

## The Thought That Counts

Or,

## For Zoom The Bell Tolls

“Right,” said Polly Carveth, climbing down from the chair. “Here we go.”

She knelt down beside the Christmas tree and threw the switch. Lights flickered into. On top, a tiny angel waved a miniature trumpet.

On the far side of the dining room, Suruk the Slayer regarded the tree with suspicion.

“Oh, come on,” Carveth said. “You look like a normal person looking at modern art. Well, a normal person with mandibles. What’s wrong with it?”

Suruk the Slayer opened his mouthparts and emitted a thoughtful croak. “A valiant effort, Piglet. But I feel that it is missing something.”

“A heap of skulls around the base, I suppose.”

“No. Legs. It is missing legs.”

Carveth shook her head. “For the last time, Suruk, trees don’t have legs.”

“Nonsense. Many of my favourite trees have legs. And huge claws. And many sharp teeth. They are large, and green, and mighty, and – ah, no, I’m thinking of dinosaurs. Anyhow, in M’Lak space, at festive occasions, warriors often lasso a Venus mantrap with fairy lights,” Suruk said. “That way, whenever one goes to fetch a present –”

“He has to fight a giant vegetable.”

“Exactly.”

“No, Suruk. I’m not having Christmas spoiled by vegetables. And that goes for sprouts, too. Horrid little fart-eggs.”

“Hey guys!”

Rhianna Mitchell stood in the doorway, carrying a tray. She approached, her kaftan billowing out behind her. Steam rose from the mugs on the tray: the herbal aroma that surrounded her was slightly different to normal. “Check it out, guys. I made mulled wine.”

Carveth took a cup and sipped. “That’s really good. It’s got a very smooth taste. What did you mull it with?”

“Cinnamon, and orange peel. And, um... herbs.”

Suruk reached into one of the cups. “I think I have found a stick of cinnamon.”

“Um, actually, Suruk, that’s my cigarette. I kept it behind my ear – it must have fallen into the wine...”

“So what do you think of the tree?” Carveth asked.

“It’s metal, isn’t it? Good recycling, Polly. It’s just a bit...” Rhianna made a vague gesture.

“Static.”

“See?” Suruk exclaimed. “She thinks it should have legs too!”

“No,” Rhianna said. “I mean, like, literally static. I’m picking up, like, waves...” She looked up at the ceiling. “I think they’re caught in my aura... or my hair.”

The door opened. Carveth glanced around. Captain Isambard Smith strolled into the room. “Hullo again, chaps. Anyone want a cup of tea —” He hesitated. “Carveth, why is the radio antennae in the corner of the room? And why is there a fairy on top of it?”

“Pay attention, men,” said Smith, two cups of tea and a mince pie later. “An important message has come through from high command – at least, it would have done if someone hadn’t repurposed our comms equipment for festive purposes. Really, Carveth, I’ve not seen you make such an outrageous misuse of a piece of innocent machinery since – well, let’s not dwell on that. The point is, we have received a top secret coded transmission, and we’re needed right away on the galactic rim.”

“Are we going to a party?” Carveth asked.

“Not exactly, no.”

“Is it some sort of grotesquely oversized dinner, washed down with huge amounts of booze?”

Smith shook his head.

“A battle?” Suruk asked.

“Not exactly, no. We’re going to visit Agent W.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Carveth replied. “He’s the most depressing man alive!”

“That’s a bit harsh,” Smith said.

“Actually, Mazuran,” Suruk added, “Piglet here has a point. He is, perhaps, somewhat gloomy for this time of year. Unless, of course, we are going to cheer him up, like the ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*. Rhianna here can be the Ghost of Christmas Future; Carveth, the Ghost of Christmas Pasties; and you can be the Ghost of Christmas Presents.”

Smith sighed. “Look, chaps, this is an urgent distress call, and Service protocol requires us to respond on penalty of total forfeiture of eggnog. Besides, I’m sure we’ll find something to do while we’re there. W lives next door to an automated whisky distillery.”

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The *John Pym* cut through the upper atmosphere of Hera 7. Isambard Smith sat in the captain’s chair, watching flames lap at the ship’s nosecone. *With a bit of luck*, he thought, *they might burn some of the rust off the fuselage*.

The *Pym* ploughed through the clouds like a mouse chewing through candy floss. Suddenly, the clouds broke apart, and the surface of Hera 7 was laid out before them.

