

THE **LUCY WILSON** *MYSTERIES*

A LITTLE LUCY CHRISTMAS



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Once upon a time, there was a little village called Frostingle. It was a perfect little place with a perfect little pub, a perfect little post office, a perfect little butcher's, a perfect little grocer's, a perfect little sweet shop, a perfect little toy shop, and a perfect little church. In the village square, every year, they raised a perfect little Christmas tree, and carollers gathered around it to sing away the darkness.

Darkness was the thing that the people of Frostingle feared. For eleven months of the year in Frostingle there was nothing but darkness. No sun, no moon, no stars to shed even the slightest light. The window of the toy shop went dark, and the butcher, the grocer, the sweet shop, even the post office all fell prey to darkness and silence. It was as if the world folded up around them, a black cloud enveloping the town and blotting out everything that lay beyond. No matter how hard the carollers sang, no matter how bright the Christmas lights shone, the darkness always came.

But still, the people of Frostingle sang. They sang not in the hope that the darkness would not come, for they all knew in their hearts it must, but in the hope that it would retreat again as it always had before. For just one month every year Frostingle knew light and the people of Frostingle sang.

It had been this way for as long as the people of Frostingle could remember and, perhaps, it always would have been this way if not for the arrival one year of a most peculiar girl. She appeared as if by magic one day, stumbling into the village square, wearing what appeared to be a set of Christmas pyjamas, and a somewhat perplexed expression.

‘Oh for goodness’ sake,’ she muttered. ‘I’m on the flipping dining table!’

Nobody had the slightest idea what she meant.

Traditions were a big thing in the Wilson household, in that Lucy’s mum was absolutely desperate to create some. They shouldn’t still feel like newcomers to Ogmores-by-Sea, but somehow they did. Lucy’s mum had joined book groups, attended coffee mornings, volunteered at the local library, and had even had one ill-advised stab at forming an acapella singing group, but still hadn’t quite found her place in Ogmores. Lucy’s dad was still travelling back and forth to London for work, and, of late, had never seemed one hundred percent present when he was

at home. It was like being visited by the ghost of someone who was still alive, a phantom that looked and moved and sounded just like her father, but was never quite there, never quite complete.

‘Christmas,’ Mum said, ‘Is a time to come together,’ by which she meant it was an opportunity for her to inject herself into all the local goings-on in search of her ‘thing’, a chance for Dad to embrace the simpler life that he’d moved them down here in search of, and for Lucy to do more than just... ‘Well, anything *other* than whatever you and Hobo get up to on a regular basis.’

‘It’s not that I disapprove of George,’ Mum had said, frequently. ‘But wouldn’t it be nice to make friends with some girls your own age as well?’

This was one of what Lucy called her mum’s ‘Greatest Hits’, ongoing campaigns of mother-daughter torture that Mum returned to on a regular basis. Depending on her mood, Lucy had a range of standard responses. There was sullen indifference; a reminder that she did have some other friends in Ogmere (as long as you were willing to stretch the definition of friend well past its elastic limit); a spirited defence of George ‘Hobo’ Kostinen as ‘her *best* friend and the only interesting person in Wales’; or a sharply worded reminder that she’d had plenty of approved-by-Tamara-Wilson friends back in London before she was shanghaied to deepest

darkest South Wales.

No matter which one Lucy chose, the one thing that went unspoken was Lucy's long-held suspicion that the real reason for the Wilson family moving to South Wales was to do with Lucy's legacy, as the last in the long and illustrious line of the Lethbridge-Stewarts. Lucy's grandfather, Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, had been at the front line of defending Earth from alien incursion for most of his life. He'd fought in wars that nobody knew about against enemies that were beyond top secret. He'd kept the world safe, despite most of the world having no idea that he, or the people he worked with, existed at all. Lucy was one of only a small number of people who knew some of the secret history of the world, learned on her grandfather's knee as he'd recounted his stories of the 'good old days'.

At the time, Lucy had thought they were just stories, but she knew better now. Her grandfather had been preparing her, training her, warning her. Like iron in the blood, there was something about the Lethbridge-Stewart line that was a magnet for the strange, the weird, the dangerous and the other-worldly. Half of her school still only knew her as 'that girl who came down from London', but half a galaxy away... they knew the name of Lucy Wilson.

Secrets and never-quite-fitting-in. Maybe the

Wilson house did have a few traditions after all.

The Christmas decorations came out at the start of December as regular as clockwork. Lucy had heard her mum muttering darkly about ‘across the road’ and ‘four doors down’ a few days before as she planned, with a military precision that Lucy’s grandad would have envied, the deployment of Christmas lights to the front of the Wilson house. But today was it... D-Day. Decorations Day. All hands to the pump and nobody-leaves-this-house-until-everything’s-perfect day.

The tree was up by nine. Tinsel pinned and swagged across every door and window by ten. Knick-knacks, seasonal ornaments, bric-a-brac and novelties were deployed to all available surfaces by ten-thirty. Dad had been roused from his bed and forced into a Christmas jumper and some musical antlers several hours earlier, and was now climbing the ladder outside the house with a reel of Christmas lights over his shoulder, and all the enthusiasm of a soldier climbing a trench ladder into No Man’s Land by eleven.

‘All done inside then, Mum?’ Lucy asked hopefully, sensing the opportunity that she could salvage the bulk of Saturday for far more Lucy-compatible activities if she played her (Christmas) cards right. She was still in her pyjamas, a cunning

defence tactic that meant her presence outside was absolutely forbidden by her mum, lest Lucy be seen in her nightwear by the watchful eyes of 'across the road' or 'four doors down'. In a concession to Mum, and the season, the pyjamas did at least fit the theme of the day; bright red with a repeated pattern of jolly Santas, slightly perplexed reindeer, and grinning anthropomorphic Christmas trees.

Mum held the ladder as Dad clambered awkwardly up it, her eyes alternately on him and scanning for any neighbours who might be conducting festive espionage on the Wilson display before it was fully installed.

'Can you put the little people out on the dining table, please?' she asked. 'And be careful, they're heirlooms.'

Lucy rolled her eyes and stalked into the house, leaving a sigh behind her that had only slightly less density than an imploding star. The 'little people' that her mum was referring to was a set of miniature shops and houses, all Christmas-themed and styled after the kind of chocolate-box Victorian utopia that had never existed. Last year, Hobo had pointed out that perhaps the set should have included a little workhouse or perhaps a tiny asylum, a suggestion that while factually accurate and historically insightful, had done nothing to endear him to the wider Wilson clan.

Lucy found the old cardboard box containing the 'little people' in the lounge, placed carefully on the sofa and emblazoned with the words 'Wilson Christmas Village' in thick black marker pen ink on the side. She opened it up, breaking the layers of new and old Sellotape that held it shut like she was stripping the bandages off a desiccated mummy (which she had done once, but that's another story). Inside the box, carefully wrapped in old newspaper, were the houses.

They'd been around ever since Lucy could remember, those special kind of Christmas decorations that were designed to be utterly entrancing to all children, while simultaneously being so delicate that they would be absolutely forbidden from touching them by their parents. *The work perhaps*, Lucy thought, *of a failed toy maker who now wished only ill on children and sought to torture them from afar with his tiny creations.* She vaguely remembered losing a piece one year, a little figure that went with the butcher's shop and wondered if, somewhere, the imagined toy maker had heard the dressing down she'd received from her mum that day.

Lucy got the tiny houses out one by one, shaking off the newspaper, and placing them carefully on the dining table. There was the little pub, the little post office, the little butcher's shop, the little grocer's

shop, the little sweet shop, the little toy shop, and the little town square with its little Christmas tree and assorted carol singers. Lucy flicked the little switch on the bottom of each one as she put it out, the lights inside flickering into life after a moment of electrical hesitation. As much as her mum's annually increasing mania for Christmas decorations irritated her, and the health and safety implications of this year's Christmas lights gravely concerned her, Lucy couldn't deny the soft warm feeling she felt as she looked down at the tiny, perfect Christmas town in all its exquisite, microscopic detail. Except, there was something missing...

'The church,' muttered Lucy to herself. 'Where's the church gone?'

The church was probably Lucy's favourite, its stained-glass windows fascinating her as a younger child. She picked carefully through the scrunched and folded newspaper until she found it, buried in a corner. Gently she brought it out, flicked the switch, and promptly dropped it onto the table with a resounding crash.

'Is everything okay?' called Mum, using the particular frequency and tone of voice that all mothers use when they say 'Is everything okay?' but what they really mean is 'Everything had better be okay or there will be dire consequences the likes of which normally only occur in fairy tales.'

‘Yeah, all good!’ replied Lucy, using the particular frequency, tone of voice, and high pitched over exuberance that all children use when they know things are not okay but want to avoid, or at least delay, dire consequences the likes of which normally only occur in fairy tales.

She snatched the church up off the table and began hastily inspecting it for damage. Steeple... check. Stained glass windows... check. Lights working... check. Creepy and unnecessary little gravestones... check. Doors... not check. Lucy had never realised the doors to the little houses could open. They were all decorated inside, carefully crafted little details you could peep in on through the windows, but Lucy was sure she’d never seen one of the doors open. Nevertheless, there it was – a miniature door hanging open from a tiny hinge.

Lucy stole a glance at the door. Mum was still holding the ladder, and holding her father to account for his lack of skills as a lighting engineer and steeplejack. She took a moment, took a breath. There was time. She could fix this. She’d fought off alien invaders; she could fix a tiny church.

Placing the church on the table, Lucy squatted down to get a proper look at it. The lights were on inside the church and Lucy couldn’t help but marvel at the detail; rows of tiny pews leading up to a tiny altar and pulpit, holly and mistletoe hanging down

from the vaulted ceiling, a little Christmas tree complete with working lights, and a small group of soldiers peeping around the corner, tiny rifles aimed directly at Lucy.

‘What on earth—’ said Lucy, her voice cut short by a sudden white light that burst out of the church.

‘Lucy? Are you definitely all right?’ called Mum, this time using the special tone of voice mothers use when the next time they repeat themselves it might be in front of a judge and followed by the words ‘And that’s why I locked my daughter in a tower for one hundred years, your honour.’

But this time, there was no answer.

Lucy Wilson was gone.

