

A Fairytale of New Dorchester

by Toby Frost

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Message identified as originating in four-hour intervals from luxury resort station 217, in permanent orbit of New Dorchester:

HAVING SPLENDID PARTY STOP COME AND PARTAKE OF FESTIVE CHEER –
FOREVER STOP ALL WELCOME STOP PARTY GUARANTEED TO NEVER STOP

The 22nd of December.

The airlock slid open with a rusty creak and Isambard Smith peered into the docking bay. Smith reached down and flicked on his torch. The beam lit up a bleak, industrial scene: what had looked like a Christmas tree was an aerial propped against the wall. Wires hung down from the ceiling like bunting for machines.

“Is it a party for robots?” Suruk the Slayer inquired.

“Looks a bit empty,” Carveth said. “Are you sure this is the right place?”

“Certain,” Smith replied, strolling into the middle of the room. “These are the right co-ordinates.”

“Perhaps they are approaching the festive season stealthily,” Suruk suggested. “Like hunters.”

“You are weird,” Carveth said.

Rhianna stepped inside. She sniffed the air cautiously. “It’s breathable. Better than the squat I used to live in.” She looked around. “Maybe they’re all meditating. You know, chilling out.”

“What?” Carveth looked appalled. “It’s Christmas, Rhianna. You don’t meditate. You relax by getting stinking drunk and singing loudly. Everyone knows that.” She turned to a row of consoles. “Let’s fire up the lights and see if anyone’s home. And if they’re not, let’s see if they’ve got a drinks cabinet.”

"You've got a point," said Smith. "Christmas is a time for looking back over the events of the year, and then getting bladdered trying to forget about them." He looked at one of the maintenance panels. A light flickered weakly on the console. "Power's on, though." Smith turned to his crew. "Right then, men. Carveth, you go and find us some accommodation. Suruk..."

"I shall go hunting for festive amusement," the alien announced, swinging his spear into his hands. "I have often wondered if the spirit of Christmas has a detachable head."

As they departed, Rhianna reached over and squeezed Smith's hand. "So that just leaves us," she said.

"Indeed so."

Rhianna smiled. "So while they're off exploring, perhaps we could spend some time alone together. After all, this is a hotel..."

"Oh, righto!" Smith exclaimed. "Have you got cards to write as well, then?"

That evening.

Rhianna walked into the dining hall. Smith was sitting at the top table, folded at the waist. He had fallen asleep, and his pen hand was still twitching. As she approached, her sandals quiet on the wooden floor, he made a vague groaning sound.

The pile of Christmas cards lay beside him, stacked in a box. Rhianna was surprised: for one thing this was unusually neat for Smith, and for another she didn't know he had so many friends. She picked up the top card and read it. She frowned, and looked at the second card. Then she reached in, pushed her hand about halfway down and pulled one out at random. She read the message, and her frown deepened. She didn't know Smith had so many friends called Jack.

"Aargh!" Smith jerked awake. He sat bolt upright, staring down the room in horror. "Oh my God!"

"Hey!" Rhianna looked round. "Are you alright? You're freaking out, Isambard."

"Urgh," he said, flopping back in the chair. Shuddering, he rubbed his eyes. "I had a terrible dream, like some awful nightmare. I went into space with this dreadful monster, and my robot broke and kept disobeying me, and then I went to bed with this crazy magic woman who smelt of joss, and we – oh," he added, coming to. "Right. Hello Rhianna. Carry on."

The door at the far end of the hall burst open. Carveth ran in. "Boss! Boss!"

Smith lurched upright. Looking down at the box of Christmas cards, he felt sure that the festive season really ought to involve much less work and more play. "What's going on?"

"Boss, come quickly! There's a horrible thing upstairs! I went up to use the loo and there it was - lying in the bathtub, all green and decomposing!"

"Good Lord," Smith said, stepping out from behind the desk. "That sounds revolting." He reached to his pistol, then paused. "Was it Suruk?"

"Oh no. This was far worse. Hideous."

"Was it Suruk with his clothes off?"

Carveth blinked. "Hey... it was." She sighed. "Well, thank goodness there's an explanation. At least it wasn't the eggnog talking."

4.15 pm.

Suruk wandered down the corridor, feeling annoyed. Stupid little android woman, walking in while he was busy at his ablutions! No doubt she was in some sort of unnatural breeding frenzy, as required by her strange Earth-metabolism. How horrible.

The empty space station bothered him. Suruk liked the company of others, especially if they were trying unsuccessfully to kill him and losing their heads in the process. It felt as if he had been lured here with the promise of entertainment and given nothing in return. That sounded like a trap, or the festive television listings.

Suruk paused, taking in the decor. By the wall, a little sign read "Christmas Party and Orgy of Bloodshed this way". He looked around the doorframe, but the long hall was deserted. Frowning, and having nothing else to do, Suruk strolled in and hopped onto a bar stool.

There was a buzzer on the bar, next to a small note that read "Please press for service". Suruk looked around for something to press, and after seeing no staff in the great, cavernous room, hit the buzzer instead.