It was sometimes said that the nations of Earth terraformed other planets to suit their inhabitants: a fair proportion of the British Space Empire's territories looked suspiciously like Kent on a fairly nice day. Hera 7, however, was rainy. The sea bashed and broke on a rocky coastline. Plants were blown flat by the wind. It looked as if Agent W's mind had seeped into the surroundings.

"Fun times ahead," Carveth said grimly. "Where's the damn whisky distillery? Ah, I see it."

The mist drew back and the distillery appeared. It looked like a pyramid, minus the top third. The outside was covered in brass pipes and valves, as if someone had squashed trumpets and tubas against its walls.

"That's the distillery," Carveth said, "so his house must be the big white building behind it." She pulled in the throttle, and the ship stabilised, held up by its thrusters. "Where do we land? Wait – there's writing on the roof. I can see an 'H'. It must be a landing pad for a helicopter. Oh, wait – I can see some other letters. Lots of other letters." She peered at the window. "It says 'Nobody lives here – go away'."

"Take us down, then," said Smith.

"Alright then," Carveth replied. "Let the good times roll."

The *John Pym* descended, and a spaniel ran out from the house and barked furiously at the sky, as if the sheer noise would make the spaceship fly away. A few moments later, a tall figure emerged and paced across the grass.

Carveth pointed at a car parked beside the house. "I'll stick the spaceship next to that Volvo." A moment later, both the navigation controls and a loud bang told Smith that she had landed – thankfully, not on the car. He waited for the *John Pym's* bad leg to wobble, as it always did, and unfastened his seat belt.

Smith and Suruk heaved the last crate onto the pallet. "That's the lot," Smith called, and the robot forklift rolled backward, straining under its load.

Agent W – or Eric Lint, as he was known in retirement – nodded approvingly. “Thanks, Smith. That should be enough tea for the next month or two.”

Carveth watched the forklift roll down the ramp and across the grass. “What’re you going to do for milk?”

“Oh, I have my own herd of cows,” W replied. “They’ll be busy, but we’ll manage.” He stood at the hold door; a haunted scarecrow of a man, his hair unbrushed and his jacket patched at the elbows, looking like the vengeful ghost of a geography teacher. “Come on in,” he said. “I’ve got some Christmas cake.”

They followed him across the grass. “It’s very beautiful here,” Rhianna said.

“Absolutely,” said W. “Only last night, I stood outside and wondered what made me feel so deeply connected with nature, and even the very sky itself. Then I realised it was the fumes from the distillery. Still, a good evening was had by all. Come on, Cardboard. You can have half a chipolata.”

It took a moment for Smith to work out that W was addressing his dog. They entered the house.

The inside was somewhat austere. It reminded Smith of those pubs where they screwed the pictures to the walls, except a good deal cleaner. W stopped at a pair of long cupboards. Someone had painted “Tea” on the left-hand door, and “Whisky” on the other.

“What the heck,” he said, “it’s Christmas. Let’s have both.”

They sat on battered armchairs. A large computer with an ornate brass keyboard stood on the dining table. “I’ve been writing my memoirs,” W said. “Had to censor quite a lot of it, though.”

Smith sipped his tea. “Lots of swearing, eh?”

W looked shocked. “No, it’s classified. Really, Smith, have you never heard of the Official Secrets Act?”

Smith wondered what the correct answer was when you were talking to a spy. “Should I be telling you that?”

"It's strange, being retired from the Service. Looks as if I'll be spending Christmas alone this year." W sighed. "Good. I had quite enough of people bothering me in the war. Anyway, I have news for you. Major Wainscott's not dead."

"Excellent!" Suruk growled.

"Glad to hear it," Smith said.

"Thought you'd be pleased," W replied. "Think of it as an early Christmas present."

Carveth scowled. "Actually, I was hoping for a pony. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm glad he's still around, but he is as mad as a hatter. You never know when he's going to drop a bomb – or his trousers. So what happened, then? Did he get thrown out of Valhalla for causing trouble?"

W sipped his whisky, then his tea. "I know people have had different opinions about Wainscott and his... trouser problem, but you have to give the man his dues. Wainscott destroyed at least a dozen battleships in the war, at least half of which belonged to the enemy. Normally, when one of our agents leaves the Service, we'd find them some new work, often as a teacher in a minor preparatory school."

Rhianna said, "Does that often happen?"

