

When Slay Bells Ring

By

Toby Frost

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“You know, Suruk,” said Isambard Smith as he disarmed the mantrap, “most people leave Father Christmas a mince pie.”

“Most people are foolish,” the alien replied. Smith passed him the trap and he took it back reluctantly. “The last time anyone in a red coat visited my home planet, they made us join the British Space Empire.”

Smith sighed. The airlock door, the natural entry point for Father Christmas, was festooned with festive decorations. His own stocking - a sock held together with darning-thread - looked meagre compared to the small sack Carveth had pinned up, together with a Christmas list slightly shorter than the Magna Carta. Suruk stepped up beside Smith and attached his own stocking, which he had made from the skin of a Procturan lungbuster, to the lintel with a knife.

“And as for his elven minions,” Suruk observed, “I trust them even less, labouring on their evil devices in the North Pole. I have read *The Lord of the Rings*. I know what elves do to people with tusks.”

“*The Lord of the Rings* isn’t real.”

Suruk scowled. “What? A thousand pages and *now* you tell me? That is the last time the seer lends me a book.” Glowering, he retreated to his room to put baubles in the sockets of his skull collection.

Smith shrugged and headed into the living area. On the settee lay Polly Carveth, android and ship’s pilot, clutching her stomach. “How are the mince pies, Carveth?”

She groaned as she sat up. “They don’t go well with Advocaat. It’s made cement in my gut.”

“You’ll be fine,” Smith replied. He crossed the kitchen, where he had stashed a spare box of mince pies on top of the fridge, out of Carveth’s reach. “Besides, at least you’ll sleep properly tonight.”

“Sleep?” She looked appalled. “But that’s rubbish! My second Christmas and I still haven’t seen Father Christmas yet. I’ve got to stay up!”

She had a point, Smith thought. Last year Carveth had been forced to retire early when she had been brained by a piece of falling mistletoe. “It was your own silly fault,” Smith observed, removing a mince pie from its silver dish. “Normal people put up a sprig – you must’ve pinned up half a tree. God knows what you were planning to happen under it. Goodwill to all men, I suspect.”

She grimaced and stood up, too excited to be laid low by her diet of pies. "I'll be in the cockpit."

Smith watched her hurry down the corridor. He found it hard to blame her: Christmas was exciting. He switched on the radio knowing that soon there would be carols from Proxima Centuri. He admired the small row of cards on the sideboard: a modern, abstract design from Suruk's family, a picture of a stagecoach from Hereward Khan, and the remains of a card from W the master spy, which had self-destructed ten seconds after he'd read it. The collection was finished with a piece of paper from the Deepspace Operations Group, which simply read "I'll drop in soon – Wainscott." Smith was not sure whether this was a Christmas card or a death threat: when Wainscott dropped in, it tended to be by parachute, with a commando knife gripped between his teeth.

Across the galaxy, the British Space Empire was celebrating Christmas. From Ravnar to Urn, there was a festive note to the Imperial war effort: standards were wrapped in tinsel, dreadnoughts festooned with void-proof paper chains. Aliens were joining in, too – Vazragath the Fell-Handed, warlord of Tharn, had killed six lemming-men with a holly bush, and the television had shown some beetle-people performing a touching, if confused, account of the virgin birth of Scrooge. Even Rhianna had managed to disregard the commercialism and celebrate.

"Alright there?" Smith called into the hold.

"Hey, Isambard." Rhianna was attacking the main dishes on the folding work-table. This being space, the food was synthetic: a honey-glazed gammon Sham and a large mock turkey. The Murkey in itself was large enough to sustain them for several depressing weeks.

"How are the guys?" Rhianna asked, brutally assaulting the Murkey with a fistful of stuffing. Smith found it rather disturbing to think that he had slept with her in the past.

He winced. "They're fine, I think. Both very excited. Carveth's looking forward to seeing Father Christmas and Suruk's – well, he'd like to meet him too. Looks like they won't be sleeping much tonight."

Rhianna pushed her wide sleeve back up and twisted her hand around as if assisting a cow with a difficult birth. "Isambard, I really think you ought to tell them."

"Tell them what?"

"They're getting all excited about meeting Santa. They think he's going to show up in person. You have to tell them that he won't be coming tonight."

