

*It is not easy being an elf. Elves are short. Elves have little chubby hands. They need to step on footstools to reach the jam on the top shelf and when they get it they have a hard time opening the jar.*

*Elves have no sense of fashion. They wear bright red velvet jackets with pointy hats and pointy shoes. They have pointy ears. They have a hard time picking up girls.*

*Elves are always tired. Elves are always tired because they work so hard. In the summer, elves work ten hours a day making toys. As Christmas gets closer, they work 16 hours a day making toys, every day of the week.*

*No, it is not easy being an elf. And for three elves named Iggy, Yugo and Sam, things are about to get a whole lot harder ...*



## **THE FRIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS**

### **A TERRIBLE TALE OF TERROR**

ONCE UPON A MIDNIGHT DREARY, Iggy wandered, weak and weary, to the stairs leading up to his bedroom. He was tired after many long hours carefully packing small toys into little chocolate eggs and was already nodding and nearly napping as he made his way to bed. He started up the stairs and heard the sound of someone gently rapping at his front door. Only this, and nothing more.

“Must be some visitor, tapping at my front door,” muttered Iggy to himself, “but who could it be at this hour?” He turned and stepped towards the door. In the distance, he heard a raven call.

He reached for the doorknob, and then paused. It was a bleak October night, dark outside and cold. Iggy lived at the North Pole, and it was dark half the year round<sup>1</sup> and always cold. The North Pole is a forbidding place and Iggy seldom had late night callers. Whoever was on the other side of the door had shown an awful lot of determination just to be standing there, tapping. Iggy wondered what could bring anyone to his cold dark doorstep at such an hour?

Still, Iggy thought, whoever it was must be freezing on such a night and very likely in need of help. Iggy's misgivings gave way to his trusting nature and he reached and turned the knob. The cold hinges creaked loudly as the door swung slowly open, revealing a short wiry figure. Iggy breathed a sigh of relief. The visitor was short like an elf and had pointy ears like an elf. Still, there was something wrong and decidedly un-elf like about the person at his door.

He had short dark hair, parted by a scar at the top of his head. Unlike most elves, he had long arms and legs, which ended in big hands and feet. His clothes were wrong, too. Elves typically wore red velvet tunics. The stranger was dressed in a tattered fur robe. Elves usually carried toolboxes, this fellow held a gnarled wooden club in his big fist. And most elves had a complexion that was decidedly less green than the one before him. Whoever this visitor was, it clearly was not an elf.

"Wh-who are you?" Iggy blurted out. "Wh-what are you?"

The stranger grinned, revealing a row of sharp pointed yellow teeth. Iggy could see that the stranger had, at most, only a nodding acquaintance with dental floss. He raised his club.

Iggy stepped backwards. It was, he understood a moment too late, the wrong thing to do. The stranger jumped nimbly through the door and into Iggy's house. "You must come with me," he hissed.

"Come where? What for?" Iggy was beginning to panic.

The stranger cackled and tossed his club from one hand to the other. "You'll see soon enough," he spat.

Iggy looked around wildly for something he could use to ward off the intruder, but all he could see was an umbrella stand sitting empty in the hallway. If only there was an umbrella there, he might have been able to

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, it is dark half the year round wherever you live, but the dark bits are interrupted by light bits pretty much every day, and most sensible people are able to sleep through them.

use that. But, living at the top of the world where it never rained, it had never occurred to Iggy to buy one. He wondered idly, why he even had the umbrella stand at all.

The creature lunged at him and Iggy ducked to the side. He felt a breeze as the little monster's club whistled over his head. Iggy scrambled on his hands and knees away from the intruder, but it grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him back. It stood over him now, leering and drooling. Iggy kicked out his leg and cut the thing's feet out from under it. It tumbled backwards and Iggy jumped on him. He tried to pin it to the ground, but it struggled wildly and Iggy could not keep a grip on it. The creature pushed Iggy back to the ground and wheeled on him with his club.

Iggy struggled to his feet and gasped, "why ...?" The creature only glowered at him and swung its club again. Iggy jerked sideways as it glanced painfully off his ribs. The thing was frighteningly strong; even though it was only a partial blow, tears sprang from Iggy's eyes and he could barely breathe.

Iggy staggered backwards, then regained his balance and lunged forward, kicking at the club. He knocked it from the creature's hand and it clattered across the hall. Iggy wiped a hand across his brow. "Now we'll see what you can do without your big stick," he said through gritted teeth.

The creature just grinned and jumped up, bouncing off a wall and settling into a martial arts stance. Then he screamed "Hi-yah!" and moved forward quickly, swinging his hand like a blade.

Iggy ducked under the creature's arm and threw a punch of his own, striking the creature on the side of the head. Iggy cried out in pain; the thing's skull felt like it was made of cement. Iggy winced and grabbed his aching hand. Then the monster struck out with his other hand. Iggy fell to the ground, punching feebly back at the intruder. It chattered menacingly at him then suddenly thrust its pointed head right into Iggy's forehead. For a moment Iggy saw stars that dissolved into little cartoon birds. And then everything went black.

YUGO WAS WORKING LATE WHEN he heard a knock on his door. He was assembling some new microprocessors for a line of artificially intelligent yo-yos he was developing and it required all of his concentration to weld the tiny connections in place. For that reason, he did not notice the first knock on the door. Or the second. Or the third or fourth. But when his front door was kicked in and crashed against the opposite wall, tipping over his empty umbrella stand, he looked up from his work with a start.

“What is it?” Yugo called, rising carefully from his chair and slipping his tiny welding tool into his pocket. He walked cautiously into the hall. A small green man in a dirty fur shirt brandishing a twisted wooden club stepped over the wrecked door and into Yugo’s little cottage. He looked at Yugo and sneered.

Yugo’s encyclopaedic mind rapidly assessed what he faced: A goblin: *Gobo Sapiens. (n.)* A diminutive and grotesque humanoid race frequently found in and around forbidden forests, haunted glens and beneath stone bridges. Nocturnal solitary creatures that feed on whatever they can get their hands on, including other goblins. Greedy, violent, and not to be trusted.

Yugo approached the goblin carefully. “Where did you come from?” he asked. “There are no goblins within thousands of miles of the North Pole. What are you doing here?”

“We needs you,” squealed the goblin, leaping at Yugo and swinging his club wildly. Yugo danced out of range, but the goblin moved with remarkable quickness. “We will have you!” shrieked the goblin, pressing his attack.