"Oh yes, very frequently. Right now, there's a chap in Chipping Norton teaching ten-year-olds about oxbow lakes who blew up an entire Edenite space station. With his hands. However, Wainscott may actually be too mad for that."

"Did you try Midwich Grammar School?" Smith said.

"Yes. He was too crazy."

"Good God." Smith shuddered: he had spent five years in that nightmarish place, and it had given him a hatred of tyranny and injustice that would never fade. He had not been a great success, academically speaking, but after the horrors of Class 3B, he could stare down a herd of rampaging quanbeasts.

"Anyway," said W, "a few days ago, I received a distress call from Wainscott's sister."

“What’s her problem?”

“For one thing, she lives with Wainscott. They’re on a planet called New Dundee –”

Carveth said, “Nude Undies?”

Gently, Rhianna said, “New Dundee, Polly.”

“Anyway,” W continued, “it seems that Wainscott has been getting lonely and depressed. His sister, Denethora, has asked us to look into the matter and help. As you know, the Service knows how to take care of people.”

Suruk raised his version of a hand. “When you say ‘take care of’ ...”

“Not like that. I want you to bring Wainscott a Christmas present to cheer him up. I can’t tell you the exact details of the present, but it is fragile, and you should store it right side up. And don’t shake it, open the seals or expose it to any naked flames. Especially after midnight.”

Smith nodded. “Righto. You can count on us.”

“There it is,” W said. Wainscott’s Christmas present sat in the middle of the otherwise-empty hold, secured in place by a spider’s web of rope, string, foam padding and Sellotape. “If that doesn’t cheer him up, I don’t know what will.” He gave the present a long, wary look, as if unsure which wire to cut in order to make it safe. “Good luck to you all. It’s imperative that Wainscott remains on New Dundee in a tolerably balanced state of mind. With him in his current state, I fear for what might happen if Wainscott was exposed to civilian society.”

“Gosh, you’re right,” Smith replied. “Civilian society could be in a lot of danger.”

“Now then. I think you’d better be going. It’s a long way to New Dundee.” W looked at each of them in turn, and something almost cheerful flickered briefly in his eyes. “Happy Christmas to you all. I hope you have a good time.”

Smith said, “Are you sure you don’t want to come with us? You could join us for Christmas lunch. We’ve got chicken this year, or at least something Suruk says tastes like chicken.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.” W’s mouth twitched, as if unsure of what was being asked of it, and then he smiled. “You know, Smith, I like being on my own. I never realised how happy I could be until every other bugger buggered off. Come on, Cardboard. We have today’s casks to sample.”

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Carveth left the cockpit, walked down the central corridor, passed through the mess and entered the hold. She looked out at the parcel, and wondered exactly what it was.

“Hey, Polly.”

Carveth gasped. Rhianna slid out of the shadows. The wispy outline of her kaftan seemed to blur into the smoke from her recreational cigarette.

“Bloody hell,” Carveth said. “You scared me. Where are the others?”

“Well, Suruk’s in his room, putting tinsel on his skull collection. Isambard’s gone to study spaceship construction, which tends to mean that he’s making an Airfix kit.”

“Figures. Right, then, we’re on course for New Dundee. We’ll be stopping off at the service station, where we’ll be stocking up on fuel and sweets, and then it’s plain sailing from then on. Find Wainscott, give him his present, and get on with the important festive tradition of stuffing my face.”

“Hello there!” Smith strode into the hold, a tray in his hands.

Carveth looked at the selection of items on the tray, and the upturned box above them.

“What’s that?”

“Nativity scene,” Smith explained. “I wouldn’t normally, but I thought I should make it before – well, before Suruk did it. He had a good go last year, but the results were a little – you know – macabre.”

Rhianna nodded. “That donkey must have been very angry. And hungry.”



“I’ve had to substitute a few things. The three kings are some spare ground crew I had from an Airfix space shuttle, and I improvised the others out of spark plugs. You can hardly tell the difference once I painted the faces on.” He led them into the mess and set the tray on the dinner table. “Suruk,” Smith called down the corridor, “come in here, would you?”

The alien appeared in the doorway, wearing the apron that he used when polishing his trophy collection. “Greetings!”

“Now, chaps,” said Smith, “once we’ve delivered this parcel, we’ll be on holiday. I’ve collected some magazines to see where we could go.”

He opened one of the kitchen cabinets and took out a pile of glossy brochures. Smith set the pile down next to the nativity scene. “Let me know if you see anything you like.”