Lucy staggered forward towards the Christmas tree. She felt unsteady, as if she were wearing a large, heavy backpack that kept shifting her centre of gravity. After a few steps she made it, wrapping her hands around the trunk and using it to steady herself as she sank to the ground. The tree felt strange underneath her hands and it took her a moment to realise that although it looked like wood, it was made of plastic. Everything here was made of plastic.

The ground wasn’t ground; it was her mum’s best dark red velvet tablecloth, the one she fussed over, picking out invisible crumbs and making threats about gravy stains all through December.

Around her the living room had vanished, replaced by life-sized versions of the tiny Christmas houses she had been arranging a moment before. No, *not* life-sized, she realised, *they're the same size. I'm small.*

It took her brain just a split-second to adjust to this new reality. That was the other secret power of the Lethbridge-Stewarts, the flip side to being a 'weirdness magnet' as Hobo had once put it. Lucy had a seemingly limitless capacity to accept the strange and the alien as normal, to expand her definition of what the world was to accommodate any new strangeness that came her way, no matter how bizarre. A disembodied alien intelligence? A troupe of assassination clowns in a time travelling vanishing cabinet? An alien snake masquerading as a kid's TV personality? Any one of these would be enough to send a regular person screaming into the hills but to Lucy, they were just her life.

Suddenly, just as Lucy was wrapping her head around where and what she was, the tree let out a deafening burst of music – the first few bars of 'God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen' and from the other side of the tree's broad green foliage, which Lucy realised up close was one big painted plastic mass, not individual branches at all, carollers shuffled into view. There were six of them, moving in a group, their feet all bound to a single lump of white plastic sculpted to look like a bank of snow. They were

wrapped up warm in Victorian costumes, complete with top hats for the gentlemen and bonnets for the ladies. One of the two men at the back of the group held a lantern on a long black pole, a tiny light flickering inside.

They looked at Lucy; their eyes forced downwards in their sockets because their heads were fixed in one position, raised up towards the sky, their plastic mouths constantly open as they sang out an endless, silent note.

‘Breathe, Lucy,’ she said to herself. ‘This is fine. You’ve just been shrunk down into the tiny Christmas village on the dining table and there are creepy silent carollers coming to get you. And you’re wearing your pyjamas. No biggie.’

The carollers shuffled closer again. There was a cracking sound of breaking plastic as the carollers pulled their hands away from the hymn sheets they had been holding since before Lucy’s childhood, and reached out for her instead; their heads slowly bending downwards, their mouths still open wide.

Lucy struggled awkwardly to her feet, still dizzy, and managed to take a few steps back before she fell onto her bottom. The carollers advanced, their sculpted hands more like claws as they reached out for her.

Suddenly, a pair of arms with gloved hands wrapped around her and started hoisting her up

onto her feet. She turned and saw, behind her, the soldiers from the church. They were different to the carollers; their faces softer and more human, but clearly not entirely human and Lucy instinctively pulled away.

The soldier who had grabbed her let go, but stood his ground as his companions rushed past him, pushing the carollers back by force. Some of them limped, Lucy noticed, and one of them only seemed to have the use of one arm. Despite this, they were a match, for the moment, for the many-limbed monster of carollers.

‘Sergeant Pine, miss,’ the soldier said politely. He had the clipped, formal military tone that Lucy remembered her grandfather had tended to use when he’d been on the phone to any of his old army friends and contacts.

There was a soft thud as the soldiers toppled the carollers over, leaving them thrashing on their combined backs like an upside down mutated turtle.

‘I’m Lucy Wi—’

‘Yes, I know who you are, miss. We all do.’

The other soldiers turned and, in what was roughly a line, saluted Lucy one by one. They were a rag-tag bunch but Lucy could tell it wasn’t for want of trying. Their old-fashioned army uniforms had been stitched, patched, and stitched again; their boots were worn but still clean and some

approximation of polished. The rifles slung over their shoulders were aged and rusted but doubtless very functional, Lucy concluded. It was their faces where things changed, however. It was if they were wearing transparent masks, a layer of translucent film that gave their skin the smooth shine and gloss of plastic. Their eyes looked out from inside themselves, as if their bodies were just shells with other people hiding inside. Lucy thought immediately of the carollers with their eyes moving independently of their frozen singing faces.

‘You’d best come with us, miss. Before more of them come,’ said Pine, nodded towards the carollers where they struggled and writhed, trying to regain their footing.

‘There are more of them?’ asked Lucy.

‘Oh yes,’ the soldier replied. ‘It can get quite lively here, come night-time.’

Without another word, the soldiers fell into step with each and quick-marched towards the church, the one with the limp at the front setting the pace, Pine escorting Lucy at the rear.

‘How did I get here?’ she asked. ‘There was a light and then... here I am?’

‘Sykes,’ said Pine grimly. ‘He’s a... bit of a dark horse, miss, if I’m not speaking out of turn. An officer, technically speaking, but well... you’ll see what I mean.’

And see what he meant Lucy did, as she and the soldiers trooped into the now not-so-tiny church. Every little detail she'd seen when she was her real size was still there but, up close, she could see how her eyes had played tricks on her before. The pews were just solid brown lumps, the Christmas tree was flat and one-dimensional, the holly and mistletoe just lumpy bits of plastic spotted with white and red paint. Behind Lucy, two of the soldiers awkwardly pulled the brown painted door closed, plastic scratching against plastic.

'Welcome to our little sanctuary,' said Sergeant Pine. He unslung his rifle from his shoulder and propped it up against one of the pews. The stock made a comfortably solid wooden sound as it touched the floor.

'Your rifle's real,' commented Lucy.

'I rather hope so,' replied Pine. 'It's not going to be much use otherwise, miss.'

Before Lucy could ask another question, the door of the rectory burst open. A man wearing a white coat over his military fatigues rattled towards them with all the calm and composure of a small localised tornado. Coming to a halt, he peered at Lucy through two sets of spectacles, flicking strands of long, gray wiry hair out of his eyes. Lucy had met her fair share of oddballs and she knew the routine

well; it was best to let them think they had the measure of you, even if that sometimes involved taking actual measurements.

‘Professor Sykes,’ said the man finally, his inspection complete. He thrust out a wooden hand for Lucy to shake. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said, ‘It’s wooden, quite safe.’

Lucy grasped the dark cherry wood hand in hers and shook it gently.

‘How did you do it?’

‘Oh, ah well,’ Sykes began. ‘It’s a very interesting story. It all began at International Electromatics, where I was working under some rather haphazard scientists and, well, suffice it to say that losing a hand made me one of the lucky ones. Still, I’m digressing, the story really starts in London, where I was invited to—’

‘I meant how did you shrink me?’ interrupted Lucy.

‘Oh, yes, I see,’ replied Sykes, clearly crestfallen that the story of his hand would go untold for now. ‘Well, I’ve been experimenting with the shrinking device, trying to reverse the effects.’

‘You’re not doing very well,’ quipped Lucy.

Sykes’s expression soured. ‘Now, see here young lady...’

But Sykes was cut short by a sudden staccato rapping at the door. Lucy spun around as Pine

grabbed his rifle.

‘On your feet, lads,’ he ordered, raising his rifle and heading towards the door.

‘Is it the carol singers?’ asked Lucy, positioning herself just behind Pine as he crept slowly towards the door.

‘If we’re lucky,’ said Pine quietly.

‘And if we’re unlucky?’

‘Then it will be the butcher.’

In Lucy’s experience, people who went by the name of ‘The Butcher’ were not good people to be around. Real butcher’s, actual butcher’s who worked in actual butcher’s shops didn’t go around calling themselves ‘The Butcher’. They didn’t even have it as a middle name. They had normal, dependable names like Fred or Frank or Bob or John or George.

The man at the door of the church was not a Fred.

Barrel-chested and wearing a blue and white striped apron over his white trousers and shirt, his broad shoulders led down to thick arms with rolled up sleeves that were rooted firmly to his hips. In one hand, a cleaver jutted out at waist height. Unlike the carollers, his feet were not welded to a piece of plastic but free to move, after a fashion. Like the soldiers, the Butcher seemed to be somewhere between plastic and person, a shell with a person trapped inside. The top half of his face was hard and

shiny; his eyes fixed open either side of a round nose and flamboyant Victorian strongman-style moustache. Underneath his moustache, his face seemed more human, fleshy and mobile as it should have been. This, Lucy guessed, was why he could talk when the carollers couldn't.

'We just want the girl,' said the Butcher. His voice was rich and deep, resonating from his barrel chest. 'That's all.'

'I can't allow that,' replied Pine politely. 'She's not here deliberately, Butcher, we'll be sending her back just as soon as we can.'

The Butcher looked past Pine at Lucy. His eyes were hungry and malevolent. Lucy could feel him dissecting her as if she were a hunk of meat on his chopping block. Why was everyone who called themselves 'The' something always so terrifying? Lucy wondered if she should start calling herself '*The Lucy Wilson*'. Maybe things like this would stop happening to her then, but then she thought about the Doctor. Perhaps not!

'She's the right size to replace Bobby the Urchin,' said the Butcher. 'She'll fit right in.'

Bobby the Urchin – Lucy's mind whizzed back through the years and regurgitated the details of the dressing down she'd had from her mum for losing a piece of the Christmas Town. That was what it had been – a little urchin child, stealing a string of

sausages from the butcher's shop. She could see him clearly in her memory now; ragged trousers, a little top hat with the lid open like a baked bean tin, little pink sausages trailing behind him as he ran away.

Pine squared up to the Butcher so that his rifle muzzle pressed against the man's barrel chest with a soft tap of metal on plastic.

'I said I can't allow that,' repeated Pine. 'You know the rules, Butcher. You get your month, we follow the traditions, nobody comes and nobody goes. Same as always.'

With a creak of straining plastic, the Butcher leant forward from the waist.

'One touch,' he said menacingly. 'You're not far off now are you, Pine? One more touch ought to do it.'

Pine looked down at his rifle, dragging the Butcher's eye line with him to where his finger was on the rifle trigger, applying just enough pressure to make the metal flex. 'Same to you,' he said firmly.

The Butcher's fleshy face twisted into a sneer. 'It's a long month,' he said softly. 'You know what they say... as one door opens.'