A mechanical butler swung up from behind the bar like a target at a funfair. His eyes opened and he looked down at Suruk with a broad, reptilian smile. "Good evening, sir."

"Greetings, minion!" Suruk replied.

"Hard day, sir?" the butler inquired. "Please, call me Floyd." He set out a small bowl full of green items in front of Suruk. Suruk looked at the bowl, unsure whether this was a dish of olives or some sort of communal nose-blowing receptacle. Not really having a nose, he decided to avoid it.

“What can I get you, sir?” Floyd inquired. “Perhaps some beer, or a packet of crisps? Or might I recommend a lovely big axe? You’ll find it quite sharp, but refreshing.”

Suruk felt uneasy. He looked over his shoulder, feeling the vague tingle that he experienced when someone was trying to creep up on him. “I came here for a Christmas party,” he explained, “yet the Victorian festivities have failed to manifest themselves. Not a sign of the Artful Dickens or his Tiny Tim.”

“Most unfortunate, sir,” Floyd replied. “Perhaps some spirits then, sir. We have some interesting coloured rum, perhaps?” Without waiting for a response, the butler set a glass on the bar and began to fill it with a thick red liquid. “You know, sir, I couldn’t help observing your colleagues on the security cameras. I am wired in, sir. They seemed a little... disrespectful of you, sir.”

“Hmm,” Suruk replied. “Small android Carveth, you mean? It is true that there are few who understand the subtlety of my nature. Many consider that I am a halfwit obsessed with violence. Rarely do they look beyond the stereotype and realise that I also like collecting skulls.”

“Then perhaps you should have a word with them,” Floyd suggested. “Perhaps a few words, if I may be so bold, sir. Words such as ‘decapitate’, sir. Perhaps even ‘hack into really tiny pieces’, sir.”

Suruk sipped his drink and thought about it. “I think not. I am not in the mood for taking heads. It is not terribly festive. Perhaps at Easter.”

Floyd leaned close, and his cold voice seemed to cut into Suruk’s head like a scalpel. “But you’ve *always* been the headtaker, sir,” he said, and he laid an axe upon the bar.

Only just Wednesday.

Smith poured himself the last gin of the evening and climbed into bed. Rhianna was already asleep beside him, lying on her back and looking as if she had fallen out of the ceiling. Smith took a deep sip and fished out his Christmas list. He wrote “Hellfire-class space fighter (model)” on the bottom of the list and settled back in bed.

It had proved a disappointing day. Not only had the party failed to manifest itself, but only when he had finished his Christmas cards, his mind teetering on the brink of reason, had he realised that there wasn’t a postbox on the station. He would have to deliver them himself and, knowing relativity and the post office, there was a fair chance that they would only arrive next Christmas, or perhaps even two Christmasses ago. Time worked strangely across the galaxy-spanning vastness of the British Space Empire, which could be a real pain if you couldn’t stand hearing Slade again.

He awoke when something nudged him in the arm. “Bloody hamster,” he muttered, and then his shoulder was being shaken, and he opened his eyes to find Rhianna leaning over him.

“What ho,” he said, taking in the aroma of joss. Rhianna’s cheeks were flushed, her breathing hard. Clearly she was looking for an early Christmas present. Smith sat up and adjusted his pyjama collar. He wagged his eyebrows roguishly. “Feeling festive, are we?”

“No, Isambard,” she replied wearily, “I do not want to pull your cracker. I heard something. Listen!”

He waited, trying to concentrate. Yes, there it was: a strange, croaky little voice, muttering. Smith got up and put his slippers on. He was half-in his dressing gown when he heard the strained, low voice again – closer, and rising.

“Sounds like some animal,” he said, and he slid the pistol from under his pillow.

The connecting door burst open. Carveth stood on the threshold, eyes glazed, her finger pointing across the room. “Pink gin!” she cried. “Pink gin!”

“It’s on the mantelpiece,” Smith replied. “Really, Carveth, you ought to have made yourself one before you went to bed.”

“Sorry.” Carveth mixed up a drink and took a deep swig. “That’s better. My throat feels terrible.”

“Probably all the mince pies,” Smith replied, and a spear burst through the door.

Rhianna shrieked. The blade twisted, tearing and splintering the wood, and was ripped free from the corridor side. A hideous yellow eye appeared at the hole, manic and bloodshot, and a low voice growled, “Season’s greetings!”

Smith opened the door. Suruk stood outside, looking slightly sheepish. “For goodness’ sake!” Smith exclaimed. “Can’t you keep it down?”

“Sorry,” Suruk said. He swung the spear up onto his shoulder. “I locked myself out.”

“You could have rung the bell,” Carveth said.

“I did not want to wake you up.”

Smith decided that he would think this through in the morning. “Look, everyone, it’s gone midnight. It’s time for bed. Tomorrow we can put some tinsel up -” He paused, listening. “Suruk, did you leave the radio on?”