Rhianna took a brochure off the top of the pile. “Okay, guys, this looks cool. It’s a holistic experience where we travel to a desert planet, learn about ecology, take huge amounts of psychedelic drugs and ride about on a gigantic space worm.”

“Wow,” said Carveth. “Butlins has really upped its game. I’m not sure about the worm-surfing, though. Isn’t that dangerous? What about theme parks?”

Rhianna looked disappointed. “Polly, I’m not keen on the rampant commercialism.”

Carveth shrugged. “What else do you think Christmas is about?”

“Well, how about the birth of Jesus? Or the ancient pagan festival of Yule? Or the celebrating of friendship and tradition, as seen in –”

“Charles Dickens Land, the theme park that lives up to great expectations. Give me that.”

Carveth grabbed one of the brochures. “Here we go... ‘Experience life in the wild west in our robot-manned theme park. Drive your own tractor, drink cider and watch a robot eating a pastie at WestCountryWorld’. Cyderpunk at its most futuristic. Sounds alright...”

“What about that park with dinosaurs?” Suruk asked.

Smith shook his head. “Sorry, old chap, but the park’s closed. All the dinosaurs escaped.”

“What, again? Which fool let them out this time?”

“Apparently, they got in a load of robot cowboys to herd the dinosaurs. It ended badly.”

A loud bleep came from the cockpit – then came again. “We’re approaching the service station,” Carveth said. “Who wants me to get them some wine gums?”

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“Ooh, I don’t feel right,” Carveth said, an hour later. “I wish I hadn’t had that prawn sandwich.”

Smith looked around. He was sitting in the captain’s chair, watching space. “For goodness’ sake, Carveth. We’re at least five lightyears and a parsec from any planet that has seafood. Didn’t you realise it was on the turn?”

“It was cheap,” she replied. “You know, this is the second grossest thing that’s happened all year.”

“Only the second?”

“You remember that derelict spaceship we found, with all those big eggs in the hold, and one of the eggs opened up, and this creature jumped out and attached itself to Suruk’s face, and Suruk ate it? That time.”

“Ah yes,” said Smith, “that.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Suruk said, “it tasted dreadful. I had to eat several breath mints afterwards, and I had terrible indigestion for a week. Still, I regard it as a learning experience. Next time, I shall lay off the breath mints.”

“Right,” said Carveth. “I need to powder my nose - urgently. You look after the controls. And don’t trash the spaceship while I’m gone.”

“Good luck,” said Smith.

He leaned back in his chair. The stars whipped by as the *John Pym* sped towards its destination. The engines hummed with restrained power. Smith took a sip of his tea and reflected that, once again, he was the master of his destiny.

An alarm went off. Smith leaped up, sloshing lukewarm tea over his thighs, and stared at the console. What the hell did it mean? He wasn't sure that he'd ever seen this particular set of switches and dials before. A diode was flashing above one of the dials. He peered at it. It said “fuel gauge”.

He rushed to the door and yelled “Carveth, there's an emergency! I'm running out of fuel!”

Muffled by the bathroom door, her voice shouted back “Make your own tea! I'm busy!”

“It's not the tea,” he called. “It's the ship!”

Smith opened the airlock, lumbered inside and closed the door behind him. He turned the wheel and waited for it to repressurise, and then opened the inner door. As he stomped into the corridor, he pulled off his helmet. The air of the *John Pym* was recycled and smelled of last night's dinner, but at least it was better than wearing the spacesuit, which was like being locked inside a cupboard full of damp cricket pads.

Suruk, Carveth and Rhianna waited at the dining table while Smith pulled the spacesuit off. They looked up at him like contestants waiting to see who would be disqualified. Smith put on his most serious captain's face.

“Someone,” said Smith, “left the fuel cap off when we were in the service station.”

“Well, it wasn't me,” Carveth replied. “I told Suruk to look after things while I got that sandwich, remember?”

“Indeed,” Suruk said. “But I handed command of the refuelling to Rhianna here, while I purchased this Christmas tree.” He produced a conifer-shaped air freshener. “It is, admittedly, a little small, and somewhat flat, but it may improve the odour of the ship.”

Rhianna scratched her head through her dark mess of hair. "Yeah, I was in charge, but then Isambard offered to take over, because he said I'd get confused..."

"Bugger," said Smith. "It was me, wasn't it?"

