

Suruk Versus The Christmas Spirit

By

Toby Frost

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Isambard Smith slowed the car and switched off the ignition. "Right then, old chap," he said. "You're clear on the plan?"

"Indeed so," Suruk the Slayer replied. He reached into his coat and pulled out a piece of paper. Unfolding it, he read from the ancient runic script of the M'Lak. "'Head to the shops. Acquire pony food. All other priorities rescinded'."

"Good work. I'll go and buy something for Rhianna. Smith frowned. "Quite what, I'm not sure. I don't think they make chocolates in 'hemp' flavour."

It was four-fifty, GMT, and the street was dark and soggy, glowing with yellow-white lights. It was as if the entire world was conspiring to look like a piece of amber, or a bottle of whisky on a pub shelf. The darkness and phosphorescent lights reminded Suruk of battling a devilsquid in the oceans of Proxima 9, which was probably not the intended effect.

Understanding Christmas had been a long and difficult process but, after much time among the human race, Suruk reckoned that he had figured it out. Essentially, the festive period consisted of concentric circles of tat. At the centre, with the least amount of tat, was the actual nativity. Compared to the outer circles of tat, this was not a showy affair, once you ruled out the arrival of the messiah, a visit from several monarchs and the appearance of an entirely new star. Next came Charles Dickens, who had invented about half of Christmas and had skilfully moved it from Nazareth to Old London Town. Then, as the circle of tat widened, the United Free States had stolen Christmas from London and had redirected it to the house of someone called Bing Crosby and forced Father Christmas to rename himself Coca Cola.

A group of uniformed people had gathered outside the shops, holding a variety of complex devices. The nearest man was wielding something that looked quite like the anti-tank plasma guns that Suruk had seen in the battle of Urn.

“Greetings!” Suruk announced. “I see you have gathered for battle. Are you planning to storm the shops?”

“Sir,” the man replied, “this is a Salvation Army brass band.”

“I see. Who commands this army and what are we saving?”

“We’re collecting for the poor, sir. And to remind people of what the season is really about, of course.”

Suruk frowned. “Indeed. It is important to remember the true meaning of Christmas. Why, I hear that these days, many humans do not even worship Charles Dickens anymore. Good luck to you. You may want to consider new weapons, though. That tuba won’t cut anything.”

Suruk pressed on, his centuries of experience allowing him to slip through the herds of shoppers. At last he reached the supermarket.

The automatic doors slid open and Suruk stopped dead, frozen like a smearp in the headlights of a hovercar. Several dozen bright lights hit him at once. A glitterball-shaped drone flew slowly across the rafters, as if daring him to grab a can of beans and down it with a skilful throw. Songs with jangling bells – perhaps several songs at once – tinkled unpleasantly through the speakers.

Cautiously, he advanced. It was all very confusing. A robot with antlers approached and offered him a tray of small objects. “Gingerbread man?” it inquired.

“No, I am Suruk the Slayer. Take me to the pet food, robot, or suffer the festive consequences!”

“Follow me, sir!” the robot replied, and it turned on the spot and rolled away. Suruk paced after it. Thankfully, the robot was equipped with a jingly siren and a flashing red nose, which encouraged foolish human shoppers to get out of the way. Moving through a crowded supermarket

was difficult when you were not allowed to carry a spear and it was considered unseasonal to leave a trail of corpses in your wake.

Around him, humans engaged in the ancient traditions of Christmas. A family argued loudly about whether the husband should eat sprouts. "I don't care if you enjoy them, you're having them!" his wife cried, loading their trolley. Further on, under a big sign that said: "Merry Christmas", an old woman was complaining that you couldn't even say "Merry Christmas" anymore because it offended the aliens. All the scene was missing was Rhianna from back home pointing out that the bizarre religious holiday of Christmas was actually the bizarre religious holiday of Yule, and the rituals would be complete.

The robot stopped and gestured grandly down the aisle. "Here we are, sir, at the pet food section. Is there anything else I might help you with?"

Suruk shrugged. "Clear a path to the door, so I may swiftly escape from this horror. Other than that, I wish you a merry Christmas and may the ancestors have pity on anyone who impedes my escape from this hellzone. Now then. Pony food for the little woman."

