in exasperation. "You do like to talk in riddles. I have a question for you, if you'll give me a straight answer."

"You may try."

"Did you really know the last four numbers of the code or was it all a bluff? Not that it mattered, I'd made up my mind to enter them."

"I know you had." The Doctor gave a rare smile. "And I'm glad you did. Since you asked a straight question, I shall give you a straight answer."

The Doctor told her the four numbers.

Ruby nodded. She thought as much. "You are a clever man. It was the year my brother died. I saw the child as the future he never had."

The Doctor clapped his hands together twice. "Enough melancholy. Come out you three."

Tom and Val appeared, each holding the hand of a little girl. Val grinned at Ruby's expression. "You'll need to do everything for her to start with, teach her to speak, find out what she likes to eat and show her how to. So far she's only drunk nutrients the TARDIS cooked up; not nice."

The child was very pale and thin, yet her ice blue eyes were alive with intelligence and questions. "Where does she come from?"

"Born out of your experiment, Professor, but shielded in my spaceship. The TARDIS life support allowed her to develop as you see. But the cord is cut. She needs someone in the real world."

Ruby could hardly speak. There were tears in her eyes but for once she did not try to hide them. "She – she will be safe with me, I promise."

"A Christmas present for you both," the Doctor said.

"It's July..."

"Mister Brooker!"

"You set the co-ordinates!"

"Just as well I did then, or we'd be even farther off. Well, I suppose it's an early Christmas present then."

Abruptly, he turned back to the TARDIS. "Come along you two," he called, disappearing round the side.

"Sometimes I wonder, I really do" said Tom. "Good luck Ruby. She's going to be a proper heart breaker."

Val lingered a moment, watching. Ruby knelt in front of the girl, smiling happily. Val followed Tom into the TARDIS. There was nothing more to say.

With a wheezing groaning noise that sent the birds darting into the sky, the TARDIS began to dematerialise.

At the same moment three droids glided into the square to remove it. Unable to find it, they concluded they had done the job. "Is there anything else we can do for you today?"

Ruby laughed. "Yes, I'm moving into a bigger apartment on the ground floor, far more practical for a little girl, especially one who is still shaky on her feet. Go and wait for me inside."

She picked the girl up and held her close. "Happy Christmas," she whispered, then looked up into the sky. "Thank you, Doctor, for my second chance."

The Tenth Doctor, Val and Tom return in 2013



The Doctor Who Project would like to extend its special thanks and great appreciation to Will Brooks in the assistance of completing this special.



"There is something in the atmosphere above Earth. You can't see it or feel it, but it is waiting, counting the days, the hours... waiting for Christmas..."

Professor Ruby Tranter was a senior scientist working for the government finding new ways for mankind to survive in the 29th century. Now they've retired her. She feels cheated and bitter. Her big regret is never having a child to love and which would inherit her work.

Snow is falling inside the TARDIS. The Doctor realises someone is tampering with nature and sets off to stop them.

Using illegal government research Ruby sets about making the perfect child in her laboratory and uses the snow to gather her data. Next day the snowmen built by the local children come to life and envelop them.

The Doctor, Tom and Val must make Ruby stop her experiment so the real children can be freed. But there is a further consequence to Ruby's experiment even the Doctor did not expect.

This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Tenth Doctor as played by Laurent Meyer

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