The Butcher pulled up to his full height and walked awkwardly back from the church door, his legs stiff, his eyes never leaving Lucy. Lucy held his glare right up until Pine stepped forward and shouldered the church doors closed.

‘I think it’s time for some answers,’ said Lucy, perched up on the back of the nearest pew with her knees under her chin. ‘Starting with you, Professor.’

Sykes had been fiddling with the hinges of the church door, his back to Lucy and the soldiers. Lucy knew a little about flying under the radar, and she knew keeping your head down when she saw it. The Professor turned sheepishly.

‘Me?’ he asked.

Lucy rolled her eyes. ‘Yes,’ she said sarcastically, ‘You.’

She hopped back down and strode towards Sykes, trying her best to look impressive despite her Christmas pyjamas. ‘Because I’m pretty sure that you know what zapped me down here. And I’m pretty sure you know how to zap me back. And even if I wasn’t sure of those two things, I should probably tell you who I am. I’m—’

‘You’re Lucy Wilson,’ interrupted Sykes. ‘Also known as Lucy Lethbridge-Stewart. Granddaughter of Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart. Self appointed queen of everything, or something.’

‘Oh,’ said Lucy, ‘Well, yeah, it’s along those lines. Except that last part.’

People usually let her get through her introductory monologue. It was sort of her thing. How on earth could half her school have no idea who she was, but this shrunken scientist was

running her Wikipedia page?

‘We’ve been watching you,’ said Sykes. ‘Ever since your sainted grandfather trapped us here. Ever since he let us get turned from the best unit under his command into a bunch of... toy soldiers.’

‘We stand guard,’ interrupted Pine. ‘We do our duty. It’s what we all signed up for.’

The other soldiers muttered their agreement. Lucy looked at them again, embarrassed to realise that she didn’t even know their names. They were all young, including Pine, except for one grizzled old soldier who Lucy recognised as the one who had limped at the front of their march to the church. She recognised their uniforms, patched and clumsily repaired as they were, recognised the Fifth Operational Corps insignia on each of their arms. Her grandfather’s old command, the secret group that had defended Earth from countless alien threats. In his stories, he’d always skipped over the parts where people died. Lucy had always thought that it was just because she was too young to hear it but now, looking at these soldiers, she wondered if it had been too painful even for him to speak about. What price had been paid for the world to be saved, all those times? How many people had given their lives, unknown and unremembered, for the rest of the world to be free? Whatever was going on here, it was another part of her family legacy, another

ghost from her grandfather's past come back to haunt her.

'Maybe I can help you?' she asked. 'I've seen some things, helped some people.'

'We're beyond help,' said Sykes darkly. 'Once you're touched by this place, there's no going back.'

He stalked off down the church, disappearing into the rectory and slamming the door behind him. Lucy and the soldiers stood in silence for a moment, Sykes's words leaving a heavy fog in the air.

'Spud,' said Pine, looking at one of the other soldiers. 'Sweep the perimeter, eh? There's a good lad. Make sure the Butcher didn't leave anyone hanging about. Mikey, Tosh, Mac, get some shut eye. I think it's going to be a long night.'

'Sir,' replied the soldiers in unison, moving awkwardly off in various directions. Lucy noticed the way they moved, stiff in places and flexible in others, like the Butcher.

'I'll explain everything,' Pine said quietly to Lucy, 'Once my lads are settled, miss.'

'Right you are, Sergeant Pine,' replied Lucy.

Pine made tea before he explained anything, heating water over a gas camping stove. He passed an enamel mug to Lucy, nodding encouragingly. Lucy lifted the mug to her lips and instantly recoiled at the smell.

‘What on earth is that?’ she asked, holding her mug at arm’s length.

‘Beef tea,’ replied Pine indignantly. ‘Secret fuel of the British Army that is, miss. It’ll keep you on your feet.’

‘Or knock me on my back,’ replied Lucy. ‘I think I just became a vegetarian, if it’s all the same to you.’

Pine shrugged and took the mug back from Lucy, pouring her undrunk tea into his own already empty mug. He took a deep breath, wafting the smell of it into his nose. He should have been enjoying it, he certainly made all the right movements and sounds, but Lucy could see the pleasure didn’t really reach his eyes.

‘Are we safe here?’ she asked, looking at the wonky plastic door.

‘Oh yes,’ said Pine, looking forlornly into the bottom of his empty mug. ‘There’s just that one door that works. All the others are just paint and a bit of imagination.’

Lucy shook her head in confusion. Fake doors, meaty tea – what was this world she’d found herself in?

‘Right, time for answers,’ she said, propping herself up on the nearest pew.

Pine upended his mug one more time, draining the last dregs from it and put it down next to his empty one. ‘Right you are,’ he said. ‘Where to

begin...'

'It began long before you were born. I was part of your grandfather's organisation; fresh out of training at Bledoe and recruited before I'd had time to pack my boots. I'd passed some test or other, they never told me what. The Brigadier well, he had a habit of collecting what he called 'exceptional people'. I suppose I must have been one of them, but I never found out why.'

'Of course, we dealt with all the strange stuff and I know you know all about that, miss. I wonder though, did he tell you all the stories? There were some strange times, dark times, we fought things... well... I'm not ashamed to say that I didn't always understand all of the things we were doing. That was what the Brigadier was for, you know? When things got strange, when you didn't know what to do, he'd point you in the right direction. He'd point, we'd shoot, and we always came through. Well, that was how it started at least.'

'Then we got Sykes assigned to our unit as a scientific advisor and they set us off to look into some disappearances. You understand, miss, we were deployed on missions like this every other week. I expect your grandfather only told you the interesting stories; the times when things did get a little odd. Tracking down disappearances, even if

they seemed strange at first, ninety nine percent of the time it's someone running off with savings out of the biscuit tin.'

'I suppose you've guessed, this wasn't one of those times.'

'By the time we got to Frostingle, there were already more than twenty people missing. It had started with individuals, then expanded to whole families. We knew it was a case for us when entire houses started disappearing.'

'Wait,' said Lucy. 'You're telling me this model village used to be an actual village?'

'Precisely, miss,' replied Pine. 'Sykes was able to track the culprits down using some gizmo he cobbled together and, well, suddenly there we were – face-to-face with creatures from another dimension.'

'Another dimension?'

'We didn't know it at the time. Back then, we thought aliens came from the sky or from underground. Things were reliably three dimensional. Sykes didn't figure out the dimension thing until we'd already been here... for a while.'

'Sergeant Pine,' asked Lucy gently. 'How long have you been here?'

Pine shook his head. Either he didn't know or he didn't want to answer and Lucy knew better than to push it. She'd seen the look on Pine's face before, it

was the same look her grandfather had occasionally worn when she'd asked a question he wasn't ready to answer. Normally he'd shrug it off but sometimes, just sometimes, she'd accidentally touch a wound that hadn't quite healed yet.

'We confronted them in the village square. They'd been taking things, people and buildings and suchlike, from the outskirts before then, but we'd now caught them in the act this time. We tried to communicate, that was Sykes' idea as well, but before we knew it...'

'You'd been shrunk?' said Lucy. She felt her brow crinkle in confusion and a little suspicion. Grandad had never mentioned a shrink ray and it seemed like the kind of thing that should have made the 'Top Ten List of Things I'm Going to Subtly Mention In Case They Come For You After I'm Gone'.

'Transformed,' corrected Pine. 'Here, see for yourself.'

Carefully, he unbuttoned his cuff and rolled up one shirt sleeve. Where there should have been human flesh there was, instead, smooth hard plastic the colour of a rotting peach. Instinctively, Lucy reached out.

'Can I?' she asked.

'Best not, miss,' said Pine, yanking his arm away and swiftly pulling his sleeve back down. 'It'll spread to you too. One touch is all it takes.'

‘The Butcher,’ Lucy asked, her brain starting to connect all the dots in this strange puzzle. ‘Is he like that?’

‘Further along,’ said Pine grimly. ‘It was Christmas in Frostingle when it happened. They’d dressed the whole place up like you see it now, Victorian costumes and all. The transformation, the way this places turns you, it’s not just your body. It turns your mind as well. People... change. The Butcher was just a regular chap to begin with but we’re all slowly changing, miss, bit by bit. Me and the lads, well, we’re just hanging on a little bit better than most.’

Lucy shook her head. How many years had she looked at the little houses with their little lights, the little figures inside, and never suspected? How could her grandfather not have told her?

‘I’m... so sorry,’ said Lucy, the words popping out of her mouth before she had a chance to stop them. ‘Someone should have come to help you.’

Pine smiled a sad smile. ‘Oh, they tried, miss. Your grandfather, he saw to that. We spent months living in labs, under microscopes, being probed and poked and prodded. They tried everything they could think of, but nothing worked. They explained it as best they could to us all – whatever they did to us, it moved a part of us to... someplace else. You can’t take a full grown man and make him this size

without doing something to all that mass, that's what they said. We'd interrupted them, those creatures, that's what they reckoned and so we got stuck halfway. Halfway there, halfway here. Half human, half whatever it is they were on the other side of things. I don't pretend to understand it all, miss. I just know what my job is, and that's to make sure it doesn't spread any further.'

'I touched the Christmas tree,' blurted Lucy. 'When I first got here I—'

'Don't worry,' said Pine reassuringly. 'It has to be one of us, or one of them, that touches you. That's what we do here, you see? The lads and I, we make sure none of them get out. They get to live their lives, or go through the motions at least, and we make sure they don't get out.'

'What happens when you... you know?' Lucy nodded sideways, in the direction she guessed the edge of the table was.

'Go back in the box?' chuckled Pine. 'We sleep, miss. We're... dormant, that's what Sykes calls it. How do you think I've kept my looks all these years?'

The two of them laughed awkwardly. Lucy realised that there probably weren't that many years between her and Pine. She'd catch him up, year after year, she realised. One day, not long from now, she'd be older than him.

'And before you ask,' Pine continued. 'We knew.'

There was a night, I can't really tell you exactly when, when your grandfather came to us. He was a sight to see, I can tell you, this great big face in the sky looking down on us. I mean, all the lads looked up to him but this was taking things a little far, if you know what I mean?'

Lucy smiled. 'I kinda know what it's like living in his shadow,' she said.