The animal feed was piled up on a high shelf. Again, Suruk wished that he had brought his spear: he could have just slit one of the bags open and caught the pellets as they poured down from above. Instead, he would have to pull a bag down by himself.

He glanced left and right to see if anyone was watching. Nobody. Suruk tensed his legs and leaped up to the top of the shelves. His fingers caught hold of the metal shelving unit. His boots jammed between the frame and a selection of tins with pictures of dogs on the front. Suruk reached out and caught hold of one of the bags. It was about the same size and weight as one of the lemming men of Yullia, once you had hacked the lemming man into pieces and thrown some of the pieces away.

"Ah, yes," Suruk hissed. His fingers closed around the top of the plastic sack. He grasped it firmly in his fist. The pony food was his.

Suruk dropped down and pulled the bag after him. He landed on both feet and the bag tumbled into his arms. He smiled and looked up to admire his work. Then he saw that he had been so successful in acquiring the sack of pony food that several others were following it off the shelves. Suruk just had enough time to reflect that he was about to be buried in an avalanche of small horse biscuits, before he was.

A strange, low rumbling woke Suruk, as if he was on a cart that crossed rough ground. He felt a powerful light through his eyelids, as though he had turned his face towards a hard white sun. Suruk blinked and saw a white wall with a lamp set into it. Then he realised that he was lying on his back, and looking at the roof of a vehicle.

A woman leaned over him, and for a hideous instant he wondered if this was some kind of misguided human breeding ritual. "Alright, sir, we're going to hospital," she said. She wore a green uniform.

Suruk croaked. "Hospital? Why? Who did I injure? I deny everything!"

"A load of pony food fell on top of you, in the supermarket," the woman said. "I'm a paramedic. My colleagues and I had to dig you out."

He frowned. "I do not remember that. I walked to the shops. There was terrible music. I tried to lead the Salvation Army into battle. After that... I am unsure."

"You've suffered a serious blow to the head," the paramedic explained. "The scanners say that you're alright, but we're going to take you to hospital so we can check you out. Also, tonight you will be visited by three spirits, who will show you strange visions of the past, present and future of your life."

"Thank goodness for that," Suruk replied. "I was worried that I might have concussion." He closed his eyes and the world faded away.

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Suruk felt warmth on his face and heard the soft rustle of long, dry grass. He was lying on his back. Slowly, he opened his eyes, and found that he was looking into a pale-blue sky. Two suns glowed, one smaller and fainter than the other. Birdoids circled high above, and the sunlight glowed through their wing membranes.

Suruk opened his mandibles, then his mouth, and took a deep breath. Memories rushed into his mind, of war, blood and chaos.

“I’m home.”

He climbed to his feet. He stood in waist-high grass. Suruk looked across an endless plain. In the distance, a pack of gorehounds had ambushed a lone bloodmoose. The bloodmoose had impaled several of them on its antlers, and was running around triumphantly, brandishing its grisly prize.

“Ah, nature,” Suruk said.

“Hey, Suruk.”

He whipped around. A woman stood behind him. The breeze stirred her long hair and tie-dyed skirt. The sunlight seemed to blur the edges of her body, as if she had formed from the air itself.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

Suruk chuckled. “Very well! I recognise this place. This is the plain of Baranath. I grew up not far from here. Just over that mountain there is where I hacked Dagrud the Black to bits. He chopped my arm off in mortal combat. It grew back,” Suruk added. “Happy days.”

“Um, okay,” said the woman. “I’m, like, the spirit of Christmas Past, right? I’m here to take you back to your childhood, when you were just a young warrior.”

“Excellent,” Suruk replied. He looked up at the sky and sighed. “This is most pleasing. I am back in the land where I was spawned. Life was simpler then, you know. You would get up in the morning, go to work, kill or be killed and come home at nightfall, assuming that nothing devoured you on the way back. People looked out for each other back then, especially if they were planning an

ambush. Nobody bothered to lock their front door. It would just get kicked down in some kind of tribal vendetta if they did. In fact, nobody bothered having a front door at all."

