

In the Hall of the Mountain Things

By Toby Frost

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Festive greetings, humans! It is I, Suruk the Slayer, who addresses you, so you may know that what I say is true, accurate and so on. So gather round and I will tell you a story about myself doing great deeds and also some other people.

Have you ever hunted prey? I do not refer to merely shooting at those pigeon things, but the fierce struggle between hunter and enormous enemy, which runs deep in the life-blood of my species. On the day when our tale begins, I had armed myself with my spear, set down food and drink to lure out my adversary, and cunningly concealed myself, ready to spring my trap.

You can imagine my disappointment when Father Christmas failed to show up. Instead, who should appear but the little android woman Carveth, pilot of the spacecraft that carries me from adventure to adventure.

“Come out from behind the sofa, Suruk,” she said.

I emerged from my hiding place. “I see you have come for the mince pies,” I observed. “You may as well eat them. Father Christmas is absent. No doubt he fears to face me.”

“Alternatively, he might be finding it a bit difficult to get down the chimney, given that we’re in a spaceship.”

“The vents,” I replied. “He may be hiding up there.”

“He’s a fat, elderly man with eight reindeer,” she replied. “I doubt it.”

I frowned with both of my mandibles. “You know, it is not the same without a tree.”

“You’re right. Bloody secret service, sending us off on missions at this time of year.”

“Maybe it will be as Charles Dickens says, and we will be visited by the Ghost of Christmas Plants.”

“It’s not fair, you know. Not only have we got no tree, but Rhianna’s threatening to make me eat sprouts.” She sighed. “Come on. We’re needed in the cockpit.”

She took the lead and we passed down the main corridor of the spaceship. The *John Pym* was well-decked out. The loose cables and poorly-secured piping had been greatly improved with tinsel, and the lavatory door now held a large wreath worthy of the funeral of a great chieftain.

We reached the front of the ship and entered the pit of cock. My old friend and favourite human was waiting here. Many years ago, I named him Mazuran, which means “The quick brown fox that jumps over the lazy dog”. Other humans knew him

as Isambard Smith. Also present was his lady friend, the seer Rhianna. She has powers of a very mystical kind. Even she does not quite know what they are. Or where she is, most of the time.

“This, chaps, is our destination.” Smith said, pointing to one of the monitor screens. It showed a large snowball. “This is Coldia.”

Rhianna took hold of Smith’s hand. Being of an asexual species, I find physical contact most distasteful. Being British, Smith finds it pretty awkward, too. But it was not really my place to comment. What could I have said to Rhianna, except “Touch him not - I know where he’s been”?

“Or,” Rhianna said, “to use its actual name, Ooitschili.”

“That’s not its real name,” Smith replied. “That’s just what its inhabitants call it. Now, Coldia is an ice world. Even at the equator, it is no warmer than Dundee in February. In the past, scientists have seriously doubted that life could exist somewhere so frozen and far from civilisation.”

“Come now, Mazuran,” I said. “Dundee is not that bad.”

“Others have landed on Coldia before,” Smith continued, “including the foul ant-people of the Ghast Empire. But they’ve never returned. Men, we happy few are going to be the first to plant the British flag on this planet and inform its inhabitants of their extreme good luck in joining the British Space Empire.”

The little woman Carveth raised her hand again. “Er, how do we know that they’ll go along with that? They might not like it.”

“Nonsense,” said Smith. “I expect they’ll behave in an entirely reasonable manner. After all, they’ll be British citizens by then.”

She looked timid, as is her wont. “I hope you’re not expecting me to do any fighting, Boss.”

“Of course not,” Smith replied, and she looked a little more cheerful. “You’ll be much too cold for any of that.”

I raised a hand. “You mentioned native life, Mazuran. Are they large and hostile, by any chance, with collectable skulls?”

“The Ghasts call them Snow Ghosts,” Smith replied. “A year ago, a division of Praetorians landed on Coldia. One of our surveillance ships reported that they never left. We’ve not got much information, but anyone who can polish off a division of ant-soldiers is either exceptionally tough or already British. HQ did send through a visual feed, though. It’s a bit wobbly, but...”

He twiddled a knob, and the image of the snowball disappeared. A landscape formed, made blurry by snowfall and static, but my eyes are keen. I made out the blocky shape of houses.

A being loomed over the houses, half-hidden by the swirling snow. The beast was stocky in build, with a broad head. It stood on its hind legs, but the solid build and broad muzzle reminded me of that large African beast, the hippypopplemouse. To judge by the buildings around it, it was at least thirty feet tall.