Yugo ran across the room and pulled a chair between himself and the goblin. The goblin laughed shrilly and brought his club down on the chair, smashing it to pieces. He capered quickly over the broken pieces, oblivious to the sharp edges cutting into his bare feet. He swung his club again. Yugo scrambled back towards his kitchen, with the goblin in close pursuit. Yugo reached around the corner blindly and smiled as his hand wrapped around a broom handle. He pulled the broom out of the corner and faced the stranger.

The hideous little creature cackled and swung his club, shattering the broomstick in Yugo’s hand, dashing the broken pieces across the room. Yugo ran back into the kitchen. He remembered that he had left his tool belt on his kitchen counter. If he could reach that, he might be able to defend himself. But as he approached the counter, the little

green man skipped ahead of him, leapt up on to the counter and kicked the tool belt away. His eyes gleamed darkly as he swung his club again. Yugo stepped backwards at the last possible moment and the club whickered harmlessly past his chin.

He reached into his pocket and felt the little welding torch. He pulled it out and waved it in the goblin's face. He shouted, "stop this, or I'll shoot! I mean it!"

The goblin just laughed at him. Yugo pulled the trigger on his welding torch and a bright blue flame arced out at the goblin. It struck the goblin in the cheek and smoke began to pour out of its face. But still the goblin only laughed. Then, it kicked the welding tool from Yugo's hand and swung his club yet again, striking Yugo the ear. Yugo spun to the floor, his arms waving uselessly as he tried to keep his balance. Then he hit the ground everything went black.

**S**AM WAS SITTING IN HIS BIG GREEN reclining chair, eating a large drumstick and washing it down with a warm Coke, when he heard a knock at his door. "Probably some kid selling chocolate bars or calendars," he grunted as he set the turkey leg down on the little table beside his remote control and pulled himself out of his chair. "I'll just get rid of him and then I can get back to my show."

Sam waddled down the hall, past his empty umbrella stand, and pulled open the door. "What do you think you're doing knocking on my door at this time of night?" he barked into the cold evening air.

Then he saw the goblin grinning at him. Sam blinked and dropped his cup on the floor, splashing warm Coke in all directions.

"Boo," said the goblin.

Sam fainted and everything went black.

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM AWOKE HOURS, or perhaps days, later tied together in a wooden cage. The cage was on a cart, which was being roughly pulled by two thin black horses through a dark forest. At the front of the cart, steering the horses, was a goblin with a black scar on his cheek and a mean disposition. He turned and looked into the cart and laughed.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were plainly in unfamiliar circumstances. They were Christmas elves.<sup>2</sup> They were used to wading through snowdrifts every day, not being carted through the woods. They were toy makers, yet now they found themselves prisoners of a horrible little monster. It was a grim predicament, as grim as anything they had experienced. For Christmas elves, they had a knack for getting themselves into grim predicaments.

Iggy smiled stiffly and tried not to lose hope. He was tall, for an elf, but that was not really saying much. He had a long face, long arms and long nimble fingers. He rarely lost hope.

Yugo was the oldest of the three, and by far the best toy maker of the group. He sported a thick black moustache, which he trimmed fastidiously. He was a master craftsman and inventor, perhaps best known for the remarkable snowmobile which he had built; a snowmobile that could travel virtually anywhere in the world.

Sam, who slept fitfully nearby, was chubby elf, with untidy curly brown hair. He was usually in a bad mood and recent events had certainly done nothing to elevate his spirits. Even in his sleep he looked angry.

Iggy blinked to clear the cobwebs from his head. He was dazed and foggy. He tried to stand up, but his knees felt like jelly and he fell right back down. "Take it easy, Iggy," said Yugo reassuringly. "You've got a nasty looking bump on your head. You're still going to be seeing stars for a while."

Not stars, thought Iggy. Little cartoon birds. And they were still flying around his head and chirping a happy tune.

On the other side of the cage, Sam was struggling uselessly at the ropes that bound his wrists. He pulled on the rope, but this only served

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<sup>2</sup>Those of you who have read a few Iggy, Yugo and Sam stories will wonder why this paragraph is here. Unfortunately, this sort of expository paragraph is necessary to tell first time readers a little bit about the main characters. Experienced readers can skip ahead to the next page.

to tighten the knots. He threw his wrists down in exasperation and shouted at the goblin. "And what do you think is so funny?"

The goblin just grinned and showed his pointy yellow teeth. "Boo," he whispered. Sam swooned to the floor of the cage.

"Where are we?" asked Iggy.

"I'm not sure we want to know," answered Yugo. The two elves looked out from the bars of their cage. They were travelling along a dark forest trail. But the trees that surrounded them were lifeless, cold and dead. Their black twisted branches had no leaves and reached skyward towards a blood red moon. Mist swirled about the forest floor. Somewhere nearby a wolf howled.

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Iggy. These were strong words coming from Iggy, who was such an optimist he rarely had a bad feeling about anything. Iggy was once hospitalized with food poisoning, but nonetheless remained grateful that the bacteria in his belly had found a home. But he had a bad feeling now, and with good reason.

"Me too," said Yugo. He reached across the cage and shook Sam by the shoulder. "Wake up, Sam," he said gently.

Sam blinked. "Oh Yugo," he mumbled, "thank goodness. You wouldn't believe this awful dream I was having." He looked around at the bleak forest landscape passing by the cage. "Oh dear," he said and fainted again.

Iggy shook his head. "I guess we might as well let him sleep," he said. "It doesn't look like we will be going anywhere for a while." The cage rocked stiffly from side to side as it wound past a broken down stone bridge. Iggy flinched as two yellow eyes peered out at him from beneath the rocky supports. Two dark objects flashed past the cage. "Those can't be bats," muttered Iggy. "They're much too big to be bats." The two objects turned and flew straight up, silhouetted for a moment against the full red harvest moon.

Yugo shuffled over to Iggy's side. "I think they're monkeys," he whispered.

"Flying monkeys?" Iggy said. "It's not possible. Is it, Yugo?"

Yugo only shrugged. While it seemed impossible, it was hard to deny the evidence of his own eyes. This was all very strange. For a moment, he truly felt there was no place like home.

Then the cart lurched heavily and broke through the edge of the woods. The trail ahead rose slowly as it reached the base of a grey rain streaked slope. The cart began to slowly climb up a winding path that was cut into the hillside. The rock at the edge of the trail was black with sharp edges that flashed in the moonlight as the cart rattled past. Iggy looked out of the front of the cage. Beyond the odious little goblin at the end of the trail a black castle rose from the mountain peak. Aside from a dim light that shone from one of the windows in an upper turret, the castle was entirely dark.