"It's certainly good to be in nature," the spirit replied. "It's healing, you know? Now, I've got something totally amazing to show you. This way," she said, pointing.

Together, they walked down the hillside. Nature was in full bloom. A birdoid landed on a flower and the flower bit its head off. In the distance, two huge tortoisaurs began a headbutting contest. Suruk removed his coat and hung it over his arm. The spirit took out a small box and started to roll herself a cigarette.

"You remind me of someone," Suruk said. "I cannot place the name, though."

"Wow," the spirit replied. "Maybe it's like a previous life or something?"

"I thought you would know," he said. "That would seem to be your area."

"Oh, sure!" The spirit paused and shook a pebble out of her sandal. She licked the rolling paper. "Hey, Suruk, check it out."

She pointed across the valley. A fortress stood in the middle of the plain, a mighty cube of stone and polished brass. It looked completely out of place, as if it had been dropped in from above.

Which, Suruk recalled, was entirely accurate.

A single figure was walking through the long grass, towards the fort. It was a M'Lak warrior, a young one, carrying a long spear. His grey-green, nippleless chest shone in the sun.

"Look!" cried Suruk. He pointed at the lone figure. "That is me, when I was young! By the ancestors, I was a fine specimen. Thank you, spirit, for reminding me of my former excellence. I shall remember this lesson all my days."

"We haven't started the lesson," said the spirit.

"Oh."

"We'll follow him. You, I mean. Wow," the spirit added, "it's like, there's two of you, but at the same time only one. It's like that time I ate that whole space cake. Take my hand, Suruk."

“Very well,” Suruk replied. “Lead on, spirit. I shall take your hand, and watch my younger self taking heads.”

Young Suruk stopped before the mighty gates of the fortress. The grass rose up to his waist, as if he had waded out to sea. He raised his spear and cried, “Greetings, humans!”

The spirit stopped a little way back, and the older Suruk stood beside her. He looked up and spotted a figure on the parapet. He glimpsed a red jacket and a bearded face under a pale helmet. “Aliens!” the soldier shouted, “One of ‘em! What do you want?”

“I want this planet back,” Young Suruk replied. “I am Suruk the As-Yet-Untitled, child of Agshad Nine-Swords and scion of the house of Ugar the Miffed.”

“Come here to talk to the boss, is it?” the soldier said. “I’ll just go and get him.”

A second human arrived on the battlements. A London-accented voice demanded, “Who the bleedin’ ‘ell is that, Evans?”

“It’s one of the locals, see?” the first man replied. “Wants his planet back, he does.”

“Well, he can’t bloody ‘ave it.” The second man leaned out. He was taller, clean-shaven, with fair hair. “My name,” he called down, “is the base commander. This here, is our planet, ‘cos we *bleedin’ said so*, alright?”

The Spirit of Christmas Past shook her head sadly. “A shameful act of colonialism. Which is, like, bad.”

The younger Suruk opened his arms. “I did not come here as an enemy. We M’Lak wish only to live in moderate and occasional peace with you humans. But you have invaded this world and stolen from us. Fair enough, I’d probably do the same. Yet now you hide in your fortress and will not treat us as equals, or give us a decent fight. That makes me sad.”

“Right,” the base commander called back. “Well, first of all, I do not bloody care. This planet, has been claimed, in the name of the bloody British Space Empire, and *you’re not having it back*, got

me? Now naff off before I make you. You're a big man, but you're a funny shape, and you will look even funnier when I'm done thrashing you. *You cheeky sod.*"

Suruk the As-Yet-Untitled lowered his spear. He looked down into the long grass and shook his head. "Well, I tried."

A second M'Lak warrior popped up from the grass beside him. "You did your best."

"Who the bleedin' 'ell's that?" the base commander shouted.

"I'm his brother, Morgar the Trainee Architect," the newcomer called. "You've got a serious structural weakness in your gatehouse, you know."

"The only weakness will be in your ugly green head when I bloody shoot you!"

Young Suruk opened his mandibles, put his fingers into his mouth and, with some difficulty, whistled. "Show him!"

The House of Urgan, all six hundred and eight of them, stood up from the grass. Spears were raised, knives unsheathed, fangs bared.

"Evans," the base commander cried, "sound the alarm!"