The alien shook his head, and as Rhianna joined them at the door, music began to filter up from below.

Carveth shuddered. “Light jazz,” she said quietly. “That always ends in trouble.”

“Somehow,” Suruk mused, “I fear it bodes ill. Especially since a robot butler tried to convince me to murder you all.” He turned towards the stairs. “Out of interest, I said I would think it over.”

“Right,” Smith declared, “we’re going downstairs. Everyone, get ready. Time we had some words with this butler fellow. Dressing gowns on, people.”

As one they crept to the top of the stairs. Light flooded up from below. Bodies moved in front of the lights, setting them flickering.

“I can sense danger,” Rhianna said.

“Thanks for that,” Carveth replied.

Very quietly, Smith began to walk downstairs. A clarinet solo twiddled through the air. He reached the bottom step, his gun before him.

Suruk pointed down the corridor. They walked into the sound of jazz.

The main hall was dimly-lit and full of people. They laughed, toasted one another, even danced to the four-piece band in the corner of the room. There must be a hundred of them, Smith thought. Everywhere there was the sound of tinkling glass and high, tinkling laughter.

A woman looked around as they walked into the room, slowly raised her cigarette holder, exhaled and turned away.

God, Smith thought, these lot were a pretty standoffish bunch. He looked back at his crew. Suruk was sniffing the air. He caught Smith’s eye and said, “No smoke.”

Carveth nodded. “They’re projections, boss. Ethergraphs.”

“I see... Of course!” Smith clicked his fingers, as though appreciating the jazz. “This must be repeated footage of a Christmas party that happened years ago. Because if there’s one thing you always see at Christmas -”

“It’s the same films over and over again!” Carveth exclaimed.

“Suruk, Carveth, find the projector and switch it off. Rhianna, come with me. We have a butler to locate.”

They slipped into the crowd. It was hard to believe that everyone here was a mere image – *almost* everyone, he reflected. “Excuse me,” Smith said, sidestepping an arguing couple. “Terribly sorry, old fellow – you almost hit me with your Charleston there.”

Yes, he thought as a pair of young ladies passed by, it was all terribly like a real party. Quite a chilly party, he thought, from the looks of that girl’s –

“Isambard?” Rhianna tapped his shoulder. “I thought I saw someone, over there.”

Smith peered into the crowd. It was hard to tell. Perhaps there was a real person there, his tails-jacket disappearing into those around him like a zebra on the veldt. Perhaps –

The music stopped, the partygoers vanished, and Rhianna shouted, “Look!”

Smith whipped around, raising his pistol, and five yards away, in the middle of the deserted hall, stood an antique robot in a bow tie. “Er, don’t mind me, sir,” the robot said, and rather awkwardly he lowered his axe.

One hour later.

“Well sir,” Floyd said, dusting down his lapels, “I must confess that being the only sentient being on the entire space station for fifty years may have affected my mental stability a tad. But at the end of the day I only tried to murder you all because I wanted a friend.”

Smith bent down and discreetly picked up Floyd’s axe. “How so?”

The robot sighed. “I was a victim of my own success, Captain Smith. My skills as a butler were remarkable, if I may say so. My service was so obsequious, yet so discreet, that when the crew of the station left fifty years ago they entirely forgot to take me with them.” He shook his head. “I suppose they’re dead and gone by now – with unpressed trousers too. It’s been terribly lonely, living here on my own: making myself drinks, knotting my own tie... That’s why I broadcast the invitation. All I wanted was for someone to come and stay with me. For ever. And ever. And very likely ever.”

“And so you malfunctioned into a homicidal maniac,” Suruk said. He shook his head sadly. “Why did you not say so earlier? Then everything would have been fine. Nice axe, by the way.”

Smith had listened to the robot’s story, frowning. “Well,” he declared, “I can see only one way of sorting all this out. In normal circumstances, the presence of an axe-wielding robot lunatic can only hinder the sort of goodwill that Christmas is all about. But there’s a war on, and as Oscar Wilde once said, if there’s one thing worse than having a nutcase with an axe on your side, it’s not having a nutcase with an axe on your side. Especially if you’re fighting the lemming men of Yull.”

“Wise words,” Suruk said. “Words, at any rate.”

“Floyd,” Smith announced, “you’re in luck. I happen to know of an elite military unit that’s got everything except its own batman. Perhaps if I put in a good word, my colleague Major Wainscott would be happy to welcome you to the Deepspace Operations Group –”

Rhianna tapped Smith on the arm. “Yes?” he said, leaning close.

“Um,” Rhianna said, “it’s a really kind idea, Isambard, but you do realise Floyd is crazy, right? I mean he’s violently insane, and if you introduce him to Wainscott... actually, on second thoughts he’ll fit right in.”

“Exactly. Having a mad robot to press his trousers might actually encourage Wainscott to start wearing some. You know,” Smith said, “perhaps we should reactivate the ethergraphic projector and try to get a group photo. That ought to capture the Christmas spirit, don’t you think?”