“That’s a snow ghost?” Carveth cried. “It’s huge!”

“Well,” Rhianna said, “just because it’s huge doesn’t mean it’s not friendly.”

“True,” said I. “Fat people are often said to be jolly, are they not? Although it is sometimes unwise to inform them of this. It lessens their jollity.”

“What if it sits on us?”

Smith said, “Don’t worry, I’ll be taking my sword. That way, it won’t sit on us and if it does, it won’t do it for long. Besides, it won’t be necessary. We will bring them a gift to demonstrate our good intentions.”

Carveth said, “What sort of gift?”

“Well,” Smith replied, “something festive, I thought. After all, it’s Christmas, and it’s snowing outside.”

“We could give them all our sprouts,” Carveth suggested. “Please can we?”

Rhianna said, “But maybe they only celebrate the solstice.”

“Fear not,” I announced. “Humans, I have a plan. We will write them a card.”

Everyone thought that this was a wily and splendid plan, which I inferred from their silence.

Last year, I sent some cards with one of those red fat birds that taste of feathers on the front. This time around, I had opted for a more traditional theme with my Christmas cards: angels, the shepherds watching their crooks by night, and the freakings bringing gold and murder and personages of that sort. So we used one of those.

Generally, when I write Christmas cards, I find that writing SOON in red ink conveys the message pretty well. This time, however, we collaborated on a longer message. I felt it was a little on the mild side, but the others seemed to think that it would suffice. Now we had written them a Christmas card, all that remained was to conquer their planet.

The path of honour compels me to be fair and generous. At Christmastime, even my sworn enemies are entitled to join in the merriment. As a result, I was decorating their skulls with little paper hats when we arrived in orbit.

We landed in the middle of a storm. I armed myself with the spear of my ancestors and joined the others at the airlock.

“Ready, chaps?” Smith asked, and he turned the wheel.

The airlock swung open and we walked out into a near-blizzard. The wind howled around us like a quanbeast with its nubbos shut in a door.

Smith consulted the compass, and we started off.

“It is fiercely cold,” I observed. “If I don’t do battle with something soon, my mandibles will drop off.”

Carveth said, “Stop being a weed, Suruk.”

“A weed? I do not have your layers of blubber, that is all.”

“Are you calling me fat?”

“Not at all. I merely suggest you refrain from lying down, in case passing seals try to mate with you.”

Rhianna frowned. “Come on guys, chill. I mean, like, metaphorically. We’re nearly there. I hope,” she added, reaching up and snapping off one of her dreadlocks.

We pressed on.

And then I saw it, forming out of the wind and snow. It was like the fin of a land-shark, a huge black fin with a symbol on it: the skull with antennae of the ant-scum of the Ghastr Empire. As I bared my fangs, it occurred to me that not only was combat imminent, but my mandibles still worked. The visit to Coldia was improving by the minute.

“I shall scout out the area,” I told my humans. Readying my spear, I jogged forward through the snow. I bent low to hide my outline.

The rest of the Ghastr spacecraft became visible through the storm. It was large and brutish, as all their things are, lacking the subtle refinement of a warrior’s blade or the making of a nice cup of tea. The black spine of the craft appeared, and then its wings. I realised then that it was flat on its belly, like a landed fish. The little legs that hold such vessels upright had collapsed.

I saw a black shape in the snow beside the ship. I ran to it, ready to strike, but it was long dead. It was a ghastr, one of their soldier-caste: a little larger than a human, and

even uglier. I crouched down and turned the beast over. Its six limbs were frozen solid; its leather coat had become stiffer than a Procturan Ripper's tail-spike.

There was a single bullet-hole drilled into its forehead, just under the visor of its helmet. A skilful slaying.

The others arrived, and I showed them the body.

We found two more ghosts on the way to the ship.

Have you ever entered a bio-engineered spacecraft? I do not recommend it, especially if you use the rear door. It is like climbing into the wrong end of a stag beetle. The walls were ribbed and slimy, the odour unsuited to the presence of a noble warrior.

We crept through the corridors. We saw many propaganda pictures, many posters of their puny warlord, Ghost Number One, but nothing lived.

Smith stopped and took out the flask of thermos. "The ship's deserted."

"Truly," I said. I looked at the ridged walls, formed as if from secreted resin. "This reminds me of the time I had to flush out a bull rectoid."