"Oh, I see," Smith said. "Got delayed, has he?"

She pulled her arm out of the Murkey and looked at him with the deep, sad compassion she usually reserved for dolphins. "Isambard," Rhianna said, "this is... like, really difficult, but you have to know. Santa – Father Christmas – he's not real. He's just made up."

Smith frowned. "Not quite sure I'm getting your drift, there."

She reached out to hold his hand; he drew back, partly out of worry, and partly because she was covered in stuffing up to the elbow. "We all do it, Isambard. Years ago I had a friend who wasn't real. He was a wonderful pink elephant, and he sang and danced. I loved him. But when the trip ended, I realised that he wasn't there. I'm afraid it's the same with Father Christmas. He's just a story."

"That's nonsense, Rhianna. It's patently untrue. Answer me this: if Father Christmas isn't real, how come the sleigh doesn't crash, eh? And who puts the reindeer in the harnesses? See, I've got you there."

"None of it's real," she explained. "Not Santa, not the elves, not the sleigh or the reindeer either. It's just a capitalist appropriation of a Christian appropriation of an ancient pagan festival called Yule. I'm sorry."

He took a deep breath. "It's alright," Smith said. "I understand. Father Exmas took a Blighty one. I see. Suppose I'd best tell the chaps," he said, and he turned to the living room. Orange light spilled through the little window in the kitchen door. Smith looked back as he turned the handle. Rhianna looked terribly sincere and sad.

"Rhianna?"

"Yes, Isambard?"

"Is Bing Crosby made up too?"

"No," she said quietly. "But he won't be coming either."

Smith stepped into the living area and closed the door behind him. Suruk stood in the kitchen, holding the mince pies above his head. Carveth was jumping up, trying to grab them.

"Seasons greetings, Mazuran! Soon, Satan comes for us all!"

Carveth stopped jumping. "Four hours and counting!" she panted. "Brilliant, isn't it? Boss? Are you alright?"

"Fine, thanks," Smith said. He looked at their faces, hopeful, expectant and, in one case, scarred, and realised that he could not do it. "I'll be back in a moment," he said, and he headed to his room.

Maybe Rhianna was wrong. Maybe she was just spouting some old rubbish that people believed on New Fran. Perhaps she had dreamed up the whole thing about Father Christmas being fake. Perhaps the pink elephant had told her so.

Or perhaps she was right.

He took off his fleet jacket and sat down on the bed. They have to know, he thought. A good captain keeps his crew informed. If there's danger, he tells them straight out. But a good captain keeps up morale. He doesn't let his men down. If only there was some way to make sure Father Christmas showed up...

He stood up quietly and gathered his jacket and the pillow from his bed. Smith stepped into the corridor – Carveth and Suruk were still in the living-area, hanging tinsel on the stuffed praetorian's head – and crept into the bathroom. In the bathroom cabinet, next to her fearsomely powerful electric toothbrush, Carveth kept a bag of cotton wool. Smith took the bag out.

It was easy to put the fleet jacket back on and stuff the cushion down the front. With half the buttons fastened, it made a convincing paunch. Smith took out the cotton wool and shaped it into a rough crescent. Holding the crescent up against his chin, he admired himself in the mirror.

"That's the ticket," he told his reflection. "Ho ho ho."

Smith meant to feign stomach cramp brought on by excessive consumption of powdered-eggnog, but luck was on his side: the *John Pym* briefly suffered a compression failure in the hold, and at the same time the radar decided to register a blip. Smith slipped out at eleven forty-eight, claiming that it was vital for him to check the systems.

"But you'll miss Christmas!" Carveth called. She was wearing her pyjamas and dressing gown, and had draped a rug over her lap. Suruk crouched beside her, alert and intrigued.

"Don't worry," Smith said, "I've seen Father Christmas before," and he stepped over the glass of sherry and mince pie and departed to get ready.

Rhianna shot him a disapproving look as he left. Clearly she thought he had not told the others the truth. This was correct, of course, but he was buggered if he was going to let a nuisance like the truth spoil their Christmas. As he struggled into his outfit, he reflected that this was truly an excellent plan.