Two M'Lak ran forwards, carrying a cauldron-shaped tub between them. They slammed it down in front of the gates and retreated. A roar of excitement came from the horde.

Suruk the Slayer nudged the Spirit of Christmas Past. "Watch this. There's a good bit coming up."

Suruk the As-Yet-Untitled jogged back from the gates. An older warrior tossed him a spear: there was a burning rag tied to the blade. Human soldiers ran onto the battlements and took up positions. Young Suruk hurled the burning spear.

It hit the cauldron and burst it apart. Powder spilled out, met the burning rag, and ignited. There was a fireball, a massive crash, and the gates fell off their hinges. For a long second, nobody spoke, and the only sound was the screeching of the birdoids overhead. Then the base commander cried "You weren't supposed to blow the bloody doors off!"

"We have a blasting fire!" Young Suruk exclaimed.

"I told you before," Morgar said at his side. "It's called 'gunpowder'. We're not yokels, you know." But his voice was lost in the chaos that rose up, the rattle of gunfire and the bellow of fury as the House of Ugar rushed forward to attack.

"Okay," said the Spirit, "let's move on to the important part." She raised her hands, and the sun swung in the sky. The warriors surged forward in a blur, and a babble of high-speed voices surrounded Suruk.

"What are you doing?" he cried. "Do not skip forward! You will miss the bit where I threw four soldiers over the battlements. That's the best part!"

They slid towards the fortress as if on rails, through the smoking archway where the doors had been. All around them, the battle raged at high speed, as if fought between wisps of smoke. Ahead was the bunkhouse, the centre of the fortress. Suruk chuckled as he saw it.

The Spirit of Christmas Past took a long drag on her roll-up and waved her hand. The world slowed, and sound rushed into Suruk's ears as if he'd surfaced from underwater. He saw his younger self striding towards the bunkhouse, spear in hand.

A figure leaped from the side and swung a sword down at Young Suruk's head. He raised his spear just in time, and with a clash of steel blocked the human's blade.

"Step back, fool, or I will take your skull," Young Suruk growled.

"There's women, children and a nice dog in that building," the human replied. "If you want them, you'll have to get through me first!"

"Challenge accepted," Young Suruk said. They pulled apart, weapons raised, watching each other. "Know, then, that I am Suruk the As-Yet-Untitled, and I am here to take this planet."

"I'm Isambard Smith," the young man replied, "and I'm here on a gap year."

Young Suruk stepped back a little, but he did not lower his guard. "This fortress must fall. But to slay civilians and a nice dog would be shameful, not to mention boring. There would be no challenge in it. You fight for a worthy cause, Isambard Smith," Suruk the As-Yet-Untitled declared,

“and it would sadden me to decapitate you. I want this world, and you want the civilians. So, as one honourable warrior to another: swapsies?”

A few yards away, the elder Suruk smiled. “And from that day forth, we were the best of friends.”

“There’s an important lesson here,” said the Spirit of Christmas Past.

“Indeed! If you slay the wrong person, you will miss out on years of friendship and bail money.”

“Um, something like that,” the spirit replied. She exhaled thoughtfully, and the world blurred and faded away.

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“I’m sorry, sir,” said the paramedic. “We did everything we could for your friend, but we’ve lost him.”

“Good lord,” Isambard Smith replied. “You don’t mean that Suruk’s... dead?”

“No,” the paramedic explained. “I mean that he climbed out of the ambulance and wandered off. He could be anywhere.”

Their voices came from below, as if seeping up through the earth. Suruk blinked, and realised that he was crouching on top of the stationary ambulance. *How did I get up here?* he wondered. *I must have been doing something excellent in my sleep again.*

“Greetings, humans!” he called down. “I am on top of this vehicle, scouting the landscape. Something hit me on the head in the supermarket. I need to go home and plot my vengeance, in case it was the lemming men. Full speed ahead, ambulance driver!”

“You need to come down, old chap,” Smith called. “You’ve had an accident.”

“Really?” Suruk jumped down and landed beside Smith and the paramedic. “What happened while I was sleeping?”