"Did you get tablets for that?" Carveth asked.

"Hush. I was on Scrotox Three, hunting a beast so well-armoured that no blade would pierce its hide. So I disguised myself as a delectable cake, and once the rectoid had swallowed me, I sprang my attack."

"And hacked it open from the inside, I suppose? That's gross."

"Actually, no. I, ah, fell asleep and forgot. But I awoke below the beast and stabbed at it from behind. In the behind, actually. So the story had a happy ending."

"I bet the rectoid didn't think so. A pretty painful ending, I'd have thought."

Sometimes, I forget that the ways of honour are lost on human beings.

"Um, guys?" Rhianna said. "I think I've found something."

She was right. A light flickered on a panel just under a picture of the contemptible weakling Number One. I jeer at him and his feeble minions, sacks of sad as they are.

"It's some sort of radar," Smith explained. "It says there's movement to the north: only a few hundred yards. We should go and see."

I thought about it. Outside, the air was full of whining wind. Inside, Carveth was full with wind and whining. I braced myself for the cold.

“I will go,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Smith replied. “What if the thing we saw on the scanner turns up?”

“Then fire upon it from here,” I replied, “and I will climb up its leg and take its skull for my collection.”

Outside it was like the black pit of Sarkoth, except white instead of black and extremely snowy and cold. And not entirely in a pit, now I think about it. But I digress.

Dashing through the snow, looking for things to slay, my boot came down on something hard. I dropped into a crouch and examined the object on which I had trodden.

It was a little house. It was no more than a foot high, and two feet long. There were tiny windows and a small door. For a moment, I wondered if it was for Guinea pigs. Puzzling.

I reached into the snow and my fingers found another house. Then I was scraping the snow away with the blade of my spear, uncovering a town of tiny homes.

A lesser mind than mine would have come to the obvious conclusion that this planet was the lost civilisation of the Guinea pigs. But with great honour comes great wisdom. I realised that I was in a model village.

I recalled the figure that Smith had shown us, glimpsed through the storm: a vast monster striding between rows of homes. Perhaps it had not been so vast at all. Frowning, I pressed on down the tiny high street.

I spotted a rectangular sign ahead, as high as I am tall. I stopped a little way back, spear at the ready. The snow fell thickly around my boots, and the wind howled at my ear-flaps, but I could at last make out the words. I spoke them aloud as I read them.

“Welcome to our beautiful but slightly melancholic homeworld. Please feel free to have a good look around you. Now go home, invader. Go no further.”

There were some smaller words underneath. I could not quite make them out. I drew closer.

They said: “What did we tell you about not going any further?”

An interesting question. What had they told me? I was just wondering whether it had been a warning or advice, when the ground gave way beneath my feet. As I fell, and as an enormous net closed around me, I realised that it could have been either.

Freedom runs in my veins, liberty runs in my blood, madness runs in my family. Enraged at the thought of captivity, I swung my spear left and right, bravely cleaving

through my bonds. Nothing could hold back such mighty cleavage and so I flopped out, unsupported.

I landed on my feet, at the bottom of a deep pit. Rising, I saw a small figure in front of me, pointing a rifle at my head.

“I am He-Who-Travels-By-Stealth,” it said.

It was about half my height and tubby. It wore a white robe, including a sort of hood that hid most of its face. It stood upright, but otherwise it looked much like a pygmy happypottymouth. Behind it, I saw a small table, on which stood a radio, a model house and what looked like a bendy trumpet. But it was largely the rifle that held my attention.

It takes a special sort of person to best the Slayer, if person is the right word. There have been a few, I admit: the four-jawed matriarch of Hellespont Hive, for instance, which bit off one of my arms as I rampaged through its lair (it grew back), or Dagroth the Fell-Handed, who dented my head with a two lumps of concrete (it didn't). But standing there before that small, fat snow creature, I was unsure whether my spear would find his throat before his bullet found my noble brain. Of course, my brain is very large and his throat was but dinky, as we warriors say, but I do not ask for unfair advantages.

“Oh dear,” He-Who-Travels-By-Stealth said. “This is sad.”

“For you, it certainly is,” I replied. “But you are brave to face me, and for that your ancestors will welcome you to the entertaining chaos that is the afterlife.”

“Our afterlife isn't chaotic,” he replied. “It's rather quiet, in fact. And a bit gloomy.”

I was about to point out that the afterlife is what you make of it, when I became aware of a metal tube at the edge of my vision. Turning my head a little, I saw that it ended in a second rifle, which ended in another, similar, creature.