The cart climbed up the mountainside and they drew steadily closer to the castle. They passed through a twisted iron gate. Lightning flashed, illuminating for a moment what appeared to be the stylized shape of a skull woven into the iron rails of the gate.<sup>3</sup>

The goblin steered the cart to the castle door and pulled it to a stop. He leapt from his stoop and shuffled around to the rear of the cage. He pulled a rusted key from his ragged pocket and inserted it into the large lock at the back. The door swung open with a grinding creak that raised goose bumps on Iggy's arms. He reached out and shook Sam's shoulder. "Wake up Sam," he said.

One of Sam's eyes flickered open tentatively. "Is it," he stammered. "Is it still there?"

"I'm afraid so," Iggy replied. Sam's head lolled backwards woozily. "Come on Sam, you have to wake up," Iggy entreated.

"And try and stay awake this time," added Yugo.

Sam's eyes opened wider. He growled at Yugo, "I'm awake, I'm awake." He looked over at the goblin, which was grinning maliciously beside the open cage door. "Just keep that ... thing ... away from me."

The three elves climbed down out of the cage. The goblin turned and skipped towards the castle doors, making some kind of wild animal noise as he bounced down the path. He stopped and motioned to the elves to follow him. The three elves looked around them. Below them a jagged rocky pathway led back into a black forest filled with strange noises and in all likelihood even stranger things. As forbidding as the dark castle in front of them appeared, it seemed to be the lesser of two evils; though only just.

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<sup>3</sup> This is not very Christmassy at all, is it?

The goblin pushed open the front door and led the elves down a long hallway covered with a frayed and bare maroon carpet. The walls were covered with paintings, tapestries and bits of armour and other relics. They passed a series of portraits of what appeared to Iggy to be southern<sup>4</sup> kings and queens. As they walked by, Iggy could feel the eyes of long dead royalty following him down the hall. If he was not already covered in goose bumps, it would have made his skin crawl.

Finally, they reached the end of the hall and entered a dark chamber. The goblin scampered ahead. He stopped in the centre of the room and bent down on one knee. “Master, I have brought the heroes to you as you commanded,” he said beseechingly.

“Well done,” a voice spoke from the far end of the room. The voice was cold and thick, like dirt from the grave. “Iggy, Yugo and Sam?” it asked.

“Uh ... yes,” answered Iggy. “That’s us.” They squinted into the shadows but could not make out the source of the voice.

“Come forward,” commanded the voice. The three elves tried to adjust and tidy their dusty tunics and approached the end of the room cautiously. If they took any smaller steps, they would have been walking backwards. Eventually, they began to make out the shape of a tall skinny figure sitting on a grey iron throne. He, or it, was dressed in a long black hooded robe. The figure rose. It was astonishingly thin. It’s no more than skin and bone, thought Iggy, except without the skin.

The figure carried a pole with long curved blade on the end. It strode stiffly towards the elves. They heard a series of staccato clicks with each step it took on the stone floor. The figure pulled the hood back from its head, revealing a bony face. To be clear, the use of the word “bony” in that last sentence is not a figure of speech. The figure’s head



<sup>4</sup> When you are from the North Pole, every place south of you is foreign. When elves use the expression “southerners” they mean foreigners. Which is to say, you.

was a shiny white skull. A pale light glowed from within each of its deep eye sockets. Otherwise, the creature's eyes were as deep and dark as the most distant void in space. "Please allow me to introduce myself," the figure intoned, "I am the Reaper." Then he smiled, at least to the extent anyone without lips can smile, "but you can call me Grim."

"I am sure you are wondering why I have summoned you here to my demesnes," said Grim, surveying his dark chamber. He gestured at three polished black chairs behind the elves. "Please sit. We have much to discuss."

"You have already met my servant, Gobby," said Grim, introducing the goblin by name. The hideous creature began jumping up and down and making loud noises for no particular reason. "I trust he treated you well on your journey."

Iggy rubbed the swollen blue lump on his forehead. "He was not exactly ... gentle," he said.

Grim turned quickly and shouted at the little kobold, "Gobby! I commanded you to look after our guests!" Gobby looked at him with a sad and confused expression. "Ah, I see," said Grim. He turned back to the elves. "This is my fault. Obviously, I did not express myself to Gobby with sufficient clarity. You will find that Gobby is faithful and kind, but sometimes he can get a little carried away." Grim stroked Gobby's short hair with his long bony fingers. Gobby purred. "Please accept my apologies for any discomfort you may you may have experienced. I can assure you that Gobby and I both require you whole and intact."

Sam squirmed in his chair. "What for, so you can eat us?" he asked. With Sam, most of his feelings about whether something was good or bad boiled down to a simple question of whether you could eat it or not. By this measure, being eaten by something was as bad it could get.

Grim laughed a low funereal chuckle, "No my dear boy, I assure you we have no intention of eating you." He scratched his ribs and it was apparent that Grim had not eaten anything, perhaps ever. "We require a simple service from you. A service I fear that only the three of you can perform."

"And what would that be?" asked Yugo.

"A simple thing for the three of you, of that I am quite certain," answered Grim. "I need you to save Halloween."

“OH NO, NO WAY, FORGET IT,” said Sam, rising from his chair and shaking his head. “I’m through with saving holidays. I’ve spent my whole life saving holidays.”

“And that is exactly why we need your help now,” said Grim, leaning back in his iron throne and pressing his bony fingertips together beneath his smooth white chin. “I have followed your careers with great interest over the years. You have travelled vast distances, through space and through time, and faced grave danger again and again so that you might save Christmas. Indeed, the many times you have faced death in your cause has not escaped my notice. I have often felt called to your sides in moments of great peril.”

“You were called to our side?” spat Sam. “Well why didn’t you lend us a hand. Or a metacarpal or something?”

“I’m afraid you do not understand,” replied Grim smoothly. “The only aid I can offer when you call is to aid your passage into the next world. It is much to your credit that you have *not* required my aid in the past.” Sam gulped and sat down heavily.

Grim continued, “but now I very much require *your* aid.”

“How can we help?” asked Iggy. Sam glared at him, but said nothing.

“These are difficult days,” said Grim. “Some say these are the last days, but I do not believe that to be so. Not yet, anyway. I lead a busy ... afterlife. I have many duties, and not all of them are pleasant. However, my happiest responsibility is to bring Halloween to the world each year. You might think of me as the Santa Claus of Halloween. Perhaps not so jolly and certainly not so plump,” Grim chuckled as he said this and idly scratched one of his bare ribs, “but a bit like Santa Claus in my own way, all the same. For one night each year, the night before All Saints Day, I summon the lost souls from their rest, ghosts and ghouls, the spirits and spooks walk the Earth once more.”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Yugo. “I thought Halloween was all about trick or treaters going door to door collecting candy?”