'Ah, he was a great man, miss,' continued Pine. 'That night, he came to us and he explained what was likely to happen next. The scientists were running out of ideas of ways to save us and there was talk, more than just talk I suppose, of how they might start to use us instead.'

'Use you?'

'A troop of tiny soldiers? You could do a lot with that, if you had the mind to and even more if you had the capability to make more. Some of the others were already changing by then. They got aggressive, territorial. Started forgetting who they were. Someone must have seen an opportunity and decided they were going to turn us into a weapon.'

Lucy nodded in understanding. Grandad had spoken about it many times, how one of the most important things in his work was making sure that alien technology didn't fall into the wrong hands, by which he meant any hands at all. It wasn't just the world he was trying to protect, but its future as

well.

‘And so, my grandad, what did he do?’

‘He saved us,’ said Pine. ‘The only way he could. He took us, and hid us. He’d spent most of his life coming up with cover stories for one thing or another, that’s what he told us. Well, we knew he was doing the only thing he could and so we did the only thing we could. We agreed. We signed on. We did our duty.’

Lucy sat quietly for a moment, taking it all in. Even by the standards set by her family, this scored a very strong eleven on the one to ten scale of craziness. A miniature village of Frostingle, once the very real village of Frostingle, shrunken and transformed and then hidden away, hiding in plain sight as a family heirloom as, year after year, some of her grandfather’s command saw out their watch over its doomed inhabitants. Lucy realised that there was a tear on her cheek, a scout it turned out for a whole battalion who broke through her defences and began running freely down her face.

‘Don’t be sad, miss,’ said Pine. ‘It’s Christmas.’

‘Some Christmas,’ said Lucy, drying her eyes on the sleeve of her Christmas pyjamas.

‘Well, my dad always said Christmas was what you made it,’ said Pine. ‘He said that’s why we all get together, families and friends and people we love. We sing away the hurt in the year gone by and

we sing in a new year full of promise. Sing away the dark, that's what he always said.'

Pine got up awkwardly from where he'd been leaning next to Lucy and straightened his uniform. 'Sorry, miss,' he said. 'That wasn't very soldier-like of me.'

Lucy smiled. 'I think you've earned the right,' she replied.

She sat in silence for a few moments after that, the last of her tears drying on the expedition down her cheeks. When there were no more to come, she dried her eyes once more, let out a long slow breath and got ready to get on with doing what Lethbridge-Stewarts had been doing for generations. It was time to get on with the job.

'So, Sergeant,' she said. Pine snapped to attention at the sound of her voice. 'I think it's high time we did something about your situation.'

On the other side of the dining table, the Butcher was gathering his own forces, holding court from behind the counter of his butcher's shop. The grocer was here, a corpulent man with a bunch of outsized carrots permanently melded to one of his fat fists, and the postmaster, a reed-thin character with the bearing and stoop of a crane. The lady from the sweet shop, dressed in a gaudy gingham dress and carrying a partially eaten giant gingerbread man,

traded excitable glances with the Toy Maker, a short man with a bristling tool belt and equally bristling beard.

They aren't much of an army, thought the Butcher. But they don't need to be. There isn't much of an army in the church either.

'Lady and gentlemen,' began the Butcher. 'An opportunity has been afforded us.' He paused for dramatic effect, but nobody asked the question that was obviously waiting to be asked.

'An opportunity,' he continued gruffly. 'In the shape of a girl that might replace our dear, departed Billy the Urchin.'

'She's the right size?' asked the postmaster, who saw the whole world in weights and measures and the requisite number of stamps.

'I believe she is,' said the Butcher, as proudly as if he had just presented an award-winning pig to the village show.

'And she is willing?' asked the Sweet Shop Lady suspiciously. Her entire experience of children involved them having consumed copious amounts of sugar and being utterly objectionable as a result. She made it her rule to dislike anyone under four feet tall, which was inconvenient given her circumstances.

'Sadly, she is not willing,' said the Butcher. 'Persuasion will be required.'

'And a new mount then, to hold her steady and

in her right place,’ interjected the Toy Maker, eagerly running his fingers over the tools in his tool belt. ‘Perhaps the runners from the rocking horse in my shop window,’ he continued, ‘might be adapted —’

‘Yes, yes, all in good time,’ said the Butcher. ‘First we must acquire the girl and for that we must have a plan.’

‘Perhaps I might be of assistance?’ interrupted a voice from the doorway. The assembled shop keepers turned as one, shuffling awkwardly around each other on their stiff legs. Sykes stood in the doorway.

‘Professor,’ said the Butcher, spitting the word out of his mouth as if it were made from wasps. ‘You have some nerve, showing your face here.’

‘I come in peace,’ said Sykes, holding up his hands. ‘And with a gift.’

‘Well then,’ said the Butcher with a grin. ‘Then it truly is Christmas.’

Lucy and Pine stood at the edge of the dining table, looking over the edge. The world beyond the table, where Lucy’s dining room should have been was blurred and indistinct, like looking through fogged glass.

‘Why can’t I see it?’ she asked.

‘It’s how your brain compensates,’ replied Pine. ‘For the difference in scale. Sykes calls it Sanity Fog.’

‘Hmm,’ said Lucy. ‘That’s the kind of thing Hobo would say. He likes naming things. So, how do I see past it?’

‘Try to unfocus your eyes,’ said Pine. ‘Don’t see what’s in front of you. Look past it.’

Lucy took a step back from the edge and willed her eyes out of focus. At first there was nothing but a blur but then, suddenly, the world beyond the table popped back into existence. Lucy staggered back as her brain hastily recalibrated itself. It was like standing in the middle of a mountain range, the walls of the dining room towering up over them, the swags of tinsel that were hanging from the ceiling looking like some new and insane form of weather pattern.

Pine dumped the coil of rope he was carrying onto the ground. It had been cobbled together from the supplies the soldiers had and was knotted together in places.

‘Are you sure it’s long enough?’ asked Lucy.

‘No,’ said Pine, shaking his head. ‘But if it isn’t I’ll pull you back up.’

‘Or I fall to my death.’

‘You might only be falling a few feet or so,’ said Pine. ‘If that helps?’

‘It does not,’ replied Lucy, giving Pine a cheeky grin. ‘But if it’s a choice between this and spending the rest of my life singing Christmas carols with your

cleaver-wielding friend breathing down my neck, I'll take my chances.'

Lucy tied the rope around her waist, wishing she could have asked Pine to double check it for her. At the other end of it, Pine was tying the rope around his waist too. Lucy wondered which of them was heavier. She tried not to picture her weight pulling Pine off the table and the two of them tumbling to their doom.

'It should be me, miss, going down there,' said Pine.

'No can do,' said Lucy. 'If this doesn't work then someone needs to be here to keep on top of things. They need you, Sergeant.'

'Right you are, miss.'

Pine snapped off a quick salute before bracing himself, both hands on the rope, as Lucy walked backwards towards the edge of the dining table. She reminded herself that she'd done some abseiling on a school trip not that long ago and that she was only aiming to go down the height of one dining table leg onto soft carpet, a couple of feet at most. None of these things reassured her however as she felt her weight tip backwards, past her centre of gravity. This was it. No going back.

'And besides,' she said, relieved to hear that her voice wasn't quaking nearly as much as her knees. 'My mother would absolutely kill me if anything

happened to you. You're an heirloom.'

Lucy kicked off and disappeared down over the edge of the dining table. Don't look down, that was what they'd told her the first time she'd abseiled. That was the one rule. Don't. Look. Down.

Needless to say, dangling off the edge of her dining table by a makeshift rope held in place by a half-man half-figurine soldier, Lucy forgot this and immediately, regrettably, looked straight down. In her head, she knew that the floor was only a couple of feet away, the nearby dining chair giving her brain some much needed perspective, but her stomach flipped anyway and somewhere in her inner ear a small rebellion took place, sending waves of dizziness into her brain.

Lucy closed her eyes and swallowed. 'It's only to the floor, just a few feet,' she told her herself. Eyes half open, she slowly began to edge down the table leg, one step at a time. She cursed the slick bottoms of her novelty Christmas slippers, which chose this moment to live up to their name and offer little or no grip on the polished wood of the table, shooting up and away from her every few steps. She kicked one of them off and listened to the soft thud as it hit the carpet below. *Hardly Wile E Coyote*, she thought, kicking off the other and letting it fall. In her head, she knew it had taken no more than a second for the slippers to hit the floor. It wasn't a long drop, it

couldn't be...

But she didn't dare look again until she felt the table leg bulge out towards her, the first carved section on the ornate leg of the table. Climbing down it slowly, she allowed herself a moment to catch her breath.

'How's it going up there?' she called out, not sure how far her voice would carry, propelled by tiny lungs.

'Fine, miss,' replied Pine, out of sight on the tabletop. 'You just keep going.'

Lucy had the distinct impression that Pine would have given the same reply even if his arms had popped out of their sockets. Wrapping the rope around her forearm and wrist, she began to walk backwards down the table leg again, daring a peep over her shoulder to check her progress.

Almost there.

Suddenly, a dark shadow fell across Lucy and something that felt like a crosswind hit her, making her swing out and away from the safety of the table leg. Weightless for a moment, she clung to the rope for dear life, its rough skin burning hers as it snapped taut with her weight.

'Don't fall don't die don't fall don't die!' she said to herself through gritted teeth as the rope went slack for a second then taut again, Pine slipping or losing his grip for a second up above. Her body

bumped into the wood of the leg and she instinctively tried to wrap her legs around it, desperate for any purchase. Somehow the swinging stopped, Lucy skidding across the smooth surface of the wood once more before coming to a stop.

Panting for breath, Lucy slowly opened her eyes. The dark shadow resolved itself into the shape of her mum, pacing back and forth in the dining room.

‘Where is it again?’ she shouted, the noise deafening to Lucy.

From outside, far beyond the dining room to Lucy’s shrunken perspective, her dad called back. ‘Try the drawers.’

Lucy’s mum bustled past again, Lucy bracing herself across the buffeting crosswind. Thankfully she had her back to Lucy, preoccupied by her search, or she might have wondered why there was a tiny toy soldier dangling a tiny toy Lucy off the edge of the dining table on a piece of string.

Lucy heard the drawers of the Welsh dresser open and shut until her mother held aloft the object of her quest; a shining white extension lead.