“This is my wife,” said He-Who-Travels-By-Stealth.

Clever Girl, I thought.

She looked very similar to He-Who-Travels-By-Stealth, except that she had a bow on her hood, which was also white. “I am She-Who-Travels-By-Stealth,” she said. “And these are the Stealthlets.” She said indicated a cluster of small creatures sitting around her feet. “I hope you are enjoying your stay on our planet.”

“But not excessively,” said He.

“You are the snow ghosts,” I observed.

“We are.”

“And you slew the ghastrs I saw above.”

“I’m afraid so,” She said. “We try to be friendly to everyone, but they wanted to murder us and harvest our young for food. And then they marched over our model village.”

“We have limits,” said He.

Now, let nobody deny that I am both stern and fair. A warrior must be bold of spirit and stout of heart or equivalent organ. Nor am I easily impressed, even in the festive season. So do not think that you can win me over just by producing your Tiny Tim and asking me for goodwill.

Yet, looking upon these beings, I felt moved. Their boldness in crossing weapons with the Ghastr Empire, their skill in surviving in this hostile land, made me wonder if they there might be something of me in them – more than just the point of my spear. After all, Polly Carveth is hardly forged of war-proof, but when sufficiently prodded has been quite ferocious in the past. Something about these simple, pale, fat creatures reminded me of her.

“I am impressed, snow beings,” I said. I lowered my spear. “Let there be no more fighting between us. Allow me to present you with this.”

I handed them the Christmas card. They examined it.

“What is this?” said She, pointing to a camel on the front.

“I have no idea,” I replied (I looked up camels later on). “Some sort of chair? To be honest, this is a gift from creatures of a different species to me, depicting events on a planet I am not from, relating to a deity I do not worship. On the other hand, Happy Christmas.”

He-Who-Travels-By-Stealth said, “Thank you. We have intercepted many ancient radio transmissions from Earth, but this is our first artefact. We have learned of your customs. Often we have listened to your Earth-musicians Radiohead as we slowly paddle our little boat around the Lake of Tears in the Cavern of Mild Depression. One day, perhaps, we will travel to your planet and celebrate with you, to a moderate extent.”

“How joyous,” I observed.

“We are content with this card, albeit not wildly happy. To be honest, nobody on Ooitschilli is ever wildly happy. Even the mating season is a bit of a let-down.”

“You can say that again,” said She-Who-Fights-By-Stealth. “You’re better off just making a snowman and putting a carrot on its – well, never mind. Still, why don’t you join us for dinner? We could eat mushroom soup and listen to my husband playing the sackbut.”

I had no great desire for this. “I think not. But perhaps I could take a gift back to my comrades, to show them that my work here has been successful?”

“What a good idea!” said He, looking quite pleased. “What objects of ours would you like to take away with you as a souvenir?”

I picked up my spear and tested the edge. It was razor sharp. An idea struck me. “Put your heads together,” I said, raising my weapon, “and then one of you can stick his neck out,” I added, giving it a preparatory swing, “and tell me where I can find a nice fir tree to cut down with this spear.”

And so it was that I returned to the John Pym with a festive tree and a family of little white blob-monsters, much like good king Wencelesslass. At first, I was afraid that Carveth might mistake the snow ghosts for marshmallows and devour them, but we were spared the impaling and roasting, which I think always makes for a good Christmas.

A few hours later, we watched them walk back into the snow, full of synthetic turkey – at least they were, since we know better by now. The others finished off the mince pies, while I was getting back into the festive spirit by eating a jar of goose fat. Their loss.

So the Space Empire didn’t get the alliance that it had wanted, but it did get a tree, which is quite similar to a treaty if you hack off the second of its syllables. Carveth even told the aliens that sprouts were rare jewels from Earth and persuaded them to carry the accursed things away.

“You know, chaps, we can learn something from all of this,” Smith declared, as the snow ghosts disappeared and the airlock door swung shut again. “But I’m buggered if I can work out what.”

“Totally,” said Rhianna. “The moral is that the Yuletide season brings us all together.”

I shrugged. “Personally, I have never understood morals.”

“We know,” said Carveth. “And so do the authorities.” She reached for the mince pies. “It’s a shame we couldn’t keep the snow ghosts, really. They seemed quite nice.”

“Ah,” I replied, “it is right to allow them their freedom. After all, it is well said that a dog isn’t just for Christmas. You can eat them at Easter, too.”