"You've been to hospital," the paramedic replied. "For someone with a secondary heart, two bladders and more ribs than an anaconda, you're in pretty standard shape. But you need to go home and rest up."

"I'll take it from here," Smith said. "Thanks for your help."

"Glad to be of assistance. Just give us a call if there are any problems." She frowned.

"Medical ones, that is. You might want a lawyer for the other stuff."

Smith gestured towards his car. "Right then, let's head home."

"Lead the way," Suruk replied. "Is this the second visitation?"

"We're just going back to the *John Pym*," Smith said. He opened the passenger door.

Suruk waited. "Ah, I see," he said after a while, and he got inside. "You are driving, then."

"Well, yes." Smith started the engine. "For one thing, you're not insured, and for another, you've never driven a car before."

"A fair point." Suruk settled back into the seat. "In which case, I shall rest festively for a while."

"I don't think you should —" Smith started, but Suruk was gone.

He awoke in the living room of the *John Pym*. He was stretched out on the settee, surrounded by cushions. Instinctively, he threw them on the floor.

A voice said, "You're awake. Hullo again, old chap."

It was Isambard Smith, and he sat on the battered armchair with a mug in his hands. Rhianna stood beside him, looking vaguely concerned.

"Hey, Suruk," she said. "How're you feeling?"

Suruk sat up. "I feel well, thank you. Just now I had a curious dream, about a spirit who looked rather like yourself. Then I was in the car. I heard many voices, crying out at once in strange, unfamiliar accents. Something about a turkey farm."

"That's *The Archers* Christmas special," Smith replied. "The radio was on."

“You still need to rest and chill out,” Rhianna said. “I’ll go and boil the kettle. You could do with some tea.”

“Thank you,” Suruk replied. “And none of that herbal foolishness. That is not proper tea!”

As Rhianna left, Polly Carveth looked around the doorway. “Our course is locked, boss,” she said. “By which I mean we’re pointing in the right direction and the engine’s on. Oh! Suruk’s awake. Thank God for that. I won’t have to use the thermometer now. I wouldn’t know where to stick it – both ends are equally bad.”

Suruk ignored that and turned to Smith. “So,” he said. “You must be the second spirit.”

“Second spirit?” Smith replied. “You’ve not been at the eggnog, have you?”

“Certainly not, old friend. I refer to the teachings of *A Christmas Carol*.”

Polly Carveth snorted. “You’ve read *A Christmas Carol*?”

“Indeed so. I have consumed a lot of Dickens.”

“You’ve consumed a lot of chickens, more like. Probably raw.”

“I remember *A Christmas Carol* well,” Suruk said. “It was full of unforgettable characters like Ebenezer Goode, Tidy Tim and Bob Catshit. And of course the three spirits, of which I assume you are the second. Very soon, I expect that you will show me another vision of my younger self doing something superb. Perhaps my first visits to human space. Times were hard then.”

“Yeah,” said Carveth. “Getting arrested for murder is pretty tough, I hear.”

“I am referring to my first lodgings,” Suruk replied. “When I arrived in the human city, I searched for somewhere to stay, but nobody wanted me to sleep on their couch, at least not after they found me there. At long last, I located a room behind a restaurant. It was tiny, with tiles upon the walls, and it smelled of bleach. The sign on the door said ‘TO LET’, or something similar, and there was a picture of a stick-man beneath it.”

Smith frowned. “Are you sure that was a house, Suruk? Because it sounds –”

“That was not the worst of it,” Suruk added. “Several times each night, men would enter my home and try to urinate in it. I think it was what you call a ‘rough neighbourhood’. I had to make examples. Eventually, I found somewhere better.”

“What did you do,” Carveth asked, “squat in a dog kennel?”

“Not at all. It was more crouching, really.” Suruk looked around the room. “This is a very convincing vision, by the way. It looks identical to the *John Pym*. Hmm. It also smells like it, too.”

Rhianna returned. She was carrying a cup of tea, and the steam rising from the hot liquid reminded Suruk of the smoke wafting around the insubstantial body of the first spirit. “Thank you,” he said. “So, I am a little confused. Which of you three is the second spirit, and what lesson is to be learned from this very lifelike vision?”