‘Got it!’ Mum shouted. ‘It was in the junk drawer.’

‘That’s what I said,’ replied Dad in the distance.

Mum disappeared back out of the room, extension lead in hand, leaving Lucy hanging, quite literally, by a thread.

‘Still there, miss?’ Pine called down.

‘Hanging in there, Sergeant,’ quipped Lucy.

Gritting her teeth, Lucy kicked off from the table leg and carried on her descent.

Lucy had been hoping for the feeling of solid ground underneath her feet, but she hadn’t taken into account her mother’s love for carpets with pile so deep you could lose a small animal in it. Sinking shin deep into the luxurious stain-resistant polyester and wool blend, Lucy quickly untangled herself from the rope, giving it three sharp tugs to let Pine know she’d reached the floor.

Checking the coast was clear, Lucy set out away from the dining table towards her destination, pushing through the carpet as if it were some sort of strange, woolly beige shrubbery. Ahead, she could see the thirty centimetres of dull chrome and shining plastic that was her smart speaker, a gift from Hobo a few months earlier. Mum had referred to it as ‘that thing’ and ‘it’ ever since it had arrived, although Lucy had also distinctly heard her mum’s musical choices floating up the stairs from it when she thought Lucy wasn’t listening. When the Christmas decorating blitz had started, the smart speaker had been moved down onto the floor next to the Welsh dresser by Mum as, apparently, it was ‘taking up space’ she needed for a fruit bowl that contained enough oranges to give a passer-by a vitamin C overdose.

What Mum didn't know was that, unlike any other smart speaker on the planet, this one had been thoroughly 'Hobo-ed'. After their first adventure, and seeing firsthand how easily the power of the Great Intelligence could influence their minds through mobile phones and other electronics, Hobo had employed his genius intellect ensuring that anything connected to Lucy and his family that was also connected to the Internet had been thoroughly hacked, patched, and upgraded to ensure it was Hobo-approved-alien-proof.

Crossing from the dining table to the Welsh dresser, Lucy thanked her lucky stars both for Hobo and for her mother's love of festive citrus. The speaker was online and at floor level and that meant that Lucy, Pine, and the others could call in reinforcements. From Lucy's vantage point the speaker looked more like a wizard's tower, the final level in one of the computer games that Hobo was always trying, without success, to get Lucy to play.

Reaching the base of the thing Lucy realised that, in this case, the wizard was Hobo. She silently prayed he never made the connection himself, she'd never hear the end of it if he did. Positioning her face up against the grille at the bottom of the speaker where she suspected the microphones were, Lucy shouted as loudly as she could.

'Speaker, call Hobo.'

A green light whizzed around the outside of the speaker as it considered Lucy's request. 'I'm sorry,' intoned the chrome and plastic tower, so loudly that Lucy had to cover her ears. 'I don't think I can do that.'

From outside, Lucy heard mum's voice, shouting up the ladder to her dad. 'Albert, that thing's going off on its own again!'

Lucy didn't hear her dad's reply, but realised that calling Hobo wasn't going to be an option. Although her part of the conversation would probably be inaudible to anyone but him, Hobo's responses certainly wouldn't be. Lucy needed help, but she'd also prefer not to spend Christmas dinner explaining to her parents how she'd been spending her weekends and evenings secretly defending Earth from alien invasions.

Lucy rolled her eyes as she realised there was an alternative, although it was one that she would have liked to avoid. When Hobo upgraded tech, sometimes, he bundled in a few extra features for good measure as well and in the case of the smart-speaker, this meant Hobo had gone the extra mile and installed a secondary artificial intelligence underneath the original. Unfortunately, for reasons even Hobo didn't quite seem to understand, the artificial intelligence he'd created had rather too much... personality.

'Pennyworth,' said Lucy through gritted teeth, 'Code Red.'

The speaker lights turned red and the tower let out a digital sigh.

'How imminent is your death?' asked the voice of Pennyworth, Hobo's home-brewed artificial intelligence. 'On a scale of one to ten, where one is not imminent and ten is very imminent indeed.'

'I don't know,' said Lucy, 'Err... seven, maybe?'

The speaker lights pulsed as Pennyworth considered Lucy's response.

'And what is the nature of the threat?' the speaker asked.

'Albert!' Mum shouted from outside. 'It's saying weird stuff!'

Lucy eyed the speaker suspiciously. She was pretty sure Hobo had been aiming for 'helpful assistant' not 'demonic call-centre worker' when he'd installed Pennyworth, but being the secret defender of Earth often meant you made do with the tools at hand. Still, she made a mental note to lodge a solid 'three out of five' review with Hobo, once she was human-sized again.

'Plastic,' said Lucy, hoping this was something Pennyworth might have been programmed to respond to.

'Understood,' said the voice of Pennyworth. 'I will alert George Kostinen.'

Lucy let out a lungful of relief. Hobo was coming. Hobo would know what to do and, even if he didn't, a Gulliver-sized ally would certainly come in handy. Lucy was just about to head back across to the table when a thought struck her, a memory triggered by the thought of Hobo towering over the Christmas village like Gulliver.

'Pennyworth?' she shouted through the grille. 'Send a message to Hobo. Ask him to bring his toy soldiers.'

On the other side of Ogmore-by-Sea, Hobo Kostinen was engaged in pitched battle. Surrounded on all sides by alien warriors, his ammunition low, his shields almost depleted. The fate of the world rested on his shoulders but, this time, it looked like there was no way out for Earth's other defender.

Just as he was thrown into the air by an explosion, Hobo spotted out of the corner of his eye that his smart speaker was flashing rapidly. Hitting pause and pulling off his headphones, Hobo decided to save Earth tomorrow, after he'd helped Lucy with whatever she needed... which he expected was probably also saving the Earth.

'Pennyworth, what's up?' asked Hobo.

'Lucy Wilson reports a seven out of ten chance of her imminent demise,' replied the speaker. 'She requests your immediate assistance.'

Hobo jumped up from his chair and started to pull on a pair of trainers.

‘Lucy Wilson says the problem is plastic in nature,’ continued the speaker as Hobo pulled his trademark hoodie off the back of his bedroom door and pulled it over his head.

‘Plastic, understood,’ said Hobo. He yanked open the door of his wardrobe and reached into the back, pulling out a backpack from behind a pile of neatly stacked boxes. His ‘go bag’, packed with everything he could think of for dealing with weirdness, strangeness, and what Lucy liked to call ‘Lethbridge-Stewart stuff’.

‘You need your toy soldiers,’ said the voice of Pennyworth, just as Hobo was slinging the backpack over his shoulder and heading out of the door.

‘What?’ said Hobo, looking at the speaker. It was difficult for Hobo to look quizzical, his alopecia robbing him of eyebrows as well as making him bald. He raised an invisible eyebrow nevertheless.

‘You need your toy soldiers,’ repeated the speaker.

Hobo flushed slightly. ‘I don’t have toy soldiers.’

‘The ones from under your bed,’ suggested the speaker. ‘Lucy Wilson has been aware of these for nine weeks, two days, three hours and thirty seven minutes. Approximately.’

‘How do you know that?’ asked Hobo.

‘Because nine weeks, two days, three hours and twelve minutes ago you left Lucy Wilson in this room to retrieve snacks. In your absence I heard Lucy Wilson say ‘Now, let’s see what you’re hiding under your bed, Hobo Kostinen.’

‘Lucy!’ squeaked Hobo indignantly.

‘You returned with chopped apple and grapes. Lucy Wilson does not consider these snacks.’

‘Okay, that’s enough thank you, Pennyworth,’ grumbled Hobo, flipping up the edge of his duvet and pulling out a hard plastic storage box. Inside, carefully arranged and separated by sheets of paper were what Lucy had called his ‘toy soldiers’.

‘And they’re not toy soldiers,’ Hobo continued. ‘They’re collectable figurines.’

Lucy clambered back up over the edge of the dining table, Pine hauling on the other end of the rope. Pine toppled backwards, the last heave sending him over. The two of them lay on their backs and Lucy realised that she was the only one whose chest was rising up and down.

‘Pine?’

‘Yes, miss?’

‘You’re not breathing.’

‘No, miss. Haven’t needed to breathe since sometime around 1969. Plastic lungs you see.’

‘Oh, right,’ said Lucy, who had no idea what the

appropriate response to this information was.

‘Did you get your message to your friend?’

‘He’s coming,’ said Lucy. ‘He’ll know what to do.’

Pine rolled onto his front and flipped himself back up onto his feet.

‘I’d offer to help you up, miss, but... well.’

‘I know,’ said Lucy, getting to her feet and untangling herself from Pine’s rope. ‘One touch.’

Together, the girl and the soldier trudged back towards the church. Lucy could feel her perceptions shrinking again, the sanity fog closing in around her, until there was just nothing but the village, its lights warm, twinkling and inviting. Lucy wondered if, one day, the fog might close in on the village so completely that the people here might forget that there was ever a world beyond the edge of their little Christmas world? Perhaps the sanity fog was part of the other place, the other dimension that Sykes and Pine had talked about. What was there, beyond the fog, if you forgot about the normal-sized world?

Spud was waiting for them when they got back. If his face had been less plastic, he might have looked concerned. Lucy could read the fear in his eyes, still liquid and moving underneath the hard plastic mask of his face.

‘Sykes’s gone missing, Sarge,’ he said gravely.

‘Missing? Spud, this village has only seven

buildings in it, there's nowhere for him to go missing to.'

'That's what we thought about Billy the Urchin, and he never turned up.'

Pine shook his head. 'No, Sykes's is up to something, I can feel it.'

'What should we do?' asked Spud.

Pine and Lucy looked at each conspiratorially.

'Man the barricades,' said Lucy. 'Help is on the way.'

'Run me through it again,' grumbled the Butcher, staring at the arrangement of tiny plastic sausages, pork chops, and oversized rashers of bacon that Sykes had been arranging on the counter top to illustrate his plan.

'It's quite simple,' said Sykes irritably. 'We are trapped here, halfway between our world and their world.' He moved a sausage from one side of the counter to the other. 'We lack the necessary mass to make the transition. We're like two equally sized children, stuck on a seesaw. To get things moving, somebody needs to *push*.'