Grim chuckled. “Of course it is. But if you must know,” his voice deepened, as though it were coming from six feet under the ground, “and I feel that you must, the whole trick or treat business is really just a cover up – an elaborate camouflage, if you will. For while the children

caper about dressed as witches or spacemen, walking from door to door, the spirits are able to join them and walk by their side entirely unnoticed. And, in this way, they can once more see the family and friends, the wives, husbands and children, they have left behind.”

The room grew quiet as the elves took in Grim’s words. The only sound was that of Gobby giggling to himself. Grim turned and barked at the goblin. “Gobby! Focus! This is important!” The goblin pouted and sat silently as Grim continued his story. “While Christmas is perhaps the happiest day of the year to the children of this world, there can be little doubt that Halloween is the happiest day of the year for those of the other world.”

“But what has this got to do with us?” asked Yugo.

“I was just coming to that,” explained Grim. “As I said, we live in a difficult and trying age. There are those who use fear or terror in order to impose their political or religious views on others. There are terrorists and eco-terrorists and bio-terrorists all of whom will bring down great works of man or cause terrible suffering to advance their aims. Now, a strange and particularly frightening kind of terrorist has emerged. A holly-terrorist: the holiday terrorist. His goal is to rid the world of all the holidays and celebrations they know. The worst of these, by far, is a monster named Yomama Bin Yappin.”

Sam laughed loudly. Iggy and Yugo turned and glared at him. “Oh come on,” pleaded Sam. “It’s a joke name, like Yahava Ban Nanna or Yewanna Go Dansin or ...” he scratched his chin as he thought aloud, “or Yugotta Be Kiddin.”

Then Grim turned and also glared at him. Sam looked into those dark eyes and felt he was staring into the depths of the universe itself. Even without eyelids or eyebrows Grim’s stare alone brought silence. “This is no laughing matter, Elf Sam. Yomama’s motives are unclear and his goals are unknown. It may be that he wants nothing more than to make the world a colder, unhappier place.” At this point Grim reached down and picked up a skinny skeletal cat from the floor. He cradled it in his bony hands and stroked it gently. A haunted purr rattled from it. “Definitely a colder place.”

“And this my friends, is where you come in. Yomama has determined to rid the world of Christmas, the greatest and happiest day of the year. To this end, he has seized control of a secret weather satellite. Only you can stop him.”

“What do you mean?” interjected Iggy.

“Perhaps you have heard of the ‘Cold War?’” answered Grim. “This is not just an expression. The great military powers of the world have developed ways of controlling the weather. In the event that military action failed they would simply use their satellites to turn down the temperature -- to freeze out the other side, if you will. Yomama has boarded one of these satellites and taken control of it. It is his plan to freeze out Christmas.”

“So what has this got to do with Halloween?” asked Iggy.

Grim smiled his lipless smile. “Yomama will use this technology to create a worldwide blizzard and freeze the planet on Christmas Eve. Your Santa Claus will be unable to perform his annual good works. Christmas will be cancelled.”

“So what has this to do with Halloween?” repeated Yugo.

“Yomama is a cautious man,” explained Grim. “He wants to destroy Christmas. But before he does so, he will test his power. He will attack on Halloween. My day. He will chill the world and the children will stay home. People will lock their doors against the cold. There will be no cover for the real ghosts of Halloween. There will be no Halloween. And then Yomama will set his sights on the real prize. Christmas.”

“That means,” said Iggy, “that in order to save Christmas ... ”

“We must first save Halloween,” finished Yugo.

“Exak-a-tact-ly,” said Grim, carefully enunciating the word without the benefit of lips, tongue or oesophagus.

“But how do you know all this?” blurted Sam.

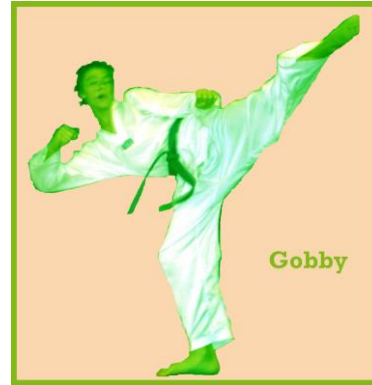
Grim turned to him and his voice turned even colder than before. Frost formed in the corners of the room. “Young elf,” explained Grim, rising to his feet. “I have walked this world since its first light and I will stand alone at its end. I have stridden through battlefields at dawn. I have seen the comings and goings of dynasties. I have seen cities and empires rise and fall. All men and women, the great and the small, the rich and the poor, the weak and the mighty, come to me in their due time. In the *end*,” he said, with particular emphasis on this last word, “there are no secrets from me.”

Sam shivered. Grim returned to his seat. “You must stop Yomama.”

“But why us,” implored Iggy.

Grim fixed Iggy with his cold stare. “Because only you can. There are no others. Not Randy, Rocco and Max, the Easter chickens. And do not even get me started about Benny, Patrick and Moe, the Thanksgiving Day gnomes. No, when it comes to tasks like this, there are no others. None at all.”

“I regret that the only help that I can provide you is this.” He clapped his hands together, with a sound like two dried branches striking each other. Gobby looked up. “You shall have my loyal servant, Gobby with you. You will find him a useful ally. He is a good and tireless worker and is well trained in the martial arts.” Gobby grinned and rocked back and forth in his seat.



"In addition, you shall have this ...” With that, Grim attempted to snap his fingers. However, without skin, his effort to make any sort of noise by striking his bony thumb against his bony third finger resulted in nothing more than a hollow and barely audible ‘click’. Nonetheless, at his summons, two enormous white stallions cantered into the chamber, dragging behind them a red shiny snowmobile.

Yugo smiled broadly. It was his snowmobile and it was a snowmobile like no other. It was big, with an enclosed cabin with room for passengers. It was designed to travel through snow, but with Yugo’s tinkering over the years it was equally capable of driving through rain, sleet, smog and even time. With the push of a button or the flip of a switch it could soar with falcons or swim with whales. If you needed to get to a secret weather satellite in a hurry to stop a maniac, Yugo’s snowmobile was the one thing you could count on to get you there.

Gobby scampered over to the snowmobile to release it from its harness and it crashed to the floor. Tears welled in Yugo’s eyes. Gobby grinned sheepishly, like a really ugly sheep might grin in an embarrassed sort of way.