Carveth folded her arms and leaned against the wall. “For the last time, it’s not a vision. I never thought I’d say this, but that crack on the head has made you crazier than ever. You had a hallucination and now you’re back in reality and you’ve not realised it yet.”

“Polly’s right,” said Rhianna. “I’ve had loads of visions and they meant nothing at all. That time I thought I was floating about inside a Yes album cover... it was pretty cool, but in cosmic terms it just meant that I was out of my tree.”

Suruk sipped his drink. “A fair point,” he decided. “So far, I have learned precisely nothing from this visitation, except to be reminded that the tea is good and I quite like it here. Christmas Present is quite acceptable.” He finished the tea, put his cup down beside the sofa and got comfortable. “Bring on the next spirit!”

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Suruk was on a great beige plain, under a beige sky. Ruins scattered the landscape. A single gigantic building stood on the horizon: a huge tower rose up and, on top of it, was a massive concrete skull the size of a cathedral.

A hooded figure stood at Suruk's side, like an undersized Grim Reaper. With a lot of effort, the figure pulled its hood back and said, "This outfit is way too big for me." She raised a flappy sleeve. "I am the ghost of Christmas Far Future! Behold and all that stuff!"

Suruk studied the small person. "You look suspiciously like my old comrade, Polly Carveth."

"Yeah, well, let's just get this done, alright? This place creeps me out. Listen!" cried the spirit. "Let me set the scene. We have travelled to a time many years from now. Thirty-seven-and-a-half thousand years into the future, the galaxy is really bloody awful."

"Oh yes?" Suruk said. "How so? Go on, spirit."

"I *am* going on. Stop interrupting. It took me ages to write this. Now then." The spirit cleared her throat. "This an age of eternal darkness, of soulless stars and the mad laughter of ravening void-beasts. For," she cried, throwing out her arms, "*In the endless shadow of the far future, there is only doom!* So yeah, it's pretty crappy."

"Hmm," Suruk replied. He looked around. "As it happens, I rather like doom, provided that it's me doing the dooming. It is all rather drab here, though. Where are all the people?"

"My notes say that the Doomlord killed them all. He's in charge here: king or emperor or something."

"He must have been busy," Suruk replied. "Although if I had thirty-seven thousand years, I could probably do that. I don't think that I would want to, though. All those civilians. And their pets. A waste of time, really." An idea struck him. "I have a plan! Take me to this Doomlord person, spirit, and I shall judge whether to take his head. That sounds reasonable."

"Yeah, alright," the spirit replied. "Then I can take this stupid outfit off and go home." She raised her arm, as if about to cast a spell.

"Will we be flying?"

"You don't think I'm walking in this getup, do you? I'll trip over the hem. Let's go!"

They flew forward, and the great tower seemed to shoot towards them like the prow of a battleship set to ramming speed. It rushed closer, until Suruk could see the tattered banners and

carved skulls on its side – and in an instant they were flying up a thousand feet per second, so that the beige stone was just a blur before his eyes. His stomach churned.

And suddenly they stopped rising, and swept through an archway into an enormous room. They landed at the bottom of an artificial mountain, a pyramid of steps rising to what seemed to be a great golden throne. From the bottom of the stairs, it looked miniscule.

Suruk smiled behind his mandibles. If this Doomlord person had slain everything on the planet, he would at least be a worthy adversary, although probably not a good conversationalist. *Less prattle, more battle*, Suruk reminded himself. Besides, it wouldn't matter what the Doomlord had to say, once Suruk had decapitated him. He moved forward, and a thought struck him.

"Wait," Suruk said.

The spirit tried to scratch her nose, realised that her sleeve was way too long, and gave up.

"What's the problem?"

"What if – and I am just throwing this out there – the Doomlord is actually a future version of myself?"

"I couldn't possibly comment on that," the spirit replied. "It'd spoil the surprise."

Suruk frowned. "That would be typical," he growled. "I bet it turns out to be me, and I am forced to fight my own worst instincts, like some tiresome simile. *Less metaphor, more better war*, I say."

"Well, let's go and have a look."

Suruk stepped forward, but the spirit put out her arm to block the way.