'And that's where the girl comes in?' asked the butcher, nudging a bacon rasher with this cleaver.

'The girl and her friend,' corrected Sykes. 'I watched them last year. Combined, they have sufficient mass to take us across the barrier. Now we

have the girl, the boy will follow.'

'I don't see why we didn't just take one of the parents,' said the post office lady. 'They must be big enough.'

Sykes shook his head.

'Because they lack a little something, much like you. The last phase of the plan needs more than just mass and a bit of a push. It needs something special.'

Sykes rearranged the meat again, separating the sausages from the rest.

'The girl and the boy have already crossed dimensional boundaries. I detected it last year, last Christmas. They may not even know it themselves, but they're teeming with quantum flux energy. Enough to power the device again; enough to shrink them both and enough to take us back to full size.'

The toy shop maker shuffled forward and looked hungrily at the sausages.

'Special little sausages,' he said oilily.

Despite the fact that this spine was predominantly plastic, Sykes still felt a shiver move down his back.

'Yes,' he said, 'They're special little sausages.'

Hobo made it from his house to Lucy's in almost record time, despite being weighed down by a box of what he called 'collectable figurines'. He found Mr and Mrs Wilson in the garden, Mr Wilson adding

a string of lights to a display that Hobo immediately suspected might be bright enough when turned on to have caused aircraft to change path or possibly signal the existence of Earth to multiple alien civilisations.

‘Hello, Wilsons!’ he said cheerily. ‘Just popping in to see Lucy!’

For a Code Red situation, there certainly didn’t seem to be much in the way of disruption going on outside. Hobo hoped this meant things were under control and not that Mr and Mrs Wilson had already been taken over by a mysterious space virus, hypnotised by a powerful extra-dimensional intelligence, or replaced with incredibly accurate and life-like replicants.

‘She’s inside somewhere,’ said Mrs Wilson, not taking her eyes off Mr Wilson as he teetered on the top rung of the ladder. ‘If you can find her.’

‘Disappeared has she?’ said Hobo, hoping that this was as much of a joke as he was trying to make it sound. A Code Red could also easily have involved Lucy disappearing, or being kidnapped, or falling through a portal to another dimension.

‘Avoiding hard work more like,’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘Anything she’s not finished you two are doing together before you disappear off on one of your escapades, got it?’

Hobo snapped off a salute as he headed inside.

‘Got it!’

Inside, the house was mysteriously quiet. Hobo’s lightning quick mind catalogued multiple Santas, reindeer and elves, three separate nativities, a display of pictures of Lucy in various Christmas costumes from school pantos and shows, and a sum total of zero Code Red extraterrestrial or interdimensional threats.

‘Lucy?’ Hobo called out. ‘Where are you?’

No answer.

Putting his box down on the floor, Hobo headed into the dining room.

‘Pennyworth?’ he called out. ‘Where’s Lucy?’

Tucked away by the Welsh dresser, Lucy’s smart speaker lit up.

‘Lucy Wilson is in the dining room.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Hobo, squatting down to check underneath the dining table. ‘Pennyworth, confirm the location of Lucy Wilson.’

‘Lucy Wilson is in the dining room.’

On the dining table, the tiny village of Frostingle caught Hobo’s eye and he remembered the small diplomatic incident his comments on Christmas Victoriana had caused last year with a wince. He was just about to ask Pennyworth to run a diagnostic when he realised that there was something different about the tiny Victorian village.

The people were moving.

Peeping through one of the plastic stained glass (or was it stained plastic?) windows, Lucy could see the Butcher leading his little army of shopkeepers and carollers towards the church, marching in awkward lockstep with each other. It was one of the things she'd noticed about monsters; the more trouble they were, the slower they walked. She never worried about the things that ran at her; she worried about the things that walked. She worried about the things that were prepared to take their time.

Behind her, Pine was organising his forces. 'Spud, Mickey, Tosh you're on the front door. Mac, up in the pulpit, that's our fallback position.'

'Can we use the pews, barricade the doors?' asked Lucy, turning away from the window.

'Welded to the floor, miss,' replied Pine. 'We'll have to make do without.'

Lucy looked around the church, looking for something, anything else that they could use to defend themselves.

'What's in there?' she asked, pointing to the rectory.

'Sykes' lab,' replied Pine. 'He had a fair bit of equipment with him when we were shrunk, most of carried on working for quite a while, but most of it's just plastic now.'

Lucy's radar, that special compass in her head

that always pointed due-weird pinged. 'You're sure?' she asked.

Pine turned, letting his soldiers get on with their preparations.

'What are you thinking, miss?'

'I'm thinking that a mysterious flash of light brought me here and the only person I've met so far who could be behind that is your Professor Sykes, who is now missing.'

'It is suspicious, I must admit,' said Pine. 'But Sykes has been with us here from the start. He's an odd duck and no mistake but he's always done his part.' Despite Pine's protests, there was guilt in his voice. Sykes was his responsibility along with everything else after all, Lucy supposed.

'Don't feel bad,' said Lucy. 'We've all been caught out by a mad scientist at some point.'

'If you say so, miss.'

'In the meantime, how do I get up there?' asked Lucy, pointing up into the roof where the church rose into a flat-topped steeple.

'Door over there,' said Pine. 'There's stairs, straight up into the tower.'

'Great,' said Lucy. 'Want to come with me?'

'I should stay here, miss,' replied Pine. 'Help the lads guard the door.'

'Better vantage point up there,' countered Lucy. 'Put that rifle to good use.'

What was left of Pine's face that could move gave a sad half smile.

'About that, miss...'

'It doesn't shoot anymore, does it?' asked Lucy.

'No miss,' Pine unslung his rifle and tapped the butt on the floor. 'Still some metal, still some wood, but the bullets are just plastic. They won't fire. It's how things change here, miss. We go from the inside out. By the time you can see the changes, you're mostly already gone.'

Lucy didn't answer. She'd been so obsessed with getting out, getting back to her own world, she hadn't given a lot of thought to what would happen to Pine and the others after she'd gone. *Just like Grandad*, she thought. *Ready to pack the problem away in a box and come back to it next year.*

Suddenly, there was a thud from the door.

'They're here, Sarge!' shouted Spud.

Pine slung his rifle back over his shoulder and headed towards the doors.

'Best you get up the tower then, miss,' he said. 'And let's hope your friend gets here in time.'

Staring down at the dining table, Hobo couldn't quite believe his eyes, which was really saying something given some of the things he'd seen since he'd met Lucy Wilson. Whereas once upon a time aliens and monsters had been the exclusive province

of his books and comics and computer games, they were now a part of his everyday life. Still, the sight of tiny Victorian figures laying siege to a tiny church in a tiny Christmas village was definitely worth an entry in the Hobo Kostinen Top Ten of Weird.

Hobo leant down, bringing his face level with the church, trying to make out what was happening and spotted, there on the top of the church, a tiny figure of Lucy. No, wait, not a figure... *that was Lucy.*

‘Hobo!’ it squeaked.

‘What in the world?’ whispered Hobo.

Lucy had reached the top of the tower just as Hobo’s huge face had descended down through the sanity fog like a giant, confused looking moon.

‘Hobo!’ she shouted ‘Hobo down here!’

‘What in the world?’

Hobo was probably whispering, but his voice felt like a storm wind at Lucy’s scale. She was buffeted backwards, her flimsy Christmas pyjamas whipping around her.

‘Oi!’ she shouted back, ‘Keep it down. Some of us have tiny ears!’

The giant Hobo face pulled a ‘sorry’ expression.

‘Did you bring your toy soldiers?’ shouted Lucy.

The face looked momentarily annoyed but nodded anyway.

‘Well then? We’re under attack! Deploy your

forces!’

Hobo’s giant face looked down before breaking into an enormous, truly enormous, grin and then disappearing back through the sanity fog.

Lucy looked over the parapet and watched as the butcher and his forces pounded on the door with their tiny fists and threw themselves bodily against the door. She could feel the impact all the way up here, the plastic walls that only looked like stone shaking with every impact.

Then, back through the clouds above, Hobo’s giant hand appeared, holding between its enormous fingers a set of plastic soldiers. Lucy had been hoping for something along the line of Pine and his friends but, of course, this was Hobo and Hobo was never one to do things by halves.

‘Oh good,’ Lucy said to herself. ‘He brought the space soldiers riding on dinosaurs.’

At the doors to the church, the Butcher felt a vast shadow fall over him and looked up just in time to see a giant hand break through the clouds.

‘Get back!’ he bellowed, shuffling backwards as quickly as he could, colliding with the carollers behind him. The giant hand swung across them, knocking them all backwards with the huge green feet of some sort of plastic monster.

‘Tidings!’ shouted the carollers as they flew

backwards through the air. 'Tidings of comfort and joy!'

'What is it?' asked the grocer.

'Toys,' said the Toy Maker venomously. 'Toy dinosaurs and toy soldiers!'

The giant hand held onto the nearest dinosaur, lumbering it forward and knocking the lady from the post office over. Far above them, the Butcher was sure he could hear someone chuckling.

'Have they come back?' asked the grocer. 'The creatures, have they come back for us?'

'No,' said the Butcher, a smirk twisting his fleshy face. 'It's the boy, just like Sykes said. Hold firm everyone. Everything's going to plan.'

Inside the church, Spud let out a cheer as Hobo's dinosaur came to life and scattered the attackers away from the door. Pine scrambled to the nearest window and peered out. The Butcher, the Grocer, the Toy Maker, they had all fallen back. The lady from the Post Office was trying to get the carollers on their feet but, for the moment at least, they were safe.

'Well played, young miss,' he said to himself. 'Well played.'

'Oi! Where did you spring from? Where are you going?'

Pine spun around in time to see Mac dashing, as

best he could on ever stiffening legs, down from the pulpit and Sykes, a great deal more agile than he had any right to be, disappearing through the door to the tower stairs.

‘Get after him, Mac!’ shouted Pine, heading quickly through the pews. ‘He’s after Lucy; he must be!’

Lucy looked down from the parapet of the tower as Hobo’s dinosaur scattered the attackers away from the door. Seconds later, his other hand appeared, dropping what looked like some of the space soldiers’ arch-enemies into the fray. Bright green heads, bulbous white eyes, purple space suits... yep, they were evil aliens alright. It definitely wasn’t what Lucy had had in mind but tiny shrunken beggars couldn’t be tiny shrunken choosers, she supposed.