Yugo ran over to the snowmobile and quickly inspected it. He touched it with care, like a mother might with her child. In many ways, the snowmobile was Yugo’s child. It was his proudest accomplishment. Happily, it appeared undamaged. He pressed a small white button on the side of the snowmobile and a door slid silently open. “Well, I guess we had better be going then,” he said.

Iggy and Sam walked over to join him. Iggy reached for the passenger door. "Shotgun!" shouted Gobby. Iggy and Sam just shrugged and climbed into the back seat.

**T** WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE ALL HALLOW'S EVE when the snowmobile glided across the drawbridge leading away from Grim's castle and headed down the winding trail to the forest below. An otherwise bumpy ride was completely smoothed out by the new cyber-pneumatic shock absorbers Yugo had installed the previous week. Yugo carefully monitored the readings on dozens of instruments and gauges arrayed in front of him on which everything from the snowmobile's speed to its barometric pressure was displayed. Gobby squirmed in his seat. None of the elves were particularly comfortable with their new passenger, but there was little they could do about it. Grim had been insistent and he was a plainly man who was used to having his way.

Gobby stared in awe at the flashing lights and buttons spread across the dashboard. He reached up to touch a small switch. "Don't touch that," said Yugo, placing a protective hand out in front of Gobby.

"What does it do?" asked Gobby.

"Who knows?" muttered Sam. "It might turn on a light or take pictures or make waffles. Or it could just blow us all up. Take my word for it, you don't want to touch anything in here."

Yugo smiled and pulled on a green knob. Two silver rocket engines extended from either the side of the snowmobile. "If you must know," Yugo replied, "that switch fires the rocket boosters." He gestured at an orange button near the middle of the dashboard, "this switch makes the waffles." Yugo studied his instrument readings carefully. "Okay, I think we are far enough away from the castle. Gobby, why don't you throw that switch now."

Gobby's long finger darted forth and flipped the switch. A moment later they were all pulled back into their seats as the rockets fired and the snowmobile leaped forward and rapidly rose into the air. Iggy looked out the round window. The black castle and surrounding forest dwindled away behind them as they soared up through the clouds. "Do you know where we're going?" he asked.

Yugo pressed a black button. A small screen flipped up out of the dashboard. He typed a few commands into a small keyboard beside the steering wheel. Small glowing dots appeared on the screen, accompanied by a soft and friendly sounding “ping”. “This is a satellite detector. There are thousands of them up there, but I’m sure that we can find it.”

“Why would you even think about putting something like that in here?” blurted Sam.

Yugo stared at him with a puzzled look. “You have to have a satellite detector,” he said. “It isn’t safe to go into orbit without one.”

“Orbit?” gasped Sam. “Who said anything about going into orbit?”

“How else are we going to reach this satellite?” answered Yugo.

“I thought we were going to do all this from the ground. You know, by remote control or something.”

Yugo smiled. “I’m afraid I don’t have one of those.”

“Must be the only thing you don’t have in here,” said Sam.

“That’s not quite true.” Yugo pulled back on his steering wheel and the snowmobile’s ascent grew steeper. “Anybody care for some waffles?” he asked.

“I hate this part,” grunted Sam. The castle and forest curved away in the distance. The blue sky outside the windows grew darker. Millions of stars sparkled into view.

“Wow,” breathed Iggy. Sam just closed his eyes tighter. And still the snowmobile soared higher. The Earth fell away from them. Soon a band of glittering metal objects appeared ahead of them. Yugo pushed forward on the steering wheel and the snowmobile levelled off.

“What are those things?” asked Iggy.

“Satellites,” said Yugo. “All of the world’s satellites are here, 35,785 kilometres above the Earth.”

“Why so high?” asked Iggy.

“It’s a geosynchronous orbit. At this altitude, a satellite orbits the Earth in a single day and will therefore stay in the same spot above the Earth all of the time,” Yugo explained.

“There sure are a lot of them,” said Iggy.<sup>5</sup>

“Yes, and most of them don’t even work anymore,” said Yugo. He looked at his satellite monitor as he steered the snowmobile between two gently rotating satellites. “There are so many, I don’t know how we’ll ever find the one we are looking for. It’s probably something pretty big.” As he spoke those words a large blue satellite loomed into view.

“How about that one?” asked Sam.

Yugo looked up. The satellite approaching them was big, but did not appear to him to be anything special. “I don’t think so Sam,” replied Yugo. He returned to scanning the dots on his little screen.

“I really think it’s the blue one,” pressed Sam.

Yugo looked up from the monitor. “I’m not getting any readings on my equipment. What makes you think this is the one?”

“It says so on the side,” replied Sam. Sure enough, as they rounded the big satellite, they could read the words:

**NATO WEATHER CONTROL – TOP SECRET**

written in big white letters across the side of the satellite.

Yugo laughed. “Now, that’s what I call military intelligence. But it looks like you’ve found it after all, Sam.”

“Let’s go get it then,” said Iggy. Gobby stomped his big feet on the dashboard and giggled.

**Y**UGO CAREFULLY GUIDED THE SNOWMOBILE alongside the satellite. He turned a yellow dial and a tube extended from the snowmobile to a hatch

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<sup>5</sup> There are currently 2616 satellites in geosynchronous orbit above the Earth and about 6100 pieces of debris (pieces of broken up satellites, rocket boosters, lost tools, etc) orbiting the Earth. I actually researched this interesting, but ultimately useless, fact so that I could include it in this interesting, but ultimately useless, footnote.

on the side of the satellite. It clicked silently<sup>6</sup> into place. Yugo unfastened his seat belt and opened his door. "All aboard that's going aboard," he joked. He climbed through the docking tube to the satellite hatch. He tinkered with the locking mechanism for a few seconds and then the door slid aside. "Looks like we're in," he said.

Iggy, Sam and Gobby followed Yugo into the satellite. They found themselves in a narrow and dimly lit hallway. The floor and walls were made of polished steel, but covered in a thick layer of dust. The hallway gently curved ahead of them.

"Come on, let's go find the weather controls and get this over with," said Iggy.

Yugo looked around. "Yeah, let's go. This place is giving me the creeps."

Sam glared at Gobby. "That's not all that is giving me the creeps," he said. Gobby glared back and stuck out his tongue at Sam.

"Knock it off, you two," said Iggy. "We have work to do." He followed Yugo down the hall. Sam and Gobby kept glaring at each other and then slowly fell in behind.