"Yep. Sorry boss."

"Indeed, Mazuran."

"Um, yeah, Isambard."

Smith sighed. "Right then. I'm sorry I accused you all of being incompetent. I should have known that... well, anyway. Have we got enough fuel to get to New Dundee? And have we got enough to get home again?"

"Yes," Carveth replied. "But not both. In half an hour, we'll have reached the point of no return. We don't have enough fuel to land on New Dundee and deliver the present, and then to break out of its atmosphere and return home. Unless someone has a good idea, it's one or the other. I gather that in such circumstances the normal thing is to go back and send a book token through the post – but this is us and Wainscott we're talking about, so I suppose 'normal' is out the question."

"I see. That's not good. We need a plan."

"Personally," Carveth said, "I'd like to vote for the option that doesn't involve being stuck on a planet with Wainscott."

Suruk frowned. "Why do we not just open the door and push the present out? Then it will fall gently to the ground."

Carveth said, "Assuming that it doesn't burn up in the atmosphere, if we get into the gravity well and chuck the present out, it will hit the ground like a bomb. Flattening Wainscott's home from orbit is probably not the best way to start the man's Christmas."

This was a moment that called for ingenuity and moral fibre, Smith decided. He put the kettle on. "Could we cut the engines, coast over and slingshot around New Dundee and back home?"

"Just about."

“And Wainscott has no offworld capacity?”

Carveth shook her head. “I’m not certain. But it’s Wainscott, boss. I wouldn’t trust him with an HB pencil, so I doubt the Service has given him his own spaceship.”

“But he *will* have explosive.”

“Like I said, it’s Wainscott. He never leaves home without it. He’s probably moulding himself an igloo out of CX5 as we speak.”

Suruk smiled. “He always was an ingenious man, and skilled with projectiles. I remember once, he leaped out of cover and blew up a Ghost tank with a single rocket, while shouting ‘Say hello to my little friend’. For many days afterwards, I wondered if the ‘little friend’ referred to the bazooka he used, or the fact that he had removed his underwear before making the attack.”

“Right, chaps,” said Smith, “the answer seems clear. We can orbit New Dundee but we can’t land. So, we need Wainscott to collect his present. For that, he needs a vehicle of some sort. Assuming that he has the raw materials, we need to tell him how to build a rocket and where to aim it.” He frowned, thinking. “If only there was some way to send him the instructions in a condensed form. Damn shame he’s not got a fax machine. Carveth?”

“Yes boss?”

“Get us in a medium orbit. Use as little fuel as possible to keep us stable. We need to make radio contact.”

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It took twenty-seven minutes to reach New Dundee, eight minutes to enter a stable orbit, and fifty-nine minutes to tune the television in. They sat in the cockpit of the *John Pym*, drinking tea and eating space-issue Christmas cake, until the screen hissed and flickered into life.

“We’ve got contact,” Smith called. “On screen, pilot.”

Carveth reached to the back of the TV and turned the coat hanger thirty-five degrees.

A large room appeared on the screen, fuzzy and wavering as if viewed through a heat-haze. Chairs stood around a long, wooden table. At the head of the table was – something white. It sat motionless, a blur in the rough shape of a human.

“Um...” said Carveth, “can you guys see that thing too?”

“What thing?” Suruk asked. “I can see nothing – except for the large ghost, of course.”

The white shape stood up. Trailing cloth, it walked off screen.

“Well, that was normal,” Carveth said. “I’d really like – argh!”

A face was thrust up in front of the camera. It was a woman in her early fifties, with messy hair and wild eyes, like a warning against the misuse of laudanum. She stared out at them. “You have woken me from my slumber,” she announced. “I always have a nap at tea-time. Are you friends of Arwen?”

Smith swallowed. “Yes, we are. I’m Captain Smith, and these are my crew. Are you Major Wainscott’s sister?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Denethora, please. Arwen will be so glad you’ve come to visit. He’s been getting quite lonely recently. It’s just the two of us here, you see. He keeps saying that he’ll find me a husband, but he hasn’t checked the traps for ages...”

“Ah,” said Smith. “About that – there’s been a bit of a problem.”

He explained the situation. Denethora Wainscott took it all pretty well – at any rate, she didn’t scream or threaten to haunt him.

