

SOUTH TO ALASKA

Views of a Cruise

Day 1 - The Gulf Islands

THE MORNING HORN WAILED THE MOURNFUL WAIL of a whale in mourning. At least, that is what Iggy thought it sounded like from his poolside seat on the Lido Deck. Sam was in the next deck chair, licking a top heavy ice cream cone. Yugo was at the railing, unpacking equipment from a large case and laying it out carefully on the deck.

A small boy with bandy legs and a big head the size and shape of a pumpkin ran past. Sam turned to look at him. A stream of melted ice cream dripped from his chin onto his bare chest and congealed in a pool at the top of his prodigious belly. "Wow, that is one funny looking kid," he said. He scooped the blob of ice cream from his belly button and slurped it from his fingers.

Iggy turned and watched the boy ramble across the tiled floor. He might have told Sam that all children were beautiful or that it is what is inside that counts, but he could not say the words. And that was because the little boy disappearing through a doorway really was a Funny Looking Kid.

This is not to say that anyone would describe Iggy, Yugo and Sam as male underwear models, for they were not. They were Christmas elves. Iggy was



slim, with dark eyes and pointed features. He had a long pointed nose, pointed ears and his dark hair stood up in points no matter how often he combed it.

Sam was shorter and heavier than Iggy, which is to say he was just a little bit shorter than Iggy, and a whole lot heavier. Where Iggy was pointed, Sam was round. His round head rested upon a round body with no obvious neck between them. He had red curly hair that framed a round face with a perpetual scowl.

Yugo rarely scowled, though you would not know that as his face was mostly hidden by his enormous black moustache. He was the handy elf, a master craftsman with quick hands and a quick wit. Yugo could build anything. He held more patents than any other elf in the world. The only things that Yugo had not invented, were things he had not thought of yet.

The three elves were toymakers, who worked in the largest toy factory in the world; Santa Claus' workshop at the North Pole. It is a big job, building billions of toys for billions of children every year, and Iggy, Yugo and Sam were enjoying the first full day of their vacation, a cruise up the Alaska coast from Vancouver to Anchorage, aboard the *Spectre*. *The Spectre* is a gigantic luxury cruise ship with room for more than 2,500 passengers on its ten decks. The *Spectre* has everything a vacationing elf could want; dozens of shops and restaurants, a spa, a mini golf course and breathtaking views of the Inside Passage off the coast of Alaska.

This is the sort of vacation that Christmas elves like best. These are people who live at the North Pole, which is just about the coldest, darkest and nastiest place on Earth.¹ A chilly Alaska evening is a day at the beach for a Christmas elf. They find an actual day at the beach to be unbearably hot.

They had arrived the day before in Yugo's snowmobile. Although it rarely snows in Vancouver, this was not a problem for Yugo's snowmobile. The snowmobile was sleek and red, with an enclosed passenger compartment. It has stubby skis on the front for driving through snow and stubby wings on the side, so that it can take to the air when there is no snow to be found. The snowmobile is powered by a small fusion reactor, instead of an engine and can travel at tremendous speeds, through wind and snow, sleet and hail, and even time itself.

Yugo eased the snowmobile into the parking lot beside the big cruise ship. The elves stepped out and walked around to the back. Yugo pressed a button on his key fob and the rear hatch lifted up on smooth hydraulics. Iggy reached in and removed a heavy gray garment bag. Sam withdrew a small fanny pack and fastened it around his capacious waist. Yugo struggled to pull out a very large brown case.

¹ The coldest place on Earth is Vostok, Antarctica, where the temperature once fell to -89.2° Celsius. With the wind chill that day, it actually felt like -138°. At those temperatures, skin freezes in under a second and the rest of you will be as solid as a frozen Christmas turkey in less than a minute. If you ever go to Vostok, be sure to take extra socks.

Iggy looked over at Sam. "Where's your suitcase?" he asked.

"Right here," said Sam, pointing at his fanny pack. "I was able to fit all of my swim suits in one bag."

Iggy shook his head. "You can't wear nothing but swimsuits," he complained.

"Just watch me," said Sam. "I'm on vacation and I can't wait to get out of these clothes." He tugged at the lapel of his red velvet jacket and stuck out his tongue.

Yugo opened the big case. It was completely empty.

Iggy's mouth hung open. "Didn't you bring anything at all?"

Sam nodded approvingly. "Wow, you pack even less than me."

Yugo smiled. He pressed another button on his key fob and the doors of the snowmobile popped right off and clattered onto the pavement. He lifted them up and laid them in the bottom of the big case. Then he removed the rear hatch and lowered it into the trunk and laid it on top of the doors. He reached up and carefully unscrewed the snowmobile's headlights, which he covered with bubble wrap before putting them in the trunk. He worked his way around the snowmobile, taking it apart quickly and setting each piece in turn into the big trunk. The satellite dish came down, followed by the rocket launchers and then the front windshield. In minutes, Yugo had completely dismantled the snowmobile and packed it away in his case. Finally, he carefully rested the chrome dual exhaust pipes on the top and closed the lid.

Yugo pulled a handle from the side of the trunk and pulled the case along behind him.

Now Sam's mouth hung open. He stood beside Iggy, their mouths opening and closing soundlessly like a pair of baby robins waiting for a worm.

"What is it?" asked Yugo. "You didn't expect me to leave her behind did you?"

Iggy and Sam both shook their heads, but their mouths continued flapping open uselessly.

Yugo marched out of the parking lot and set his trunk beside a luggage cart. He turned back and looked at the others. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Iggy and Sam followed, set their own considerable smaller cases on the luggage cart and then joined Yugo in the queue. They waited in a long line to get through customs, then another long line to get their room keys, then a third line to get their picture taken.

This was the first of dozens of souvenir pictures that would be taken of them in the following week, but it was the one that took the longest. Iggy, Yugo and Sam had joined the queue behind a group of twenty or so heavy set women, all dressed in matching brown T-shirts that exclaimed in bright yellow type that they were all members of the *Sisterhood Alaska Tour '09*. While the elves waited patiently, the Sisterhood arranged themselves into every permutation

and combination of sisters they could imagine while the weary ship photographer flashed photograph after photograph.

Finally, Iggy, Yugo and Sam were directed to stand behind a prop life preserver for their souvenir photo. It seemed a bit ominous to pose beside the one object they hoped to avoid entirely on their trip, but they grinned nonetheless when the photographer asked them to.

Their picture finally taken, they joined one last line to get on board the boat. "What do you want to do first?" asked Iggy, as he stepped from the gangway onto the enormous ship.

"I'm going to go up to the bridge and see if I can get a look at the ship's navigational systems," said Yugo.

"I'm going to find the buffet," said Sam. "Then I'm going to find the ice cream machine. After that, I think I will head back to the buffet for a while."

"How about you Iggy, what are you going to do first?" asked Yugo.

Iggy smiled and said, "I think I will just go up to the top deck and look around. Maybe I'll wave at the poor people left behind on shore."

But they did not get to do any of those things first. By the time they had wound their way through the massive ship to their little stateroom (which was on the Atlantic Deck, even though the *Spectre* would never leave the Pacific Ocean on this cruise) a whistle blew and they were summoned to their mustering station for a lifeboat drill.

As instructed, the elves rushed to the closet to retrieve their life jackets, which were packed tightly on the top shelf. For Iggy, Yugo and Sam this posed a small problem. The problem was that they were small. Iggy jumped up and tried to grab one of the straps of the life jackets which dangled from the top shelf. His pointed fingers brushed it, but he could not hold on to it.

The whistle blew again. They could hear other passengers, bustling down the hall in their life jackets. Iggy grimaced and jumped again, but the strap eluded his reach. He turned to Sam. "Can you give me a hand here?"

Sam looked at him quizzically. Then he stepped up to the closet and jumped for the strap. His feet barely left the floor and he missed the strap by nearly a metre. Still, the big ship shook a little when he landed.

"Not like that," said Iggy. "Just stand there."