Iggy and Yugo rounded the curve ahead of Sam and Gobby when a horn sounded and a red light started flashing. "Intruder Alert ... Intruder Alert ... Intruder Alert ..." droned a mechanical voice. Panels on either side of the hallway slid open and six gleaming steel robots stepped out. Each robot had several legs and was armed with a stubby black laser pistol. Their heads spun around and focussed on Sam and Gobby. The robots moved stiffly, yet quickly to surround them.

"This is it," grumbled Sam. "We're doomed. I'm going down with a goblin."

But Gobby had other ideas. He sprang into the air, his legs scissoring and screamed "Hi-Yah!!" He blocked the first robot's gun hand with his forearm and with the other hand chopped at its neck. Its head sprang from its shoulders with a surprised look on its face and tumbled down the hall. Gobby landed nimbly on one foot and with a loud grunt

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<sup>6</sup> You may be saying cleverly to yourself that 'clicking silently' is a bit of an oxymoron (like the ancient 'military intelligence' gag included two paragraphs ago) and makes no sense. But if you are saying that cleverly to yourself, then you are not as clever as you think. Since there is no atmosphere in space, there can be no sound. As a result, Yugo's docking mechanism really did click silently.

kicked up at another robot, knocking its gun against the wall. Then he delivered a crushing palm strike to its chest. The robot fell to the floor with a thud and the gold lights illuminating its eyes faded out.

Gobby spun on the third robot and with a quick stabbing motion delivered a devastating hand drill, follow by a hand knife chop, and finally immobilized it with a shattering sliding side kick. The fourth and fifth robots fell quickly as Gobby set upon them, a whirling frenzy of hands and feet. The two robots collapsed, bent, dented and defeated.

The final robot raised his laser pistol and trained it on Gobby. “Desist at once or face termination,” the robot commanded. Sam, who had found himself cheering for Gobby, gasped. The robot pulled the trigger of its laser pistol but as the red beam shot out Gobby flipped backwards out of harms way. The robot shot again and again, but Gobby danced between the laser blasts, closing in on the robot and finally unleashing a combination of slashing punches and kicks that reduced it to a pile of scrap metal.

Gobby stepped back as Sam jumped at him and wrapped his arms tightly around him. “You saved us!” Gobby smiled slightly and then pulled himself out of Sam’s embrace.<sup>7</sup> They climbed over the wreckage of the robots and made their way quickly after Iggy and Yugo.

Sam and Gobby turned the corner to find that Iggy and Yugo were having problems of their own. They had reached the sealed door leading to the control room but found it locked. Yugo was working on a small control panel beside the door when he triggered another alarm. “Uh oh,” said Sam. “More robots. Don’t worry about a thing guys. Gobby and I know how to take care of them.” Gobby looked over at Sam with a pained expression on his face.

But before any robots could arrive, a wire net fell from the ceiling on top of the four. Strong electro-magnets along the edge of the net stuck it firmly to the metal floor. They strained against the wire mesh but it would not yield. Then the door opened. A tall figure stood framed in the doorway, leaning on a short walking stick. He was thin and dressed in a white robe. A scarf was wound loosely around his neck covering his chin. His short dark hair was greying slightly. His eyes were invisible behind large dark sunglasses. He wore a thick brown belt around his waist from which hung a large scimitar. He chuckled quietly and poked at Gobby with his cane.

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<sup>7</sup> Unless they are hitting someone, goblins do not really care much for physical contact.

“Imagine finding a goblin here,” he said, with a strong southern<sup>8</sup> accent. “And Christmas elves. How peculiar.”

Gobby spat at the tall man. He reached down casually and blotted up the booger with the end of his scarf. “Tsk, tsk,” he said. “That is no way to treat your host. And we have not even been properly introduced. My name is Yomama Bin Yappin. And your names, well, they do not really matter, do they?”

Iggy struggled against the net. “You won’t get away with this,” he grunted.

Yomama smiled gently. “Foolish little elf. Of course I am going to get away with this. Of course I will. I have been planning this job for years and now my plans are about to bear fruit.” He chuckled as he walked around them. He walked quickly and gracefully and had no apparent need for his cane. “I have dreamed of this moment for years. Perhaps you would like to know why?”<sup>9</sup>

“You’re a loony,” said Sam. “A complete nut bar.”

“Well, this loony is on this side of the net,” said Yomama smugly. “You know, I used to love holidays. All of them. Valentine’s Day, Mothers Day, Halloween, Christmas. Especially Christmas. I liked holidays so much I decided I would make one of my very own. I even named it after me. Yappin Day. It would be the greatest day of the year, with presents and singing and eating and celebrating. And a man in a blue scarf with a cane would leave presents in the underpants drawers of all the good little girls and boys. Yappin Day would be the most wonderful day of the year.”

“I made cards and posters. I bought radio ads. Everything I could do to spread the Yappin Day cheer. But it was all for nothing. Nobody paid any attention. Every Christmas, it was the same thing. Santa Claus got all the press. All the good write-ups. And Yappin Day got nothing. I could not get into any of the calendars. Nobody took a day off to celebrate Yappin Day. Nobody sang a Yappin carol or roasted chestnuts over an open fire on Yappin Day.”

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<sup>8</sup> Remember, for an elf, southern = foreign.

<sup>9</sup> This is the part of the story where the villain, who is armed and has the heroes completely at his mercy and instead of doing the obvious thing and just killing them, pauses to explain his motivation and gloat over his imminent triumph. This buys the heroes enough time to escape from their predicament and turn the tables on the villain. It always happens that way. Keep reading and you will see what I mean.

Yomama sighed. “It finally became clear to me that the only way I was going to get Yappin Day off the ground was to put all of the other holidays under the ground. Starting with Christmas.”

“But it’s Halloween,” said Yugo.

Yomama cleared his throat. “Well, yes. Starting with Halloween. But this is just a test run. Today Halloween, tomorrow the world and all that.” Yomama continued pacing around the elves, seemingly lost in his own reminiscences. “And soon, with Christmas and all of these other holidays out of the way, the only holiday people will have left will be Yappin Day. And what a grand and glorious day that shall be.” Yomama paused and stared dreamily into the distance.

Gobby had been slowly and quietly working a skinny leg through one of the holes in the net. At that moment, he kicked it out. He struck Yomama’s cane, which fell from his grasp and skittered across the floor. Surprised, Yomama toppled to the ground right on top of the elves. Gobby thrust a skinny arm through the mesh and grabbed the hilt of Yomama’s scimitar. He pulled it from the villain’s belt and slashed at the net.

Yomama struggled to his feet, but it was too late. Gobby and the elves scrambled out from the remains of the net.<sup>10</sup> He stepped backwards and picked up his walking stick. Gobby and the elves came closer. “Now boys,” pleaded Yomama. “Can’t we just talk this over? You wouldn’t hit a man with a cane now, would you?”