"If you think I'm climbing all those stairs, you're bloody mistaken," said the Spirit of Christmas Far Future, and they flew upwards, over the vast ziggurat of steps. Like birds swooping to a perch, they swung down gracefully and landed at the side of the throne. "Nicely done!" the spirit said. She stepped towards the throne, tripped over her robe and fell on her face. "Bugger."

Suruk pulled her up. "Let us see who this Doomlord truly is."

He walked around the side of the throne. A figure sat on it: stick-thin and unmoving. A crown of laurels was perched on its bony head. It was a M'Lak warrior, long-dead and mummified.

"Gaze in awe," cried the spirit, "at that bloke over there!"

Quietly, Suruk said, "It is me. I would know those nostrils anywhere." He looked across the huge room, down the endless steps. "I destroyed this world, and died here alone. What a wretched end for one so glorious." He turned to his companion. "Speak, spirit! Tell me, is this the future destined for me? Can it be avoided?"

"Well," the spirit replied, "it's one possible future, as dreamed up by you, a mad alien, who has just been walloped on the head by a huge bag of pony feed. So yeah, you could give it a miss if you wanted."

"I do or shall, as applicable!" Suruk cried. "What a dismal fate this is! That I should take the skull of every being in the world, conquer the galaxy, and end up sitting on this throne! I will never sit on a throne again!"

The spirit coughed.

"Oh – and I will never slay absolutely everyone, or conquer the galaxy, at least not without my friends!" He reached out and plucked the laurels from the corpse's head. With a roar, he hurled the crown away. It flew end over end into the darkness, catching the light like a coin tossed down a well, until it was lost to view.

"I have no need of crowns," Suruk declared. "I cast my baubles away!"

"I didn't know you had any in the first place."

"One last question, spirit."

She sighed. "Go on then. But make it quick. *Bridget Jones' Space Station* is on telly soon."

"How do we get down from here?"

*

“My baubles!” Suruk exclaimed. He blinked. He was crouching on a stool. Rows of skulls stared at him from the walls. He was back in his bedroom.

He hopped down from the stool and rubbed his eyes. “Baubles,” he muttered. There had been some kind of dream, involving a golden throne. Something about flying. He looked at his trophies. A length of tinsel had been draped across the skulls.

Tinsel... baubles – it had to be Christmas! Memories rushed back. Suruk threw the door of his cabin open and strode down the hallway and into the sitting room.

The others were sitting around the table. Smith, his old friend, wore a jolly waistcoat. Carveth was in her most festive pyjamas. Rhianna had some sort of vegetation stuck in her hair. Even Gerald the hamster was wearing a tiny red hat.

“You!” Suruk cried. “What day is this?”

“Halloween,” Carveth replied. “What do you think? It’s Christmas Day.”

“Then greetings to you, humans and hamster!” Suruk announced. “It is I again! I am here to celebrate Christmas and slay my foes, and I am temporarily all out of foes! Is there a turkey that I can carve instead?”

“We’re having breakfast,” Smith replied. “It’s artificial stuff, I’m afraid: we’ve got shambled eggs and Corn Fakes. How’re you feeling?”

“Very good, thank you. Being struck upon the head gave me remarkable insights, which I have largely forgotten owing to being struck upon the head. However, I am back to normal, and I do know that I am very pleased to be here with you all, my good comrades. Let me share my wisdom: I have been to many places and seen many things, but the real treasure was the friends I made along the way, and the enemies I hacked into bloody pieces.”

Rhianna looked up from her breakfast. A stray dreadlock had fallen into her muesli, like a tendril absorbing the milk. “Um,” she said, “you were talking about having some kind of visions last night. Are you okay now?”

“I certainly am,” Suruk replied, as he poured out his cereal. “I shall tell you all about them, but suffice it to say that I will not be conquering the galaxy without my honoured companions at my side. Last night I learned the important lesson to remain as excellent as I have always been, and I hope you will join me in this festive quest!”

Polly Carveth lowered her spoon. “Well,” she said, “seeing that you’re talking complete bollocks about honour and conquest again... you’re not better, and you’re not normal, but somehow you seem to be better and back to normal.”

“Indeed!” Suruk replied. “And may everyone have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year – or else!”