Sam stood there, and Iggy climbed up onto his back. His pointed shoes sank into Sam's waist. He tried to lift his right foot to climb higher but it was stuck. He grunted and tugged at his left shoe, but it was also stuck fast.

"Help," Iggy pleaded meekly.

Yugo came up beside him and yanked on his leg. It did not budge. "Wow, that is really stuck in there," he said. Then he reached up and put his hands on Iggy's shoulders, and then pulled himself up. He hooked his toes onto Iggy's

belt and stepped up onto Iggy's waist. Then he knelt on Iggy's shoulders and reached forward to the top shelf of the closet. He pulled the black strap wrapped around the life jackets and they tumbled from the shelf to the floor, bouncing off of Sam's face on their way to the ground.

Sam stepped back in surprise and Iggy's boot suddenly came free from Sam's back with a noticeable slurping sound. He slipped and Yugo tumbled from his perch at the top of the makeshift elfish ladder. The three elves fell backward, bounced off of the adjacent wall of the tiny stateroom and landed in a red and green heap on the floor with three life jackets piled on top of them.

The whistle blew again. Iggy scrambled to his feet, grabbed his life jacket and headed to the door. Yugo and Sam were close behind him. They followed a long line of passengers to the muster station, which was an open space on the third deck near the life boats.

A crew member in a bright green hat grabbed Yugo by the arm and quickly tied a fluorescent green plastic bracelet around his wrist. "All children under 11 have to wear one of these," she explained.

"But I'm not under 11!" exclaimed Yugo. "I'm almost 400 years old! Can't you see my moustache?"

"Yes, it's just adorable," she replied. "It even looks real." She gave it a playful tug.

"Ow!" shouted Yugo. But she was not listening as she had moved on to Iggy, who she had pinned against a railing so she could fasten a bracelet to his wrist, too.

Yugo was buckling up his life jacket when Iggy and Sam joined him, rubbing their wrists. "This is so embarrassing," said Sam.

No sooner had those words escaped his mouth when things got dramatically more embarrassing. A silver haired woman walked up to them and bent over so that her face was barely an inch from Sam's nose. "Well, look at you three. Aren't you just the cutest little fellows." She gripped Sam's cheek with her fingers and pinched him.

"Ow!" shouted Sam.

"You look just like my grandchildren!" she said. She turned to the gray haired man beside her. "Don't they look like the grandkids, Abner?"

Abner shrugged. "Our granddaughters are both in their 20's, ..." he began, but the silver haired lady kept on gushing.

"And you, you are just adorable!" She pulled on Iggy's ears. "Look at those widdle diddle ears!"

"Yes, aren't they just the ickiest wickiest widdle ears ever?" said Yugo.

"They really are," she said. Then she pinched Yugo's nose. It felt a little like that time it had been caught in the atomic vice at his work bench.

"And just look at your little matching outfits," she said. "Aren't those just the sweetest little matching outfits, ever. Don't they look like the kids did in their matching outfits, Abner?"

Abner stared hard at the elves. "I don't think our kids ever wore red and green velour coats," said Abner.

"Of course they did," she said. "Now take a photo." Abner sighed, then pulled a heavy camera from a leather bag and took a picture. "Take another one," she commanded, "I think my eyes were closed." She wrapped her arms around the three elves and grinned.

Finally, the ship's whistle blew again and the elves could take off their life jackets and return to their rooms, their wrists raw and their cheeks burning. "I'll be looking out for you boys," she called after them. "We're all going to be best friends on this trip!"

That was yesterday. Now, as they lay under the bright morning sun on the Lido Deck, the abuse they had suffered under the pinching and poking hands of BF Grandma was just a pinching, poking memory. Iggy was working on his postcards. Sam, dressed only in a tight green velvet Speedo, was working on his fifth ice cream cone of the morning.

"Isn't this place great?" Everything is free." Sam picked up a tall drink in a souvenir glass. There was nearly a pound of fruit speared with a long wooden skewer floating on top and a real umbrella in the glass. "You'd pay \$50 for a drink like this at home. But here, you just show the waiter your room key and he brings it right to you."

Iggy's eyes widened. "How many of those have you had?" he asked.

"Seven."

The morning horn wailed again. A tiny, tinny voice announced that a humpback whale had been sighted on the starboard² side of the boat. Iggy leapt to his feet and ran to the rail, where a crowd of people had gathered to peer at the sea in the hope of seeing a whale in the distance.

Sam slurped on his ice cream cone while Yugo finished unpacking his case. He was surrounded by an array of dozens of black and silver parts. He picked up one piece that looked a bit like a shining toilet brush and pressed it into another part that vaguely resembled a three handled hair dryer. Then he took the bit with the four squiggly wires sticking out of it and plugged each wire to another bit that had three squiggly wires sticking from it. He plugged the fourth wire into a sort of plunger and then shoehorned the whole works into a little black box.

² "Starboard" is the nautical term used to refer to the right side of a boat, as perceived by a person facing the bow. "Bow" is the nautical term used to refer to the front of the ship. Why people on boats do not use simple terms like "right" or "front" is a mystery as old as the sea.

He picked up the contraption, then lowered it over the port³ rail by a long cable. Once it reached the water, Yugo took a set of headphones that was attached to the other end of the cable and placed them over his ears. He listened for a moment and then waved to Sam to come over and join him.

The portly elf downed the rest of his ice cream cone in a single gulp, winced for a moment from a pain behind his eyes that was both burning and freezing at the same time, and then shuffled over to join Yugo.

"Here, listen to this," said Yugo. He passed the headphones to Sam. He placed them over his ears, grateful for the warmth they provided to his chilled brain. He heard a few chirps and a low whistle.

Sam shrugged. "What is it?"

Yugo smiled. "Everyone is looking for whales by the starboard side. But that's not where they are. Look over there." Yugo pointed to a spot a hundred metres from the port rail. Suddenly, two humpback whales breached the surface of the ocean, rolled in the air and fell back onto the water with an enormous splash. With all of the other passengers on the other side of the ship, Yugo and Sam were the only ones to see them.

Sam let out a low whoop. "That was incredible!" he said. "How did you know that would happen?"

"I heard them on this," Yugo patted the headset. "I call it the Cetacean Location Creation™. If you listen carefully, you can hear exactly where the whales are and exactly where they are going. He listened for a moment, and then pointed, sternly, towards the stern of the boat. A moment later, a whale's tale broke the surface. It flapped twice in their direction, before disappearing back into the sea.



"That is awesome!" said Sam. Iggy rejoined them at that point, shaking his head.

"There was nothing there," he said.

"You have to try this Incubation Inflation Cremation^{NOT}™ thingammy that Yugo built," he said. He slammed the headphones over Iggy's pointed ears. He took the control box from Yugo and spun the dial to its highest setting.

³ "Port" is the word sailors use when they mean the left side of the boat. However, a boat will not always be docked with the port on the left side. Sometimes the port is on the starboard side. This leads sailors to say confusing things like "That's right, when we left port, the port was starboard."



"Hear anything, yet?" he asked eagerly.

Iggy frowned. Then he said, "I can hear something, but I don't think it is a whale." He held out the headphones and the three elves crowded around them to listen.

What they heard was not whales at all, it was people. The voices were muffled and indistinct. It was not clear if they were the voices of men or women, or how many different voices there were, but the meaning quickly became clear.

Is everything is in place? said the first voice.

Very nearly, came the reply. *The antimagicon is all on board.*

Will it be enough?

Yes. Five hundred pounds of antimagicon, just as we planned.

Five hundred pounds of antimagicon should be more than enough to destroy the entire North Pole.

All of the workshops? The reindeer? Santa Claus?

Everything.

We still need a few supplies, but the dogs are ready.

Good. We will load it onto the sled once we reach our final port.

Don't you mean starboard? There was a lengthy pause that sounded like someone being glared at.

From there it is a short journey to the North Pole. It will all be gone long before Christmas.

Excellent.