Gobby waved the scimitar menacingly. Yomama turned and ran down the hallway. Gobby started after him. “Leave him, Gobby,” said Yugo. “We have more important things to do.”

Yugo led the elves into the control room. It was an oval shaped room, with a large screen against one wall that looked like a window and a control panel beneath. There were small black leather chairs on casters lining the control panel. Yugo sat in one and rolled it up to the keyboard. “Let’s see, this shouldn’t be too tricky.” Yugo punched a few commands into the keyboard. He looked up at the screen. He scratched his head and typed in a few more commands. He pushed back his chair.

“Nothing’s working. Yomama must have disabled the control panel,” he said.

“But why?” asked Iggy.

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<sup>10</sup> I told you so. Didn’t I just tell you so?

Just then Yomama's face appeared on the big screen. He was laughing. "Ha ha ha little elves! You're finding out now that no Christmas is coming. Well, no Halloween anyway." Yomama held up a small black object. "You've no doubt noticed that the controls are completely useless. I am running the whole satellite now by remote control. I picked this little beauty up at Wal-Mart.<sup>®</sup> Very handy once you program it, but the instructions are murder!" He pressed a button. "Good-bye Halloween! Good-bye little elves! Ha ha ha!"

"I knew we should have had one of those things!" said Sam. A hum reverberated from deep within the satellite.

"That must be the weather machinery," said Iggy. Sure enough, the screen flashed to a view of the Earth far below them. Across the planet dark clouds could be seen boiling up in the sky. It looked like a nasty storm was coming ... everywhere.

"We have to find him," said Yugo, rising from his chair. At that moment the picture on the screen dissolved into a shot of a small rocket leaving the satellite. Iggy, Yugo and Sam watched in horror as the rocket sped back to Earth.

"He's getting away!" shouted Iggy.

"Come on, let's go!" called Yugo. The three elves ran from the control room, with Gobby at their side, still swinging Yomama's scimitar around.

"Be careful with that thing," said Sam. "You could put an eye out. Or an arm."

Gobby giggled and stuffed the scimitar into his dirty belt beside his old gnarled wooden club. "Shotgun!" he yelled.

**T**HREE ELVES AND A GOBLIN charged back into the snowmobile. Yugo's fingers danced across the control array. He hit a blue switch, twisted a red dial and pressed a green button. The docking mechanism retracted from the satellite and the snowmobile drifted away from it. Yugo touched the small switch in front of Gobby and the snowmobile's rockets fired, launching them back towards the Earth.

Yugo studied the little screen on his dashboard. “He’s got to be out here somewhere ...” A little light flashed on the edge of the screen. “Gotcha!” he said, and turned the snowmobile’s wheel right. The snowmobile made a wide turn. Soon a small shape appeared in the distance in front of them. It was hurtling towards the thick clouds that were building in the Earth’s upper atmosphere.<sup>11</sup>

“Hang on to something,” said Yugo. “The weather outside is frightful. Our re-entry is going to be a little rough.” The snowmobile pierced the black clouds blanketing the Earth and bounced erratically through them. Sam retrieved the small bag he kept in the seat back pocket in front of him. He offered one to Gobby. Gobby shook his head and stared out the window ahead of them. They burst out from under the clouds and into a raging blizzard. The snowmobile bucked wildly from side to side as Yugo fought against the storm.

“There he is!” shouted Iggy. He pointed to Yugo’s left. Ahead of them a little rocket was bouncing through the air. Yugo turned the steering wheel to the left. The snowmobile whined under the strain.

“He’s heading for those woods!” Iggy yelled over the wind pounding against the snowmobile’s windows. The little rocket had veered towards a small forest and was skimming along the tops of the trees. Then it dove under the treetops and disappeared.

“He’s going to land!” shouted Iggy. “We have to get down there. If he escapes into the woods, we’ll never find him!”

“Hold on,” Yugo grunted. “This is going to be a pretty rough landing.” The snowmobile shot across the treetops, crashing through the branches until it finally skidded to a stop in a snow filled clearing. The snow was piled high around the snowmobile, and it was with some difficulty that Iggy, Yugo, Sam and Gobby pushed open their doors and finally climbed out into the clearing.

On the other side of the snow-covered field, Yomama Bin Yappin was climbing slowly out of his rocket, which lay sideways against some trees. He still held the small black remote control in his hand.

Gobby and the elves scrambled across the clearing. “Stop right there, little elves,” said Yomama, waving the remote control menacingly. He pushed his thumb on one of the buttons. There was a tremendous clap of thunder and a brilliant bolt of lightning slashed into a tree at the edge of the clearing. “I mean it. I’m not afraid to use this!”

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<sup>11</sup> Footnotes are fun, don’t you think?

The elves slid to a stop. Gobby scampered ahead into the snow.

“Gobby, wait!” called Sam. But Gobby was not listening. He pulled the scimitar from his belt and swung it in circles above his head. “Hi-Yah!” he called and jumped into the air.

Yomama raised the remote control and pushed one of the buttons. Sleet tore down from the sky at Gobby, tearing at his face and arms. But still the goblin charged forward. He closed in on Yomama and the tall man picked up his walking stick to ward him away. Gobby swept at it with the scimitar, cutting it in two. Yomama looked at the piece remaining in his hand and threw it at Gobby. Gobby deflected it away with the scimitar and closed in.

Yomama pressed another button on the remote control, and hail pounded down on Gobby. Though some of the hailstones were the size of tennis balls, Gobby batted them away with the scimitar and crept tenaciously forward. Yomama backed away and jammed at the remote control again, calling back the lightning. A brilliant blue-white bolt struck the ground right beside Gobby. The goblin flew backwards through the air, landing heavily 5 or ten metres away. He struggled to his feet.

Yomama pointed the remote control at him, pressing the button again and again. Bolt after bolt of lightning crashed into the snow around Gobby. The nimble goblin danced and weaved through the white-hot lightning as it tore into the ground at his feet, but there was simply too much. Finally one bolt struck him a glancing blow and he fell into the snow. He raised his head and looked up weakly towards a place behind the elves. Iggy, Yugo and Sam looked behind them. There was nothing there.

“Master ...” whispered Gobby. “Is that you?” Then his face fell forward and he lay still.

“No!” shouted Sam. He started to charge at Yomama, but Yugo held him back.

“No, Sam, don’t. He’ll get you too.”