“That’s a shame,” she said. “But he’ll appreciate a gift. I think we can send a rocket up to collect the parcel. There’s an old grain silo that would make a good fuselage, and lots of fertiliser. Arwen’s taught me a thing or two, you see. I’m pretty handy with a blowtorch, Captain Smith.”

Smith turned to his crew. “Do you think it’s possible?”

Carveth shrugged. “If anyone can scratch-build a missile, it’s Wainscott.”

“How high could Wainscott get?”

“That totally depends on what he’s using,” Rhianna replied.

Denethora said, “Arwen’s out right now – he’s gone fishing.” There was a muffled explosion from behind her: light flashed in the dining room windows. “But I’ll tell him right away. Give us twelve hours, Captain Smith.”

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Carveth sat in the pilot’s chair, a duvet over her legs. Drowsily, she watched the dawn creep around the edge of the planet. “It’s been twelve hours,” she said. “It’s a new dawn.”

“A new day,” croaked Suruk. “And I am feeling good.” On the far side of the cockpit, the alien opened another door on the advent calendar and emitted a throaty chuckle. “Soon, Baby Jesus... soon.” He walked over and stood beside Carveth’s chair, staring into the void of space. “Do you think that Father Christmas can survive out there?”

“Oh, definitely. I mean, he’s been alive for several thousand years, so a little space travel can’t be that hard for him.”

“How about his reindeer? What will happen to Rudolf, Blitzen, Donner, Kebab, Famine, Pestilence, War and Death?”

She frowned. “You’ve still not quite *got* the festive season, have you? Maybe we should take you to the north pole sometime, so long as you promise not to murder the elves.”

Suruk’s mandibles moved aside, allowing him to thoughtfully rub his chin. “Perhaps so. You know, my ancestors used to travel to Earth to hunt in the snow. They would throw spears at these hairy creatures with horns...”

“Your people used to kill the reindeers? You maniac!”

Suruk looked puzzled. “No, those were Vikings. Where is the fun in fighting a reindeer?”

The dashboard beeped. Carveth leaned over and examined the switches. "We've got contact. Rising from the surface, heading into high orbit... it's him." She twisted around and shouted down the corridor. "Boss! Wainscott's hailing us. You speak his language better than me."

Smith strode into the cockpit. "Not sure I know what you mean," he said, "but I'll give the old fellow a heads-up on our oppo." He dropped into the captain's chair and brushed mince pie crumbs off his jacket. "Ready."

The screen crackled. A face appeared, much too close to the lens. The man drew back, scrutinising the camera as if afraid that it might steal his soul. Wainscott was wide-eyed, unshaven and, hopefully, naked only from the waist up. He looked like a Cro-Magnon journalist reporting live from the discovery of fire.

"Smith? That you, Smith?"

"Hello, Wainscott."

"Good. I'm in a missile, headed right at you. Happy Christmas."

"Er, smashing," Smith replied. "Jolly good. Did Denethora explain that we're low on fuel?"

"Yes," Wainscott said. "Bad situation, can't be helped. It's just good to talk to someone who isn't my sister. Between you and I, I think she's a bit... odd. You still with that psychic bird, Smith?"

Rhianna leaned in front of the camera and waved. "Hey, Major."

"Good God, she's read my mind!"

"Actually, you're on the speakers."

"Ah, phew. Thought I'd unmuted my brain for a moment." Wainscott checked his watch. "In T-minus eight minutes, I'll break atmosphere and grab this present off you. It's going to be brief: I'm zooming in and dropping back down."

"Understood," Smith replied.

Wainscott cracked his knuckles. "I'd better put the old space suit on. Can't rush that. Had some terrible trouble with the zips that way. Good luck, *John Pym*. See you on the other side."



Smith and Suruk hurried down the corridor, past the cabins, to the wardrobe beside the airlock. They pulled out their spacesuits and clambered in. Suruk squeezed the helmet over his fangs and glared out like a shark squashed into a goldfish bowl. "Ready, Mazuran?"

"I jolly well am," Smith replied. "And you?"

"I was spawned ready. When Christmas calls, the slayer answers."

"Good-oh. When we open the hold, all the air will rush out, and so will Wainscott's present. I need you to aim it and throw it in his direction. It'll be just like throwing your spear, except that obviously it's a different shape and I'd rather you didn't kill him with it."

"Of course. It shall be a piece of cake."

Smith had a vague memory of being told not to shake the present. *Well, he thought, we won't be. We'll just be hurling it into space.* He clipped himself to the rear wall, and checked that Suruk had done the same.