Yugo lowered the headphones and stared at Iggy. Iggy stared at Sam, who stared back at Iggy, before he turned and stared at Yugo, who was staring back at Sam before turning once more to stare at Iggy.

"Who was that?" asked Iggy.

Yugo shrugged. "Impossible to say. Somewhere inside the cruise ship, that's for certain, but I have no idea where."

"Whoever they are, they mean to destroy the North Pole," said Sam.

"It's worse than that," said Yugo. "They've got antimagicon, and lots of it."

"What is that?" asked Iggy.

Yugo sighed. "It is just about the worst thing there is. The North Pole runs on magic -- Christmas magic. It keeps the workshop lit up and running. It makes the reindeer fly. But like everything else in the universe, Christmas magic is balanced by stuff that is just the opposite of that. Particles of negative magical energy called antimagicon. It was discovered by an elf named Rongo. He

wanted to use it in the toy shop but it was far too dangerous. When Santa Claus discovered what he was up to, he forced Rongo to leave the North Pole."

"What's so dangerous about it?" asked Sam.

"Magic and anti-magic can't exist in the same place. The antimagicon absorbs and consumes any magic in the area. If that much antimagicon ever reached the North Pole, it would destroy all the Christmas magic in the area for thousands of years. There would be no North Pole anymore."

"And with no North Pole ... " began Sam.

" ... there will be no Christmas," finished Yugo.

Iggy's face grew dark. "We have to stop them," he said.

Yugo nodded. "I'm afraid so. We're going to have to save Christmas."

"It's what we do," agreed Iggy.

"But we're supposed to be on vacation," whined Sam.

THERE WERE THREE QUIET AND THOUGHTFUL ELVES that made their way through the big cruise ship to the dining room that evening. Along the way they walked through the ship's photo gallery. All of the photographs that had been taken of the passengers before they embarked onto the ship were arrayed on racks. They took a few minutes to find their picture. While they were looking for it they saw countless pictures of the Sisterhood in their various arrangements. They saw a picture of their BF Grandma and one of the Funny Looking Kid, grinning at the camera with his monkey smile.

The likenesses of hundreds of other passengers were spread out in the photographs. Two things occurred to Iggy as he scanned through them. First, it occurred to him that their fellow passengers were a singularly unattractive group. There was a picture of a man with an extraordinarily bad toupee that seemed to be sliding off of the side of his head. Another photo depicted a woman with short dark hair who might have been a man or perhaps it was a man who might have been a woman. Iggy could not tell for sure. For the most part, the images reminded him of the 'before' pictures in either an advertisement for a weight loss product or for plastic surgery.

The other thing that occurred to him was that somewhere in all of these pictures was a snapshot of the passenger who was scheming to destroy the North Pole with hundreds of pounds of antimagicon. It could be any of them. It could be *all* of them for all they knew. Iggy, Yugo and Sam had only one week to find the right passengers and put an end to the plot.

With that sobering thought, the three elves made their way into the dining room. In spite of everything, they enjoyed their meal immensely. They shared

a table with a delightful couple who spoke to each other in Polish throughout the meal. They did not realize that the elves, who spent their whole lives building toys for children everywhere, were fluent in most of world's major languages and understood every word they said.

Sam could not decide which of the entrees he preferred, so he ordered all of them. It was one of the best meals he ever ate.

Day 2 - Ketchikan

IGGY ROSE EARLY THE NEXT MORNING. He wanted to get his morning workout in before breakfast. He sat on the edge of his little bunk while he slipped on his pointy toed trainers and his red velvet wrist bands. He checked his stopwatch then slipped out of the room.

He climbed up five flights of stairs to the Promenade Deck at the top of the boat. The sky was overcast and gray. The boat had reached their first port, the little town of Ketchikan, Alaska, sometime in the night.

Ketchikan sits on Revillagigedo Island at the southernmost tip of the Alaska panhandle. It is home to perhaps 10,000 people and about 500 souvenir shops that line the streets near the cruise ship docks. There were shops that sold T-shirts and caps and little Alaskan flags. There were shops that sold cards and pictures and toys. There were shops that sold jade and gold and gemstones. Iggy watched a shop keeper set a rack of postcards outside his door. Iggy did not know what the word 'Ketchikan' meant, but he wondered if it was not a native word for 'cheesy gift shops'.⁴



⁴ 'Ketchikan' is really a Tlingit word that means 'salmon creek'. There is a creek in Ketchikan where the salmon come to spawn every summer. That is probably what the Tlingit had in mind when they named the town.

While Ketchikan's principal industry appears to be the sale of T-shirts and diamonds, it is also a fishing town and boasts of being the 'Salmon Capital of the World'. It also boasts of being the home of the largest collection of standing totem poles in the world. Quite a place, is Ketchikan.

Iggy jogged in place for a few moments and then started running down the deck. There were other joggers out there and they waved at Iggy as he passed them. At the end of the first lap, he passed a tall middle aged fellow in a black long sleeved shirt. He was breathing heavily and seemed to be in a good deal of pain, but he kept running along anyway.

Iggy passed him again on his fourth lap of the ship and once more on his sixth trip around. After that the tall man seemed to have given up. Iggy ran on for another 15 laps before heading back down to the little stateroom on the inaptly named Atlantic Deck.

Yugo and Sam were out of bed when he got back to the room. Yugo was reading an engineering manual on their little balcony while Sam studied the room service menu. They decided to head up to the buffet for breakfast.

Iggy filled his plate with fruit and a small pastry. Yugo had bacon and eggs and a large mug of coffee. They walked through the restaurant together, and looked for a table by the window. Iggy saw the Tall Middle Aged Guy he had met on the Promenade Deck. He was still red faced and panting. He sat across the table from a slim teenage girl with long blond hair. He said something to her and she lowered her forehead into the palm of her hand.

They reached a table at the end of the row beside a window. A line of seaplanes was gliding over the little harbour that led into Ketchikan. They had nearly finished their modest meals when Sam arrived, with six full plates spread over his outstretched arms. He settled carefully into the chair at the end of the table and spread out his breakfast dishes in a long row.

Sam licked his lips and said, "Isn't this great? I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither have I," said Yugo, staring at the mounds of food arrayed in front of Sam.

"What is that on your sausages?" asked Iggy. He pointed to a gray heap on the third plate.

"Sausage gravy," replied Sam. He pushed a dribbling sausage into his mouth and slurped the gray gravy from it.

"That's disgusting," said Yugo.

"It's really tasty," said Sam. He flipped a gooey sausage onto Yugo's plate. "You should try it."

Yugo turned a little pale and pushed the plate away. "No thanks," he said.

Sam picked up the sausage and waved it in Yugo's direction. "Would you like it on a boat?" he asked. "Would you like it with a goat?"



"Knock it off, Sam," Iggy said seriously. "We only have a week to figure out who is behind this plot. How are we going to do that?"

Yugo sipped his coffee and answered, "I think we should go into town."

"Leave the boat?" asked Iggy. "But why?"

"That is where all the passengers are going. Whoever is behind this scheme is out there somewhere. We won't find them sitting on the ship when they aren't even here. And besides," added Yugo, "they said they still needed a few supplies for their plan. Furry hats, snow shoes, that sort of thing. This city is full of shops that sell that stuff. Let's get out there and see who is stockpiling winter gear."

Sam grunted and swallowed another sausage. He wiped a dribble of gravy from his chin and then said, "what are we waiting for? Let's get shopping."



HEY MET TEN MINUTES LATER AT THE TOP of the gangway. Iggy wore his walking boots; the ones with the pointy toes with the little jingle bells on the end. Yugo carried a small knapsack over one shoulder, with a few small devices he brought along 'in case of emergency.' Sam clutched a thick coupon book in one hand and a thick slice of pizza in the other.

Iggy and Yugo stepped out onto the gangway, but Sam was stopped at the security desk by a tall dark haired man in a navy blue uniform. "I'm sorry sir," he explained, "but you can't take any food off of the ship."