One minor problem was the absence of good presents. Not only was deep space rather short of gift shops, but Smith felt that supplying the crew with the sort of deadly, mind-altering or intoxicating things they might actually want was asking for trouble. Instead he had found Suruk a copy of *Jane's Fighting Spaceships* and a nice straw hat for Rhianna. Carveth would be receiving a small china shepherdess which, he felt, she would probably not mind too much.

Smith placed the items into his haversack, swung it over his shoulder and stepped into the corridor.

The others were setting up a board game. "You can't be the little dog *and* the top

hat!" Carveth protested as Smith entered the room.

"Ho ho ho!" he exclaimed. "Merry Christmas!"

For a moment there was silence. Then Rhianna shrieked, Carveth ran for the hold and Suruk pulled a knife.

"Behind you!" Rhianna screamed, and Smith threw himself down, reaching for a weapon. The knife flew overhead, followed by Suruk. Smith stood up holding the china shepherdess and saw Suruk struggling in the corridor with a bearded figure in a red coat.

"Bloody hell!" Smith said, and he was shoved aside by Carveth. "It's Father Christmas, you stupid sod!" she shouted, and she hit Suruk with a tray.

"Stop it, stop it!" Rhianna cried, and suddenly, as if waking from a dream, they paused, hesitated, and looked round. "Easy, everyone. Let's just chill, okay?"

Smith spat out his cotton wool beard.

On the floor before him was a man in a red coat, and this time his beard was real. But the man looked a little slender for Father Christmas, the beard much too small. And wasn't that an army jacket, too?

"Good Lord, it's Wainscott!" Smith exclaimed. "Whatever are you doing here, man?"

Now that he recognised the fellow, Smith was surprised that he had ever taken him to be anyone else. It would have been hard to mistake Major Wainscott, even without the strange glint in his eyes. And besides, he had fought Suruk for over five seconds and still retained his head. Few other men could have managed that.

"What do you think I'm doing?" Wainscott said cheerfully and he climbed to his feet. "Thought I'd drop by and give you your present. Didn't realise your chap here was going to attack me. Bracing experience, that," he added, wiping some blood off his chin.

"But why creep on board like that?"

Wainscott rolled his eyes, which made him look possessed. "Because it's a surprise, of course! I thought, I'll sneak on board and surprise Smith and his chaps. And I'd have got away with it too, were it not for your crew. Now, I have very important orders to give you a bottle of gin."

Wainscott took off his backpack and rooted around. Under a coil of wire, some pliers and a revolver was a wrapped bottle. "Here you go. Is that for me?" he asked, eyeing the china shepherdess. "Bloody hope not. So, shall I get the others in?"

"Well," said Smith, setting down his knife and fork, "I don't know quite why, but eating all that dinner has made me feel quite splendid. What did you use to season it, by the way?"

“Um, that’s kind’ve a trade secret,” Rhianna said.

“Well, very good job. Who’d like more to drink?”

They sat at the dinner table, the smell of roast Murkey thick in the air. Carols chirruped from the intercom. The five members of the Deepspace Operations Group were on the battered settee, helping themselves to freeze-dried sprouts. “More gravy, Susan?” Wainscott demanded as Nelson, the Group’s radio expert, opened a fresh bottle of tonic water.

“Excellent food,” Suruk observed, peering at a chipolata, “although I am surprised how many of these things came off one synthetic turkey.” He had impressed them all by carving the Murkey in a flurry of steel, although Carveth had insisted he use a knife that had never severed anybody’s head. “Your are most welcome in my ship, Wainscott. God rest ye in pieces, merry gentlemen.”

“And thanks to the secret service for the gin,” Carveth said, as she spooned brandy butter over the last mince pie.

Wainscott frowned. “Secret service? Oh no, girlie, I serve a higher power. This season, I work for the big Christmas chap, you see.”

“Who’s that?” Smith inquired. He had an odd mental image of Wainscott struggling from the North Pole with a sack over his shoulder, and then an even odder image of him taking orders direct from a donkey and the three kings.

“Could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you,” Wainscott observed. “And that’s hardly festive, is it?”

“Quite,” said Smith. “And that, I think, is the real spirit of Christmas - along with brandy. We may not have Father Christmas in person, but we’ve got the next best thing: space commandos with gin. Good company, a lack of murder, and wholesome family fun. Now then, ladies, who’d like a bit more stuffing?”

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