His radio crackled. "Nearly there," Carveth said.

A row of diodes flickered into life around the door. Smith wondered if they signalled anything, and then realised that they were fairy lights.

"Wainscott's nearly on us," Carveth said. "Eight miles, seven, six..."

"That's right outside the door," Smith replied.

"Alright, here we go. Get ready!"

The hold door fell open. Air rushed out of the hold, along with dirt, rust and an empty bottle of gin. The air pulled at Smith and Suruk, tried to drag them out. Suruk raised his arm, the present gripped in his gloved hand.

A small white figure appeared in the doorway, toddler-shaped in its space suit, arms and legs moving slowly as if underwater.

"Celebrate with *this*," Suruk growled, and he hurled the present.

For a moment, Smith saw Wainscott's face behind his visor, wild-eyed and bearded like a pirate – and then the present hit him in the nose. He tumbled backwards, end over end, clutching the gift to his chest. The cone of his rocket rose behind him, a door gaping open in the fuselage, and Wainscott fell back into the hatch. The door swung shut, and Wainscott disappeared.

Smith hit the controls: the hold door rose like a drawbridge. It slammed closed, and the *John Pym's* systems pumped fairly fresh air into the room. He unscrewed his helmet and lifted it off.

"Did that work?"

"He got his present," Suruk replied. "And I believe it was a surprise to him. So yes."

"Maybe we shouldn't have aimed for his face."

The radio on Smith's suit crackled. "Hello?"

"Hey, Isambard," Rhianna replied. "We need you in the cockpit."

*Uhoh*, Smith thought. He lumbered through the dining room, waddling like an infant in his spacesuit, and struggled into the cockpit. Wainscott's face was on the monitor screen, and it looked surprisingly intact.

"Smith!" The major grinned as if he'd just brought down a mammoth. He was sitting in a cramped cockpit, apparently put together in a hurry: bundles of wire hung from the ceiling; keyboards had been attached to the wall with sticky tape. The present was on Wainscott's lap, the packaging miraculously intact. "Thanks!"

"Happy to help," Smith replied. "Merry Christmas."

"And to you too! Sorry I've not got anything for you."

Smith reflected that the only things Wainscott tended to leave behind him were destruction, mayhem and discarded trousers. "Don't worry. It's the thought that counts."

Rhianna pressed two fingers to her forehead and put on her psychic-powers expression.

"Whoa. He's got some serious thoughts."

“Let’s see what the Service has got me,” Wainscott said. He split the parcel open with the edge of his hand, and grabbed at the contents with a level of enthusiasm that he usually reserved for his enemies’ throats. Carveth flinched.

“Brilliant!” Wainscott said. “It’s some... socks. And pants. Bottle of whisky for me and some sherry for Denethora. Smashing. Wait – there’s something else in here. Socks, and pants and a box of Christmas crackers.” He rummaged. “No, wait, it’s not crackers – it’s sweet, sweet dynamite!”

Carveth shook her head. “Still crackers if you ask me.”

Wainscott brandished a stick at the screen. “This is better than Lego! It’s true, you know. The Service looks out for its own. And a Wainscott never forgets to pay a fellow back.” He looked straight into the camera, eyes gleaming, a stick of explosive in each hand. “Next year, I’ll come for you.”

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“So it all ended happily,” Carveth said, as she refilled her pint glass with eggnog. “We’ve got enough fuel to get back to the service station, and Wainscott’s got his dynamite.” She peered at New Dundee, still large in the windscreen. A tiny flicker appeared on the main continent, and was gone. “I suppose you’ve got to give him credit. His Christmas is visible from space.”

“Good work,” Smith replied. “It’s time to go. Set a course for festivity, Carveth.”

She grinned. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Smith turned to the window. Out there were trillions of different people – humans, aliens, and intelligent machines – separated by vast gulfs of space. And yet the humans had put up their decorations, the sentient machines had printed out tinsel, and the aliens had decked their halls with streamers, trophies and secreted resin as appropriate. Believers and unbelievers, citizens and allies, they had all looked into the endless winter of the void and realised that the only sane response was

to have as good a Christmas as possible. Which just went to show, Smith thought, that the true meaning –

“Boss?” Carveth prodded his arm. “Boss? Wakey-wakey. We’re going to get pissed in the mess-room. You coming?”

“Of course,” Smith replied. “Break out the gin.”