Sam stood dumbfounded. He looked down at the pizza slice in his hand longingly.

"You can just throw it in the bin," said the uniformed security man. "There's plenty more where that came from."

Sam looked up, his eyes watering. "But it's so delicious!" he pleaded. Then he stood there and ate his pizza as dozens of other passengers queued up behind him.

"Come on Sam, hurry up," called Iggy.

Sam shoved the last bit of crust into his mouth, burped and followed the others down the metal gangway. At the bottom, they had their pictures taken in front of a sign that read 'Ketchikan - Salmon Capital of the World!', then another picture with a crew member dressed in a furry moose suit.

"That's a keeper!" the photographer exclaimed proudly.

The elves crossed a wooden boardwalk and entered the first shop they found on Front Street. "Remember, we're looking for a passenger who is buying a lot of winter goods," said Yugo.

Sam leafed through his coupon book. "You guys keep your eyes open," he said. "I have a coupon that will get me a free bookmark in this shop." Sam shoved his way through the crowd to the cashier's desk and slapped his coupon on the counter.

Iggy and Yugo strained to spot someone acting suspiciously, but the crowd was so thick and so much taller than them that they could not see anything. It seemed that every passenger on their ship, and every other ship in port, was shopping that day. They were buying everything they could lay their hands on: winter hats, tins of salmon, jade carvings and hundreds of T-shirts. The Man With The Bad Toupee was there, buying a bright orange sweater with a moose on it. In the line behind him, the Woman Who Might Be A Man was waiting with a matching hat and scarf in her or his hand. Every passenger they saw looked to be outfitting themselves for an Arctic expedition.

It was the same story in the next shop. Sam presented a coupon for a free train whistle, while Iggy and Yugo tried to sort out which passengers were innocent souvenir shoppers and which were involved in a nefarious conspiracy to destroy Christmas. They found it very difficult to tell one from the other.

They passed an outdoor theatre where a teams of burly lumberjacks threw axes and chainsaws at each other to the hoots and cheers of a delighted crowd. Sam cashed in a coupon for a novelty wooden axe at the gift shop.

From there, they wound their way up to Creek Street, where the shops hung out over the edge of a creek and they found more passengers unburdening the shelves of sweatshirts, caps and cheap jewellery. Sam was able to acquire a set of free coasters in exchange for another four coupons.

At the end of Creek Street they turned onto Dock Street, but it did not take them back to the dock as they had hoped. It led them to Edmonds Street, which became a wooden staircase that was still named Edmonds Street. They marched up the stairs to where they intersected with another wooden staircase that rose up the hill perpendicular to them. This staircase was called Washburn Street, and climbed even higher to their left. They continued up the staircase that was Edmonds Street until they finally reached pavement again.



They realized they were getting closer to the ship when they found some more shops, teeming with passengers. There were lots of familiar faces there: they saw BF Grandma shopping for tanzanite rings and the Funny Looking Kid running through a store with a fur trapper hat perched on his pumpkin shaped head. But, just as before, there was no way to discern the bad guys from the good. They all had the same armfuls of things and they all followed Sam to each cash register to present their coupons for even more things.

They were no closer to finding any answers by the time they reached the ship a few hours later. Sam was the last to reach the top of the gangway. He was slowed down by the weight of his big red shopping bag with Tongass⁵ Trading Co. emblazoned on the side. His coupon book was empty, but the bag was stuffed full of free caps, jewellery, an ulu,⁶ a jade bear and a T-shirt that said 'Coldest State - Hottest Governor'. He had traded his last coupon in his book for the bag itself.

It took all three of them to push Sam's red bag through their narrow stateroom door. Yugo squeezed past the bag, then collapsed onto his little bed and sighed.

"It's hopeless," he said. "There are just too many of them. We'll never figure out which passengers are behind the plot."

Iggy just smiled and said, "don't give up hope. We still have a few days and a few more stops to sort this out. We'll find them." Iggy never lost hope. He was a relentless optimist who could find hope in the most hopeless of lost causes. He held onto hope as if it had handles.

"I hope you're right," said Yugo.

Sam pulled a charm bracelet from his bag and held it up to the light. He had cashed in eight coupons in eight different shops to complete it. He set it down carefully on his nightstand.

Iggy checked his watch. "Wow, look at the time. We have to get ready for dinner."

It was formal night on the ship; all of the passengers were expected to dress in their best clothes for dinner. Iggy, Yugo and Sam slipped into their tuxedos. Iggy and Yugo wore green velvet jackets with tails and pressed green pants with a satin red stripe down the side. Sam's tuxedo was made of red velvet and he finished the look with a red bow tie with polar bears on it that he had received in exchange for a coupon in a shop on Water Street.

⁵ At first blush, a word like 'Tongass' will make you blush, since it sounds like something wildly vulgar. It is however the local word for Sea Lion People, who are the local people. Just be careful how you say it when you are not with the locals.

⁶ The ulu is a traditional knife with a rounded blade used by indigenous Arctic people for cutting virtually everything: food, cloth, hair, and even blocks of ice for building igloos. Think of it as the Slap-Chop™ of the North.

They made their way through the main lobby towards the dining room. The real reason the cruise line scheduled formal night soon became apparent. It was not simply to create an elegant experience in the dining room, but to give the ubiquitous ship photographers a chance to take even more pictures of the passengers.

The elves joined one of the lines to get their picture taken by a piano. There was an older woman there having her photo shot with a rose in her teeth. She was wearing a long white dress with a jaunty white bowler hat. The photographer snapped off a few frames and then she slipped behind the piano. They heard her grunt a couple of times and then she reappeared, dressed in a long sequined black gown with a thick white belt. Her silver hair was covered in a jewelled skull cap. She lay across the top of the piano, with one knee raised and the rose once again firmly clenched in her teeth.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam waited while she slipped into a short pink silk dress with a matching pink turban.

"How many outfits does she have?" muttered Sam. Iggy just shrugged.

A tall woman beside him leaned down and whispered, "Mother just loves her clothes. I hope you're not in too much of a hurry." Sam shifted uncomfortably in his tuxedo while Fashion Mother changed into a deep purple business suit with matching purple fedora, a yellow dress with a maroon cape draped over one shoulder and a red dress with a shockingly low neckline that revealed far more cleavage than any of the elves had ever wished to see.

Once they had their pictures taken, the elves went to the dining room and were led to their table by a waiter dressed in a dark black dinner jacket. He laid their napkins on their laps as Iggy and Yugo studied the menu. Sam only glanced at it briefly, he already knew that he was going to order one of everything.

"I'll have one of everything," he heard someone else say. He turned his head and that was when he saw Her; a stranger across a crowded room. She sat three tables away, with four plates of food arrayed in front of Her and the table cloth tucked under her triple chin. Sam had never seen anyone like Her. She was a vision wrapped in an acre of black taffeta. She was as wide as the table itself and had curves and lumps everywhere. Her curves had lumps and her lumps had curves. Sam found her entrancing.

Iggy and Yugo followed Sam's gaze across the room. There was an enormous woman there wearing a black dress with enough material in it to make an awning. She smiled at them and lifted a heaping forkful of melted chocolate cake into her mouth.

Sam just stared at Her, as he absent-mindedly pushed his own melted chocolate cake into his mouth. He felt a rustling in his chest. It was like nothing he had ever felt before. He had experienced the not inconsiderable

expansion of various body parts before, but this was the first time that he felt that his heart might be swelling.

"I think I'm in love," he whispered. Iggy and Yugo looked at each other and grinned.

Sam finished his melted chocolate cake. He liked it so well, that he ordered another and ate it as he watched the wide woman in the black dress get up from dinner and waddle out of the dining room. It was one of the best meals he ever ate.