Suddenly, the trap door she had come up through banged open and Sykes climbed up onto the rooftop. He was clutching a strange device to his chest with his good arm and had a look of maniacal triumph in his eyes.

Maths had never been Lucy’s strongest suit but she knew what ‘probably evil scientist’ plus ‘mysterious gizmo with blinking lights on it’ plus ‘looking-rather-pleased-with-yourself’ added up to. And it wasn’t ever anything good.

‘Sykes!’ said Lucy defiantly. ‘It’s time you and I had a chat.’

‘It’s too late! You’ve given me all the energy I need. I’ve got the controller! I’ve got the village. What have you got?’

‘I have a Hobo,’ said Lucy, jerking her thumb up at the sky. ‘And you have a serious case of short-man syndrome. You’re about to get Gulliver-ed, mate.’

‘I beg to differ,’ snarked Sykes. He pointed the device at the sky and a blinding light shot out of it, forcing Lucy to screw her eyes shut tight. A second later, when she opened them, the impossible had happened for the second time that morning.

Hobo was standing on the rooftop.

‘Err, what just happened?’ asked Hobo.

‘I brought you down to size,’ said Sykes, laughing to himself. ‘And now my device is at full power thanks to all that lovely quantum energy you and your... little friend here, are swimming with. Enough to re-open the portal. Enough to finish what started here all those years ago. Enough to send this whole village through to the other side and for me... well, I’m finally going to be free!’

The device in Sykes’ hand was glowing now, vibrating with an unknown energy. Stretching out his arm, Sykes pointed the device up at the sky and a shaft of brilliant light shot upwards, puncturing the fog. The misty clouds began to swirl around it

in a shifting vortex of colours as, at the centre, a dark portal began to open.

‘Well,’ said Hobo, looking up into the sky. ‘That’s another one off the sci-fi trope bucket list. Bolt of energy making a portal in the sky. Never thought that would turn out to be an actual thing that happens.’

Above them, the portal slowly grew and Lucy could feel a tugging sensation coming from it, as if it were a hungry mouth trying to suck up the world.

‘What did you do?’ Lucy shouted at Sykes, ‘What’s up there?’

‘The other place,’ replied the scientist. ‘Where the parts of us that are missing go. Well, I’m going to finish it, I’m going to send this whole place through!’

‘Not if I have anything to do with it!’ said Hobo, and he rushed toward Sykes, his hands outstretched to grab hold of the device.

‘Hobo, no!’ shouted Lucy, throwing herself at Hobo and trying to knock him off course. He was bigger than her, and stronger, but she managed to change his trajectory just enough so he passed by Sykes and collided with the plastic parapet of the church tower instead.

‘Lucy? What?’ gasped Hobo, rubbing his side where it had hit the wall.

‘Plastic people,’ puffed Lucy, winded from her impact with Hobo. ‘One touch, and you’ll start

turning into plastic as well.'

Hobo frowned. 'So he's untouchable? The mad scientist who wants to send us through a portal to... somewhere is untouchable?'

'Maybe to you, but not to me.'

Lucy turned and saw Pine climb awkwardly put through the trapdoor, Spud underneath him pushing him upwards.

'Sorry for the delay, miss,' said Pine politely. 'Legs weren't exactly in the mood for stairs.'

'Friend of yours?' asked Hobo.

'Sergeant Pine,' replied Lucy. 'Friend of my grandad's. Sort of.'

'We really need to invest in a flipchart or something,' said Hobo. 'These catch-ups are getting really complicated.'

Lucy and Hobo watched as Pine advanced on Sykes. The scientist held his ground, the device still above his head. The portal was still growing, the pull of it tugging at Lucy's pyjamas and hair now, an unnatural wind building up around them all.

'Sykes, be a good old lad and put that thing down, eh? We can talk about this,' said Pine.

'Not this time!' spat back Sykes. 'You've kept us here too long, Pine! You and your 'duty'. You and your 'greater good'. I could have done *so much* in the real world. I could have been so much. But you kept me here, locked away with you and the rest of them.'

‘You know what happens if these... things get a foothold in our world,’ said Pine, taking another step towards Sykes. ‘They won’t stop with just this village, you know that. They’ll take everything. The whole world. Maybe even more than that.’

The wind grew stronger, as if it could somehow hear what Pine was saying, as it was growing hungrier at the thought of feasting on the town and the world beyond it. Lucy looked up. There was something, or somethings, moving in the darkness beyond the portal. Shapeless things, like splodges of ink, or wax in a lava lamp. Things that oozed and flowed and split and recombined. Lucy tore her eyes away, her head starting to spin.

‘We have to do something,’ said Hobo.

‘I know,’ said Lucy. Her mind raced back to her grandad. How had he felt, looking down on this little village, realising that there was nothing more he could do to help? How had he felt, putting them into a cardboard box and hiding them away? Year after year, bring them back out to put them on his mantle... facing his failure over and over again. Lucy didn’t know if she could do that.

‘Sykes!’ she shouted, standing up. ‘Look at me!’

‘Miss, no!’ protested Pine.

The scientist turned, keeping one eye still on Pine, to look at Lucy.

‘Do you know who I am?’ asked Lucy.

‘Of course, child. I’ve watched you grow up. I watched that old fool Lethbridge-Stewart with you on his knee, telling you his war stories. But he never mentioned us, did he? All his stories, all his heroics. He never told you about the times he failed, did he? The people who got lost following his orders.’

‘No,’ said Lucy firmly. ‘But that doesn’t mean I don’t know about them now. And it doesn’t mean I don’t care. What happened to you, all of you, is terrible. And I want to help put it right.’

Lucy took another step towards Sykes, reaching out her hand.

‘My name is Lucy Wilson. Some people call me Lucy Lethbridge-Stewart. I’m here to help you.’

Sykes looked at Lucy, his eyes narrowing. His arm lowered, slightly, and he took a step towards her, his free hand slowly rising.

‘Miss, no!’ shouted Pine, launching himself at Sykes. His arms wrapped around the scientist and they flew towards the parapet edge. Sykes lost his grip on the device and it fell to the floor, smashing into pieces. The light inside flared, sending a pulse up into the air above them as Sykes and Pine tumbled over the edge of the tower and disappeared.

‘No!’ screamed Lucy as she and Hobo ran to the edge of the tower and looked over. Down on the table top, Pine and Sykes lay motionless.

*

By the time Lucy and Hobo got to Pine and Sykes, a small crowd had gathered around them. The soldiers, the Butcher and his cronies, the carollers, all silent except for the carollers who were gently singing a song that Lucy had never heard before.

‘Let me through,’ she said, her voice catching in her throat. She was careful not to come into contact with any of them as he made her way through the ring of plastic people and knelt down at Pine’s side. His arms and legs were twisted, like a toy who’d had his arms and legs popped off which, Lucy realised with a sick feeling in her stomach, was exactly what he was. He wasn’t breathing, but Lucy was used to that now. The important thing was his eyes, and they still had life in them.

‘Pine?’ said Lucy softly.

‘Reporting for duty, miss,’ croaked Pine weakly.

‘I think you should stand down, just for a little while, Sergeant.’

‘Might need to be able to stand up first,’ replied Pine. ‘The old legs don’t quite seem to be playing their part I’m afraid.’

Every instinct in Lucy screamed at her to take his hand, to help him, but she knew she couldn’t. It was that feeling again, that feeling of helplessness. She should have been a giant here but, somehow, everything about this place made her feel *so small*.

‘I’m also still alive, if anyone cares,’ grumbled

Sykes. Lucy looked across and realised that Sykes had been neatly snapped in two half way up this body. He was completely hollow inside, his body nothing but a painted shell.

‘One of the beneficial side effects of our situation,’ continued Sykes. ‘We are remarkably hard to kill... or so it would appear.’

There was a rumble from above them. The portal was still open and still pulsing with hunger. They looked up as one, the soldiers and the villagers, Lucy and Hobo.

‘Can you close it?’ Lucy asked Sykes.

‘Not without this, I expect,’ said Hobo. He was holding the shattered components of Sykes’s device, the lifeless hunks of plastic now dormant, no longer glowing with the light they had held moments before.

The empty shell that was Sykes chuckled and Lucy decided it was best to not to think too hard about how he did that without lungs.

‘It’s not funny,’ said Lucy. ‘There has to be a way.’

‘Of course there is,’ said Sykes. His eyes were locked on the portal now, glassy with tears. Lucy decided not to wonder how that worked either, as she was sure he didn’t have tear ducts, or even real eyes.

‘It’s obvious,’ continued the scientist. ‘Too obvious probably. We always look for the complicated option, don’t we? Truth is rarely

complicated.'

'Just tell us,' said Lucy, 'Please, Professor. If there's any way to stop it.'

'Oh, no no,' said Sykes, 'Stopping it is the *last* thing we want to do. We have to make sure it happens. We have to help them. And they'll help us in return.'

'I don't understand,' said Lucy, frustration leaking into her voice. 'Hobo?'

'It's beyond me,' said Hobo, looking down at the shattered bits of plastic in his hands. 'There's nothing here. No circuits, no wires, no power source. It looks just like a model. Just a toy.'

'Prop me up someone, would you?' asked Sykes. The soldiers obliged, carefully lifting Sykes up and resting him against the plastic wall of the church. They moved Pine next, propping him up alongside Sykes. Lucy and Hobo knelt down in front of them, surrounded by the others.

'What makes a toy work?' asked Sykes.

'Batteries,' said Hobo.

'Clockwork?' said the Toy Maker.

Sykes shook his head. 'Think about it. A child picks up a plastic sword, and suddenly it's Excalibur. A pirate hat turns the sofa into a galleon. A stick becomes a rifle.'

'Imagination?' said Lucy.

Sykes smiled. 'Exactly.'

‘But we’re not toys,’ interrupted Pine. ‘We’re people.’

‘Perhaps we’re both,’ continued Sykes. ‘I’d been searching for years for a power source that would allow me to reverse the shrinking, thinking that what I needed to do was steal back our mass from the other side of the portal. Finally, I found something powerful enough.’