“It looks like I win after all,” Yomama laughed. He started to dance a little jig. “Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow,” he crooned.

“It doesn’t matter!” yelled Iggy.

Yomama looked up and cupped his hand to his ear. “What do you mean ‘it doesn’t matter?’”

Iggy shouted into the wind. “It doesn’t matter how many blizzards and how many lightning bolts you bring down from the sky. You can’t stop Christmas.”

“Of course I can!” screamed Yomama. “Look all around you. Nobody is going have Christmas in this weather. Nobody!”

“You’re wrong. Christmas doesn’t happen out here,” Iggy gestured at the woods. “Christmas doesn’t happen in the streets or in the shopping malls. Christmas happens here.” He pointed to his heart. “Christmas happens inside you. It’s that warm feeling you get beside the fire, drinking eggnog or telling Christmas stories. It’s making someone happy with a gift you chose just for them and just with them in mind.”

Yomama’s attention was focussed on Iggy. He did not notice as Sam separated slowly from the other two elves crept up towards him.

“Christmas is about laughing with your family and drinking toasts with your friends. It’s singing songs. It’s playing games. It’s waiting underneath the mistletoe for someone special to walk past.”

Yomama tried to ignore Iggy, but the elf kept talking. “And sure, Christmas is about Santa Claus, but it is so much more than that. Now, there isn’t much that Santa Claus can’t do. I doubt the worst blizzard in the world could keep him from coming. But even without him, even without Santa Claus, Christmas is going to come all the same!”

Yomama screwed up his face into a grimace of hate. “You lie!” he shouted. “You lie! There won’t be any Christmas.”

“Of course there will,” continued Iggy. “You can’t stop Christmas with a storm. It’s just like Yappin Day. You don’t believe that something as small as a snowstorm could stop Yappin Day, do you?”

Yomama’s face softened. “No. No, I suppose not. It would take more than a storm to stop that good old Yappin spirit ...” His eyes filled with a different kind of understanding. He lowered the remote control a little.

As they had been talking, Sam had crept ever closer to Yomama. The moment he saw Yomama lower the remote control, he sprang up out of the snow. His legs scissored and kicked out. “Hi-Yah!” he hollered. His foot crashed into the side of Yomama’s head. It was a brilliant high

jump kick. It could have broken a plank. Or a beam. Sam was happy to see it broke Yomama's nose.

The tall man flipped over backwards and landed with his face buried in the snow. His leg quivered and then lay still, utterly unconscious.

"Yo mama!" exclaimed Sam, rubbing his hands together. He turned to Iggy and Yugo. "I learned that move from a friend of mine." He started marching through the deep snow towards the place where Gobby had fallen.

Yugo walked over and picked up the remote control, which lay beside Yomama in the snow. He studied it for a moment and then pressed a few buttons. It only took a minute for the snow to stop falling. Soon, the clouds began to scatter and the sun shone down into the clearing. "Hmm," said Yugo, slipping the remote control into his pocket. "Something like this could come in handy sometime."

Iggy and Yugo walked through the rapidly melting snow to join Sam. The grass was burned black. Little fires still sputtered here and there. But Gobby was not there. They stayed for a time and looked around, but they could not find him.

"He must have been carried off by the storm," mumbled Yugo.

Sam scratched the blackened ground with his toe. He looked up into the clearing sky. "Wherever you are Gobby, you're a real spirit of Christmas now," he said.

Yugo placed his arm gently around Sam's shoulder. "Come on, Sam", he said. "Let's go home." The three elves turned and headed back to the snowmobile.

**H**ALLOWEEN CAME, AS IT ALWAYS DOES and children ran from door to door, collecting candy and treats. Among them, in hiding, the spirits of Halloween called upon and saw their loved ones again.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam spent Halloween at their tree house at the end of Candy Cane Lane, just up the hill from Mitten Manor<sup>®</sup> and the Frosty Playground<sup>®</sup>. They had decorated their door with a picture of a little green creature with a twisted wooden club grinning madly. It did not

seem to scare any children away from their door. Indeed, it seemed that they passed out more candy to little girl and boy elves than they ever had before.

**C**HRISTMAS CAME, AS IT ALWAYS DOES. The weather was cold, but it always is. Santa Claus completed his journey without incident. It seemed to him though that he placed a few more goblin dolls under trees and in Christmas stockings than he ever had before. Indeed, he could not remember ever handing out goblin dolls before.

**I**T WAS A WEEK AFTER CHRISTMAS and Iggy, Yugo and Sam were enjoying their much-needed post-Christmas vacation. They were lying on deck chairs on the beach just behind their tree house. The sun shone brightly in the sky. Iggy adjusted his sun umbrella and asked Sam if he needed any more sunscreen.

“I’m fine thanks Iggy,” said Sam, sipping on his iced tea and eating a hot dog. “Sure looks like a warm spring at the North Pole this year.”

A couple of robins flew by, chirping happily. “Yup,” said Yugo. “Looks like another scorcher.” He patted the little black remote control that was lying on top of his beach bag. “Honestly, I don’t see why anybody thinks that global warming is a bad thing,” he said.

Sam was reaching for another hot dog when a shadow fell across him. “Hey,” he shouted, “You’re standing in my sun!”

“Many apologies, Elf Sam,” said a cold voice, that Sam felt, rather than heard. It felt like a breath of air from out of a morgue. A chill ran down Sam’s spine. He looked up. The man beside him was very tall, and exceedingly thin. He pulled back his black hood and smiled a lipless smile.

“Yikes, what are you doing here?” gasped Sam, dropping his hot dog in the sand. The iced tea wasn’t poisonous was it?” Sam started coughing and gagging.

Grim laughed. “I assure you Sam, Iggy and Yugo, that this is purely a social call. I have no business with any of you today. In fact, according to my records, I shall not have any professional reason to call upon or visit you for many many years to come.”

Iggy stood up to shake Grim’s hand. Grim withdrew it carefully. His touch was not always the safest thing. “What brings you to our neck of the woods, Grim?” he asked.

“I have brought you a visitor,” said Grim. With that, a green figure jumped out from behind Grim’s robe.

“Gobby!” Iggy, Yugo and Sam shouted together. “But we thought you were...” Iggy looked over at Grim.

The big spectre shrugged his scapulae.<sup>12</sup> “My job is a thankless one. But sometimes you get to break few rules,” he said.

Gobby scampered around the deck chairs and suddenly leapt up onto Sam’s lap. He chattered and grinned and then looked Sam squarely in the eye.

“Boo,” he said.

Sam fainted, and everything went black.

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<sup>12</sup> Bony shoulders.