Day 3 - Juneau

THE *SPECTRE* CRUISED INTO THE QUIET PORT of Juneau while Iggy finished his morning run around the Promenade Deck. Juneau is the capital city of Alaska, but it is still a relatively small town which is entirely surrounded by mountains and the ocean. Because of this, there is no road to Juneau. The only road out leads to the Mendenhall Glacier⁷ a few miles to the north and the only road in is the one back from the Mendenhall Glacier to the north. Since there are no roads, only things with feathers or fins can get into and out of Juneau. That, and things standing on the top level of a very large cruise ship.

Iggy checked his wristwatch: 22 laps around the ship in a little over 27 minutes. "A little slow this morning," he clucked to himself.⁸ There was a sound of heavy footsteps and Iggy looked up as the Tall Middle Aged Guy in the black long sleeved shirt thumped past him on his own morning run, huffing and gasping for air as he went by. "Oh well, at least I'm not as slow as that guy," Iggy mused.

He wiped his brow with a red velvet wrist band with little bells on it and headed down to the Lido Deck, where Yugo and Sam were eating breakfast. Yugo had a cup of coffee and a Danish. Sam's more substantial breakfast was spread

⁷ Mendenhall Glacier is a 12 mile long chunk of blue ice that terminates at Mendenhall Lake, just down the hill from the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor's Centre. Other things named after Thomas Corwin Mendenhall include the Mendenhall Laboratory at the Ohio State University and the Mendenhall, a popular sandwich made with ham and fish.

⁸ The world record for running 22 times around the top of a cruise ship is 26:17.53, held by the great Ethiopian runner, Kenenisa Bekele. Mr. Bekele also holds the record for the 11 lap run and is the reigning Olympic gold medal champion in both events. Iggy's disappointing time would have been good enough to earn the bronze medal at the Beijing Olympics. Unfortunately for Iggy, elves have never been eligible to compete in the Olympic games. The exclusion of elves from international competition is shameful speciesism of the worst kind. The International Olympic Committee really ought to do something about it.

out in front of him on three plastic buffet trays. Iggy selected a fruit cup and a large cup of juice then sat down beside them.

"Things didn't work out so well for us yesterday," began Iggy.

Sam looked up from his breakfast, and said, "what are you talking about? I got a whole bag full of stuff and it didn't cost me a thing!" He dipped a sausage in a puddle of gray sausage gravy to emphasize his point.

"What Iggy means is that we are no closer to finding out who is behind the plot to destroy the North Pole," said Yugo.

"We need to find a clue," said Iggy.

"Where should we look?" asked Yugo. "We tried everything yesterday. If there were a store for clues, Sam would have surely found it by now."

"Laugh all you like," said Sam. "But I do, in fact, have a clue." Iggy and Yugo turned at Sam. The portly elf slurped down another gravy laden sausage before he continued. "These guys are carrying enough antimagicon to level the North Pole, but it won't do them any good just sitting in a big box. They have to spread it around somehow. The best way to do that would be to blow the whole thing up."

Yugo tugged the end of his moustache gently. "You're right Sam. They will need to disperse the antimagicon over a large area. They are going to need blasting caps or maybe even dynamite."

"And Juneau is an old mining town,⁹" said Sam. "Just the place for a bad guy in search of explosives."

"So, instead of following every passenger into every shop to see if they buy woolly socks," mused Yugo, as he tugged his moustache a little harder, "we just need to see who might be in the market for trinitrotoluene, or the like."

"Trinitrotoluene?" asked Iggy.

"Good old fashioned TNT," said Yugo.

Sam finished off his last pancake, pushed his chair back and stood up. "Come on, let's go find us some bad guys."

The elves hurried off the ship, pausing only to have their picture taken with a man in a furry killer whale suit, before they made their way down South Franklin Street toward the Juneau Miner's Emporium and Bait Shop. There

⁹ Juneau was founded by a Canadian prospector named Joe Juneau, who discovered gold there in 1880. Founding towns was something of a family business for the Juneaus. Joe's uncle, Solomon Juneau founded a city on the Milwaukee River that he called Juneautown, but some other bright guys later renamed it Milwaukee. Joe did not make the same mistake his uncle made; he not only named the town Juneau, he also named the nearest river the Juneau River, just in case somebody came along later and got some bright ideas about renaming the place. True story.

were other passengers milling about and Sam cashed in a coupon for a free gold nugget made from genuine pyrite.

The cashier passed him his nugget in a green bag and Sam asked, as nonchalantly as he was able, where he might find a little trinidadandtobago.

"Pardon me?" asked the cashier.

"Excuse my friend," interjected Iggy. "He is looking for some trinitrophenyl."

The cashier shook her head. "This is not that kind of shop," she said.

Yugo elbowed his way in front of his colleagues. "What my friends really need is some trinitrotoluene. Would you have any of that we could purchase?"

"You mean TNT?" said the cashier. She inflated a large gum bubble. "Why didn't you say so? We got lots of that stuff. I assume that you have your mining permit and explosives license with you?" The large bubble exploded as if it were filled with trinitrotoluene itself. The cashier slurped the deflated mass back into her mouth and smiled.

Yugo coughed gently and patted his pockets. "I seem to have left them in my other overalls," he explained. Then he led the other two out to the sidewalk in front of the shop.

"What did I tell you?" said Sam. "The only people who are picking up any TNT today are miners and bad guys. This will be like shooting pigs in a barrel."

"Don't you mean fish in a barrel?" asked Iggy.

Sam shook his head. "I've never tried that. I don't particularly care for seafood."

The elves paced the sidewalk for a couple of hours, but did not see anyone buying any TNT. Finally, Sam said, "We've been standing here forever. Nobody has come out with any TNT or dynamite at all."

"Not even a firecracker," nodded Iggy in agreement.

Yugo went pale. "Oh no," he muttered.

"What is it?" asked Iggy.

"We've been looking in the wrong place. Nobody can get TNT onto the ship. The security is too tight," said Yugo.

"So what are they going to use to scatter the antimagicon?" asked Sam.

"Something small enough to sneak on board, but which can still give off a big bang," said Yugo.

"You mean firecrackers?" asked Iggy.

"Exactly," said Yugo. "We shouldn't be looking for them in a mining shop. We need to find a joke shop." He pulled a map from his pocket and spread it on

the ground. He stabbed his finger at a spot on North Franklin Street. "There," he said.

Sam peered closer and read, "Vicky's Joke Shop?"

"It's the only one in town. Let's go." Yugo folded up his map and led Iggy and Yugo through town. They worked their way up a hill, then turned down Calhoun Street. They reached a large plantation style house that looked out of place among the other smaller bungalows on the block. There was a big backyard surrounded by a low white picket fence, with a trampoline in one corner.



Iggy hopped over the fence. "Keep a lookout!" he shouted. He did a somersault onto the trampoline and then started bouncing up and down.

"What are you doing, Iggy?" shouted Yugo.

"I just can't resist a trampoline," Iggy shouted back. He did a high double back flip, and got his feet back under him just as he reached the trampoline again, then shot back up into the air.

Sam turned and looked at a plaque mounted on a marble block in front of the big house. "I don't think this is a good idea," said Sam. "In fact, I think this is a really bad idea. This is the Governor's House."

"Time to go," Yugo called to Iggy. At that moment, three extra large men dressed in matching extra large black suits burst out of the back door and charged across the yard towards Iggy.



"Freeze!" shouted the first dark suited man.

"On your knees!" shouted the second dark suited man.

The third man just spoke into his jacket cuff for some reason.

Iggy took another bounce, but this time he launched himself back over the picket fence. He did another long, slow somersault in the air and stuck the landing beside Yugo and Sam. "We better get out of here!" he said and ran down the hill.

Yugo and Sam ran alongside him, with the three black suited men behind them. The elves quickly outpaced their pursuers, with Sam leading the way. Sam is the most experienced of the three elves at running away from things and is surprisingly fast in spite of his weight. They hurdled a low fence and then ran up another street before turning a corner, and sprinting down a narrow alley.

They could no longer see their pursuers and they jogged to a stop. "What was that all about?" asked Yugo.

"I don't know what came over me," said Iggy. "I just felt like going rogue all of a sudden. Must be something about this place."