‘The girl,’ interrupted the Butcher. ‘You told us.’

‘I’m not powerful,’ said Lucy. ‘I mean, I’m pretty awesome and I’ve saved the Earth like... a lot but powerful? No. If I were powerful I’d have summoned myself something to wear that wasn’t Christmas pyjamas.’

‘Not powerful in that way,’ said Sykes. ‘But full of power. Full of potential, full of probability... possibility. Most people move through the universe, Miss Wilson but if I’m right... for you and your friend it’s more like the universe has started to move around *you*.’

‘You do think the world revolves around you,’ whispered Hobo to Lucy.

‘Shut up, Hobo.’

‘You’re lucky, aren’t you?’ asked Sykes. ‘And you have intuition. Lucky guesses, a sense for the way things are going at any moment.’

‘She calls it a weirdness radar,’ said Hobo. ‘She’s always on about it.’

‘I am not.’

‘That’s it, that’s just it,’ said Sykes excitedly. ‘That’s what I’m talking about. You will be so lucky, Miss Wilson, and so unlucky some of the time I’m afraid. You will do great things and, maybe, some terrible things as well. You’re at the very start of a very, very big adventure.’

‘I don’t feel very big right now,’ said Lucy. ‘And I still don’t know how all this helps any of us.’

She looked up at the portal above them. In the real world it was maybe only a foot across but here, in the tiny village, it filled the sky. The shapes were still moving inside it, flowing and changing, but they were no longer dark. They’d grown lighter, shining with the energy the device had shot up into the void. Streaks of silver, they whirled faster and faster as the portal spun and grew above them.

‘What are they, Sykes,’ asked Pine. ‘Just give it to us straight, for once.’

‘I thought they were aliens, at first,’ replied Sykes, ‘But what sort of creature could survive with no mass of its own? So I thought perhaps they were some sort of energy creature but no form of energy I scanned for existed beyond the portal. Our mass kept vanishing, we kept changing, but I could never work out what was beyond that portal... until you arrived.’

Sykes looked at Lucy. His face, she realised, was

a little less plastic than before. It was growing softer, more human, and at the same time older. Years were appearing on his face with each passing moment.

‘They’re stories,’ he said, his voice excited and somehow sad at the same time. ‘Stories that never came to pass. Possibilities that never happened. I thought if I could create a story for them, maybe we could escape. That’s why I did all this, why I made all this happen.’

‘You lied to us,’ said the Butcher grimly.

‘I told you a story. A story with a lost girl and her steadfast companion. A brave knight who comes to rescue her, a monster who wants to take her away.’

‘And a friend who betrays them?’ asked Pine, twisted his head to look at Sykes.

‘All good stories have a twist, old boy. That was mine.’

‘But it can’t be stories...’ interrupted Hobo, his brow furrowed. ‘Now, I’ve read about alternate realities, where other possibilities are played out and maybe there’s some mechanism, quantum entanglement maybe, where something from another dimension could affect this—’

‘Stop, Hobo,’ said Lucy. ‘You’re right, they’re not stories.’

‘I knew it,’ sighed Hobo.

‘They’re wishes.’

‘What?!’

‘It’s the only answer,’ said Lucy. ‘Just look at them. Really look! They’re wishes! Oh, Hobo, all of you, can’t you see?’

And as they looked, the sliding, shimmering silver streaks coalesced into tiny, dazzling points of light. A galaxy of stars manifested itself beyond the portal and the sucking, hungry sensation that Lucy had felt tugging at her since the portal opened ebbed away. The things beyond the void weren’t hungry; they simply wanted to exist. They wanted to come true.

‘I wished for this,’ said the Butcher. His hands had come loose from his hips at long last. He dropped his cleaver and wiped a tear away from his eye. ‘I never wanted anything in the village to change.’

‘And I wished Christmas would never end,’ said the Toy Maker.

Lucy slipped her hand into Hobo’s.

‘Do you trust me?’ she asked.

‘Of course. But why?’

‘Because my radar’s going off. I know what to do.’

Lucy looked down at Sykes, so old now that she wondered if even the plastic parts of him would crumble away. She reached down with her other hand to him.

‘Take my hand,’ she said.

‘I can’t,’ croaked Sykes. ‘One touch.’

‘I know,’ said Lucy, stretching down and taking the scientist’s plastic hand in hers. ‘One touch is all it will take.’

Following her lead, Hobo reached down and grabbed a hold of a protesting Pine’s hand. Pine took the hand of Spud, Spud took the hand of Mac. The Butcher, the Post Office Lady, the Grocer, the Toy Maker, the carollers, all of them one by one took the hand of the next.

‘Now, close your eyes,’ said Lucy. ‘And make a *wish*.’

One by one they did as they were told and Hobo, who never really believed anything unless he saw it for himself, was the last to close his eyes. Just as he did, he saw the first of the stars, the first of the wishes, drop down through the portal. One by one they came, tiny and dazzling, stars you could have caught in your hand. Warm light bathed them all and even Hobo, just for a moment, could believe in something a little bigger than science.

And that was how, in a small valley tucked away in the English countryside, a village that everyone had forgotten suddenly reappeared. It was a perfect little place with a perfect little pub, a perfect little post office, a perfect little butcher’s, a perfect little grocer’s, a perfect little sweet shop, a perfect little

toy shop, and a perfect little church. It also had excellent broadband but as everyone who lived there was from several decades ago, none of them realised it.

One by one they found their way to the village square, and they stood around their Christmas tree, and they sang away a darkness that had lasted for longer than any of them could remember. And if the Butcher noticed Billy the Urchin sneaking off with a string of sausages, he didn't do anything about it this time.

It was also how, in the mess hall of a deserted barracks in a place called Bledoe, a group of soldiers came in from the cold, their long shift on watch finally at an end. There was inexplicable beef tea on the hob and, for the first time in a long time, the soldiers had time to sit, and to laugh, remember an old friend of theirs who had kept them safe, and the granddaughter who had finished the job for him.

It was how, beyond a swirling gateway from one world to any other, a foot or so above a tabletop in Ogmores-by-Sea, a scientist wished for the chance at another life, a chance to explore the endless possibilities of everything, and was lifted up on the back of a star and into the infinite beyond.

And it was how a girl in Christmas pyjamas and the boy who had come to rescue her found themselves, very much life-sized and back to

normal, watching a stream of shining silver wishes pour into their world and swirling around her parents' dining room.

'Out the back way, if you don't mind,' she said with a grin. The lights did one more lap of the dining room, flaring and twinkling their thanks, before disappearing through the door and down the hallway.

'And don't be so literal next time!' she called after them. 'No turning someone into a chocolate cake just because they want to be rich and popular or something!'

The portal above the table closed with a neat little 'pop' and, for a moment, all was quiet.

Hobo's face scrunched up with concern. 'Are you sure that's safe? Letting wishes out into the world like that?' he asked.

'It's Christmas, Hobo. If there were ever a time when there were wishes needing to be granted, it's now.'

'It didn't seem to work out so well last time.

'Yeah well, they know I'm watching them now don't they?' said Lucy.

'So... are you Santa now?'

'No! Don't be daft. Santa's the only Santa. I'm just... a really good elf.'

Suddenly, the lights in the house shut off, plunging the dining room almost into darkness, all

except for the light of a single wish, still floating above the table.

‘Albert Wilson!’ shouted Mum.

‘It was your idea!’ Dad shouted back.

‘Which you’ve got wrong! Use a circuit breaker I said!’

Lucy’s mum appeared at the front door, wearing a facial expression that could have stopped a clock. Or a whole clock factory.

‘George! Make yourself useful and reset the fuse box under the stairs. And Lucy? That Christmas village better be on the table by the time I come in.’

Lucy and Hobo looked at each other and then at the empty table. Sometimes, Lucy and Hobo had the same thought at the same time but this wasn’t one of those times. Looking at the empty table and wondering how Mrs Wilson might react to the disappearance of her family heirloom Christmas village, Hobo’s first thoughts involved creating a new identity and getting plane tickets to a warm country with limited extradition arrangements. Lucy, on the other hand, had a more realistic plan.

Lucy decided to make a wish.

‘Hey!’ whispered Lucy to the tiny ball of light that bobbed above the table. ‘I’ve got a job for you.’

‘Hang on a second, Lucy,’ said Hobo. ‘That wish... it could do anything. Shouldn’t we use it for something... big?’

Lucy shook her head. 'Ah, Hobo,' she said. 'Don't you get it? It's the little things that matter.'

And that was how, on a table in Ogmores-by-Sea, a tiny Victorian Christmas village was recreated, better than ever before. It still had a perfect little pub, a perfect little post office, a perfect little butcher's, a perfect little grocer's, a perfect little sweet shop, a perfect little toy shop, and a perfect little church. But it also had dinosaurs, and space warriors, and aliens, and soldiers. And amongst the soldiers, pistol in hand and a look of determination on his face, it also had a tiny Brigadier.

'So that's what you've been up to,' said Lucy's mum, arms crossed and her best reserving-judgement judgemental face on.

'It was my idea,' said Hobo, hurling himself under the Mrs Wilson-shaped bus that was fast approaching. 'I thought, maybe, in honour of Lucy's grandad...'

'I like it,' said Mr Wilson, smiling at Lucy and Hobo. 'It reminds me of one of his old stories.'

'Are you sure, love?' asked Mrs Wilson, wrapping arm around her husband. 'You were never too keen on them.'

'Yeah, well,' replied Mr Wilson. 'Maybe that was the wrong decision. It's nice to remember at Christmas. That's why we do it, isn't it? Same food,

same songs, same things on the telly.'

'New things are okay too,' said Lucy.

'Yeah, that's right,' said Mr Wilson. 'Starting now. Tamara, I reckon the lights can wait another day, keep them down the road in suspense a little longer. Let's get the kettle on and Lucy can tell us one of Dad's old stories.'

'Really?' said Lucy.

'Really.'

And that was how the last of the lost wishes came true.

(But in case you're wondering what happened to all those other wishes, don't worry... they found their way underneath Christmas trees all around Ogmores-by-Sea, all around Wales, and all around the world. They became bicycles and games consoles, teddy bears and train sets, play kitchens and toy castles and, in one very particular instance, an exceedingly large quantity of orange socks.)



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