Sam coughed. "Did you see those guys? I thought they would all have heart attacks trying to run and talk into their sleeves at the same time."

Iggy and Yugo laughed at that, and they were still laughing when they stepped through the door of Vicky's Joke Shop a few minutes later. A sharp looking woman sat at a desk at the back and glared at them. Sharply.

"Hey, keep it down," she barked at the three elves. "This is a proper joke shop. No laughing allowed." She pointed to a sign above her cash register. It said:

<p>Do Not Touch The Merchandise</p> <p>You Break it, You Bought It</p> <p>No Smiling or Laughing Permitted</p>
--

Iggy, Yugo and Sam stopped laughing at once.

"And I don't much like having kids in here, so no loitering," added Vicky.

"But we're not kids ... " began Sam. Vicky silenced him with a glare so sharp that it could drill through a brick wall.

The elves stepped back and walked carefully around the joyless little joke shop, but they did not see any firecrackers. There was artificial vomit, novelty gum that tasted like garlic and perhaps thirty different items that would deliver an electric shock to an unsuspecting victim, but there were no firecrackers.

Iggy leaned over Vicky's desk. He coughed gently, but she did not raise her head or acknowledge him in any way. He coughed a little more loudly, but there was still no reaction.

On the other side of the shop, Sam squeezed a whoopie cushion. It gave out a long bass flatulent.

Vicky looked, sharply, and shouted "put that down at once. Can't you read?" She extended a long knobbly finger at her sign.

Yugo smiled and said, "you wouldn't by any chance have any firecrackers or other small exploding novelties in stock, would you?" He twinkled his eyes her way and gave his moustache a rakish twirl.

Vicky was entirely unfazed by Yugo's charms. "No," she snapped. "Some kid was just in here and bought them all. Now get out."

Iggy gulped. Yugo swallowed hard and Sam choked a bit. They backed slowly out of the shop, taking care not to ring the little bell that hung from the door as they opened it.

Iggy shook his head. "Some kid bought all the fireworks."

"That's no help at all," said Yugo.

"Another dead end," said Sam.

They worked their way back to the ship. It was another dead end. Their cruise was nearly halfway done and they were no closer to finding out who was scheming to destroy the North Pole than they were when they first learned of the plot.

They wandered down a line of shops near the docks. Iggy picked up a sweatband that said 'Juneau What I Mean?' Yugo found an overpriced refrigerator magnet that celebrated Alaska's 50th year of statehood and Sam stopped to get some pizza flavoured fudge.

They had just reached the top of the gangway with their little purchases when they heard some shouting from the dock below.

"There they are!"

Iggy, Yugo and Sam turned and saw three large men in dark suits running towards the ship. Two of them were speaking into their jacket cuffs as they ran.

The elves squeezed to the front of the line of passengers were getting back on the ship. Yugo's refrigerator magnet set off the metal detector at the security desk and he had to step out and go through it again. He made it through just as the first of the burly black suited men reached security.





Red lights flashed and a siren rang as he stepped through the metal detector. Two security officers leapt on him and threw him to the ground. They pulled a gun from his belt, and removed another that was tucked in his right sock.

Three other security officers jumped on the other black suited men as they tried to step onto the ship. In a moment they were all laid out in a row, with their wrists tightly strapped behind their backs with plastic handcuffs.

"Put them in the brig," said one of the security officers, who had a shining gold badge with three glittering stars on his jacket. "We'll let the Captain figure out what to do with them later."

The three black suited men were led roughly across the lobby and then disappeared down the stairs.

Sam checked his watch. "Time for dinner, I think," he said.

They reached their usual table and Sam ordered the chicken, the pheasant, the open faced buffalo sandwich and a side dish of salmon with extra tartar sauce. He finished it off with a double helping of the melted chocolate cake and low fat ice cream. It was one of the best meals he ever ate.

An old man at a nearby table waved at one of the hostesses as she passed by. She wore a blue uniform with a short skirt. She smiled as the old man asked if she would pose for a picture with him. He stood with his arm around her and his wife raised her camera. As she fidgeted with the focus, Iggy watched in horror as the old man slowly lowered his hand down the young hostess' back and rested it on her buttocks. He held it there for a long time while his wife took picture after picture.

And She was there again, dressed in a flowered yellow blouse that could have served as a dust cover for a Ford Pinto. She ordered two helpings of pheasant, a turkey leg, lamb meat loaf and followed it all with a baked Alaska covered in little cubes of candied rutabagas.

Sam stared at Her between mouthfuls. How the sweat on Her cheeks sparkled when She chewed, he thought. She scooped up a final mouthful of baked Alaska and swallowed it in a single bite. Then She wiped the corner of Her mouth with a corner of the table cloth and left the room.

Sam crept out of the dining room after Her. She took the elevator down one floor and then walked down the narrow hall before She squeezed through the narrow door of room 4-133. Sam slipped up to the door as it closed. He stood there for a moment, and then he reached into his pocket.

He drew out a heavy gold bracelet, with the charms he had collected at eight different shops with eight different coupons. He draped it carefully over the door handle and then quietly scampered away.

Day 4 - Skagway

THE *SPECTRE* WAS ALREADY DOCKED IN SKAGWAY when the elves got out of bed the next morning. Skagway is a little tourist town surrounded by snow peaked mountains, fields that glow pink in the spring with blooms of Alaska fireweed and rivers that turn red in the summer when the salmon run. The main street that runs through the middle of the town is called Broadway, and the narrow road two blocks to the north is called Main Street. Most of Broadway is part of the Klondike Gold Rush National Park, and has been restored to its late 19th century appearance. There is a boardwalk that lines either side of the road and each of the wooden sided buildings looks just like it did when Soapy Smith ran the Soap Swindle with his Soap Gang out of Jeff Smith's Saloon in 1897.



Skagway also lays claim to the world record for most people tossing eggs at the same time (1162), which happened on Broadway on July 4, 2008.¹⁰

On the side of cliff beside the pier are dozens of paintings that commemorate the first arrival of each cruise ship that has reached Skagway. Some of them are hundreds of feet from the ground. Iggy started his morning run by

¹⁰ I swear that I did not make that up.

watching two members of the crew climb up the side of the cliff to touch up the painting that honoured the inaugural visit of the *Spectre* in 2005.

Iggy joined Yugo and Sam at their usual breakfast table. "I've got a plan," he announced, as he sat down with his usual fruit cup and fruit juice (also in a cup). "I'm sure this one will work."

"It can't be any worse than my plan was," muttered Yugo into his coffee.

"Or mine," said Sam, pouring sausage gravy from a pitcher onto a plate of eggs Benedict. "Both of those plans were terrible. They got us nowhere."

Iggy pulled a pamphlet from his fanny pack and spread it open on the table before the others. "Look at this," he said.

Yugo and Sam looked at that. A picture of a grinning husky looked back at them.

"It's a dog," said Sam.

"It's a sled dog," Iggy corrected him.

"I sit corrected," said Sam, shifting in his chair. "It is indeed a sled dog."

"It's more than that, Sam," said Iggy. He read the stylized type under the dog's grinning face:

Tour the MUSHYER'S COUNTRY!
See Real Sled Dogs!
Ride on a Real Dog Sled!
Excitement and Adventures For the Whole Family!

said Iggy.

"A dog sled tour?" asked Sam. "That's your excellent plan?"

"I think it's a brilliant plan," said Yugo. Iggy smiled. "The plotters spoke about dogs and a sled. They must be planning to move the antimagicon from the ship to the North Pole by dog sled. They are probably on this very tour."

"Exactly," said Iggy. "We go on the tour and see what other passengers show up. Then we'll have them!"

"And we'll get to see the sled dogs," said Yugo. He held up the pamphlet and pointed at the husky on the cover. "Isn't he cute?" he asked to no one in particular. "Yes, you are. You are just a cutie patootie," he answered, again to no particular body.

They went back to their room and changed into their best dog sledding clothes. They hurried off the ship, but were stopped at the bottom of the gangway to have their picture taken with somebody dressed in a furry bald eagle costume.

It was a short walk into town. Each building they passed appeared to be an historic site of some sort. By all appearances, the Klondike Gold Rush was still rushing in Skagway. Sam stopped for a halibut burger at the Sweet Tooth Cafe and then stopped again for an dish of peppermint and eggnog ice cream at the Kone Kompany.

Iggy stared at his watch impatiently as Sam paused for a tall pint of Klondike Gold™ at the Skagway Brewing Company. "Hurry up, Sam," he said. The tour leaves in twenty minutes."

"Oh, we have plenty of time," said Sam, and he ordered another. Yugo shrugged and asked for a pint of Prospector Pale Ale™. Iggy sighed and ordered a small diet root beer. They finished their drinks and stepped out onto the boardwalk, just as a white tour bus with paw prints painted across its hood and doors pulled up. The elves climbed inside and walked to the back of the bus.

It was filled with other passengers from their ship. BF Grandma was there; she winked at the elves as they passed her on their way to the back of the bus. The Dirty Old Man from the dining room was there and so was Fashion Mother, dressed in a tasteful set of tawny jodhpurs with a matching jacket and a pith helmet with a dark brown silk band wrapped around it. The Tall Middle Aged Guy and the Blonde Teenager sat together. He was giggling about something, while she wore an exasperated expression on her face. The Funny Looking Kid with the pumpkin shaped head was there, with his face pressed against the window. Behind him sat the Couple Who Only Spoke Polish and six members of the Sisterhood.

And She was there. Sitting by herself because She was spread out across two seats was the rotund woman from the next table. She smiled at Sam and he could feel his neck burning red. It rose up to his chin then quickly overtook his nose and eyebrows. He was sweating a bit as he took his seat beside Iggy.

Iggy took one look at him and said, "you look like you're getting a sunburn. You should put on some sunscreen." He passed Sam a tube of SPF 30¹¹ and he absentmindedly rubbed some onto his cheeks. It smelled like coconuts and bananas.

They drove along a bumpy gravel road for several miles, and then turned onto an even rougher, narrower road before reaching a street sign that said "Ragged Ass Road." Naturally, they turned onto that road, and then bumped and heaved along for a few more miles until they reached a lush green meadow

¹¹ SPF stands for Sun Protection Factor and is a measure of the effectiveness of sunscreen in protecting the wearer from UV-B, the ultraviolet radiation emitted by the sun which causes sunburn. Sunscreen with a grade of SPF 30 will allow a person to stay in the sun for 30 times longer without experiencing sunburn than a person without sunscreen. No amount of SPF is effective in preventing blushing.

ringed with pine trees and pink Alaska fireweed.¹² The passengers all stood up, rubbed their backsides gingerly and then stepped off of the bus. The Tall Middle Aged Guy mumbled something about having a cramp. The Blonde Teenager he travelled with just pressed her face into her palm.

They were led through the woods into a large camp, surrounded by a low wooden fence. Dozens of huskies lounged in, beside and on top of little wooden houses with their names painted on them. Jericho slept beside his little house, while Iceball stood on his, with his tongue hanging from his mouth and his tail wagging furiously. There were newborn puppies there, with their eyes still shut tightly, and older dogs that jumped and played and barked as the elves walked by them.

They were met by a tour guide with long dark ponytail that he had tied up into a bun on the back of his head. He wore a gray shirt and sunglasses and spoke with a smooth California drawl. He explained that this was where sled dogs trained in the summer months to get ready to race in the winter. These were not little races around a track, but great long races, like the Iditarod and the Yukon Quest, where teams of dogs pulled a sled a thousand miles or more across the bleak frozen Arctic.

"These are just the sort of dogs who could get load of antimagicon to the North Pole in a hurry," Iggy whispered to Yugo and Sam.

The dogs at the Musher's Camp run nearly a hundred miles a day during the long winter sled races and they needed to run every day in the summer to stay fit and ready to race once the snow fell. So, the mushers came up with the bright idea of having their dogs pull tourists around the camp (for a fee of course). The dogs needed to run anyway and the mushers were only too happy to have tour groups come in and pay them to do it.

There was no snow in the Mushers' Camp, so the dog team was hitched to a sturdy metal wheeled cart, which the dogs pulled down a mountain trail. The elves were led to the first of five or six carts and slipped into three seats in the front row. The Funny Looking Kid slipped in behind them, and behind him, filling up every seat in the back row, was Her.



¹² Although Alaska fireweed grows in abundance in Alaska, the state flower is the forget-me-not. Do not forget it, as there may be a test later. In case there is, you should also know that the motto of the state of Alaska is 'North to the Future', the state bird is the wild ptarmigan, the state tree is the Sitka spruce, the state gem is jade, the state mammal is the moose and the state insect is the four spot skimmer dragonfly.



Sam turned his most nonchalant turn as She stepped up onto the cart. It listed a bit as She sat down. Her scent was intoxicating: She smelled like fudge. Sam heard it before he saw it; the tinkling of the charm bracelet that he had hooked over Her doorknob and which was now looped around Her wrist.

Sam's heart pounded as their guide climbed onto a platform on the back of the cart and yelled "mush!"¹³ The cart took off like a rocket. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were jerked back into their seats as they rolled down the bumpy path. The cart whipped around a corner, jerking the elves to the right. Then the dogs pulled them around another bend, and the elves were all pushed to the left side of the cart.

They bounded down a hill and then lurched up another. Sam leaned forward in his chair to get a better view of the wheel dogs; the two dogs closest to the cart. Good wheelers have a calm temperament and are not easily startled by anything that happens in the sled behind them.

These were not particularly good wheelers. As soon as they smelled Sam's coconut and banana sunscreen, the dog on the left side started tugging the cart to the left and the dog on the right pulled just as firmly in the other direction. Then the cart struck a large root on the edge of the trail and things became even more complicated.

With the two wheelers struggling to get as far away as they could from Sam's sunscreen, it was up to the team dogs ahead of them to keep the cart on the path. But the load was too great. One of the swing dogs stumbled, then another lost his footing and then the whole team veered off the track and the cart flew over the hillside to certain painful death on the ground below.

Iggy never panicked at moments like this. He was guided by a dogmatic belief that things would always work out for the best. So, as the cart flipped over and flew upside down over a stand of spruce trees, Iggy remembered the time that they had been abducted by aliens and how that had turned out all right and with Christmas saved in the end. As the cart pitched forward and plummeted towards a pile of jagged rocks, Iggy was reminded of the time that he ran into a very large escaped felon with a big pile of dynamite. He remembered that even though the dynamite exploded, that it was all for the best in the end. And as the cart slowly twisted so that everyone inside was in danger of being thrown clear and into utter oblivion, Iggy recalled that he was once chased by a dragon, who turned out to be very well mannered and a really good sport.

Iggy had not just had brushes with death in the past, he had flossed with death and shined its shoes. And every time, Iggy was still breathing afterwards and standing on the sunny side of the ground.

¹³ The term 'mush' is thought to have derived from the French word 'marcher' which means to walk or go. These days, most mushers say 'hike' to get their team to start. Hike derives from the English word 'hike', which means to walk or go.



It was because of this, and other shaves closer than one can get from Yugo's 20 bladed icosomatic razor, that Iggy was sure that their momentum would carry them past the jagged rocks underneath them and he was certain that the cart would complete its rotation so that its wheels were underneath them before they landed. He was also convinced that each of the 16 dogs would land in some sort of spongy moss and walk away from the whole episode completely unscathed and hoping there was steak for dinner.

Sam, of course, feared the worst. Elves have over 200 different bones in their bodies and Sam expected to have a compound fracture in each and every one of them before it was all over.

As it turned out, the momentum of the cart carried it beyond the jagged rocks below and over a pleasant meadow carpeted with asters, harebells and other wildflowers. The cart completed its revolution so that it was upright once again just as it reached the soft meadow beneath it and each and every one of the 16 sled dogs landed safely on a bed of mossy ground.

Cart, elves, passengers and dogs all bounced around for a bit before skidding to a stop about 20 yards from the bus that had brought them to the Musers' Camp in the first place.

Iggy was the first one out of the cart. He brushed some dust off of his green velvet jacket, walked across the meadow and climbed onto the bus. Yugo and Sam followed him.

"Well, that was a close call," said Yugo as he joined Iggy at the back of the bus.

Iggy shrugged. "We've had worse," he said.

Yugo considered this for a few moments and then nodded thoughtfully. Pinwheeling down the side of a mountain in a dog cart was just another day at the office for Iggy, Yugo and Sam. Looking back, he was surprised that it had not happened before.

Sam was less nonplussed than either of Iggy or Yugo. In fact, Sam was very plussed indeed. By the time he reached his place at the back of the bus, he was breathing hard, his red velvet tunic was covered in sweat and his face was flushed.

Iggy shook his head. "You have to take better care of yourself, Sam," he said. "That sunburn is getting worse. You better put some more of this on before you start to peel." He passed Sam the tube of banana and coconut scented sunscreen.

THREE WEARY ELVES MUSHED¹⁴ THEIR WAY up the gangway and back onto the *Spectre*. It was late, but the sun would not set for another nine hours. It would rise again four hours after that.

They reviewed their findings over dinner. It did not take them very long. Their tour had ended abruptly after the cart accident. Despite their most determined efforts, they had not learned anything more since they first uncovered the plot four days earlier. Sam summed it up best when he said that they all they had learned was jack and diddely.

"But we can't stop," pleaded Iggy. "Christmas depends on it."

Sam grunted, but he was not paying attention. She had arrived and had settled in only two tables away. She wore enough red silk to make a parachute. She ordered the lamb and the lasagna.

Sam quickly changed his order to lamb and lasagna.

"I think we should take the night off," said Iggy. "I read in the ship's program that there is a magic show tonight."

"That sounds like fun," said Yugo.

Sam did not say anything, his eyes were locked on Her and he matched Her bite for bite. They both ordered a large lemon cake for desert, with a side of apple pie and low fat ice cream. It was one of the best meals he ever ate.

After dinner, they went to the big showroom at the front of the boat. They walked to the front row, and squeezed in beside the Tall Middle Aged Guy and the Blonde Teenager. She was drinking a white smoothie. Sam licked his lips. It looked delicious. The lights dimmed and the show began.

The magician was a portly man named Marcus. He had wavy brown hair and wore a dark green dress shirt that was untucked on one side. He was sweating heavily and seemed to have trouble catching his breath. He began his act with a juggling routine, but he was not very good at it and the balls and bowling pins he tried to juggle all ended up scattered on the stage.

Marcus attempted to cover up each mistake with a couple of quick dance moves, but all that seemed to do was to make him sweat even more than he was before. He reached into a hat to pull out a rabbit, but was only able to produce the half eaten carrot that the rabbit had left behind. He called on an audience member to pick a card from a deck. He correctly guessed what the card was on his fortieth attempt.

He finished his act with another juggling routine, this time involving a number of coloured felt hats. In the big finale he threw them all into the air, intending

¹⁴ 'Mushed' derives from the French word 'marcher', which means walk or go. Or march. When the elves mushed their way up the gangway, they really marched up it.



them to land in a neat stack on his head. They landed in a neat stack on the Blonde Teenager's lap.

"Aaaaaah!" she shrieked. "They're covered in sweat!"

Marcus bowed to scattered applause as the curtains closed. His microphone was still on and the elves heard him mutter, "I don't understand it ... nothing worked ... "

"That was the worst magician I've ever seen," grumbled Sam as they made their way out of the theatre.

"It's not his fault," said Yugo.

"Why is that?" asked Iggy.

"It's the antimagicon. It's on the ship somewhere. It's creating a strong field of anti-magic. Even simple magic tricks like the ones Marcus tried don't work. This is powerful stuff."

"We have to stop this," said Iggy.

Day 5 - Sitka

THE BRIG ON A LUXURY CRUISE SHIP is not remotely luxurious. It is a small room with steel walls, a steel bunk bed and a locked steel door. A matching steel toilet stands in the corner. There is no turn down service at night. Nobody comes in to leave a chocolate on the pillow, for there is no pillow. There is only a thin mattress covered in sturdy vinyl and a rough wool blanket.

The brig is located below the water line and there is no window, so the three burly men dressed in wrinkled black suits and seated in a row on the steel bunk did not see the *Spectre* pull into the harbour outside the town of Sitka early that morning. After spending two nights in the brig, their mood was as rumpled as their haberdashery.

Sitka is a pretty little town that sits on the west side of mountainous Braniff Island. It is surrounded by an archipelago of smaller islands covered with spruce trees and, sometimes, a little house or two. Like Juneau, Sitka can only be reached by air or sea and even access from the sea is not that easy. There is no port in Sitka large enough to moor a cruise ship, so the *Spectre* was

anchored about a mile away, and orange tenders¹⁵ shuttled passengers back and forth to the shore.



The three men in black suits in the brig saw none of this. Once in a while, one of them would mutter something into the radio microphone in his jacket cuff. He listened patiently to his plastic earpiece but heard no reply.

There was a knock at the door. The three men turned and a security officer walked in. He wrote a few notes on his clip board and then passed it to the first of the three black suited men. "Sign here," he said.

The man reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a standard issue black pen. He scratched his name on the sheet and then passed it to the black suited man beside him. Once they had all signed, the security officer collected his clip board and said, "all right then, the Captain says that you're all free to go. But don't try stowing away on this ship again." The three black suited men stood up, adjusted their wrinkled clothes and the security officer led them out of the brig.

He walked them up the stairs to the first level and then onto a covered tender that bobbed beside the ship. They huddled together at the front of the little boat. One of them opened a window.

"And don't make any trouble for the people on shore," added the security officer, wagging his finger at them.

Other passengers climbed into the tender. Fashion Mother sat across from the black suited men and shook her head at the sorry state of their attire. She was dressed in sequined walking shorts with a matching sequined blazer and beret. Her ensemble was neatly pressed and put together perfectly. Even the Man

¹⁵ A 'tender' is a small boat which is used to move people and supplies to and from a larger boat moored offshore. The rest of the time, the tenders hung from davits on the side of the *Spectre* and are called 'lifeboats.'



With The Bad Toupee was neatly dressed in his new sweater with the moose on it.

The tender pulled away and motored towards Sitka. The crewman at the wheel pushed forward on a lever beside him and the tender gained speed. It bounded over a wake left behind by a larger boat and cold seawater splashed through the open window onto the three black suited men.

"I'm going to get those elves," muttered one of them. The two men beside him nodded and started shivering.

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM DID NOT SPEND THE NIGHT IN THE BRIG. Unlike the three secret service men, they did find chocolates on their pillows the night before. They also found a towel rolled into the shape of a reindeer at the foot of Iggy's bed.

Iggy carefully placed the towel reindeer on the desk, beside the towel walrus, the towel penguin and the towel aardvark that had greeted them when they had returned to their room on the previous nights of their cruise.

"I think I'll name this one Cookie," said Iggy.

"You named the walrus Cookie," said Yugo.

"And the penguin," said Sam.

"The aardvark too," added Yugo.

Iggy shrugged. "He looks like a cookie to me," he said. "We'll call this one Cookie 4.0."

"All this talk of cookies is making me hungry," said Sam. "Let's get breakfast."

"We should decide what we are going to do to today to find the bad guys," said Yugo.

"Forget it," said Sam. "I've spent the last three days running around Alaska trying to solve this mystery and we haven't learned a thing. This is our last day in port and I plan to enjoy what's left of my vacation without worrying about bombs and bad guys.

"But first," he added, "I am going to have breakfast. Are you two coming with me?" Iggy and Yugo nodded and they headed up to the buffet. Sam made three trips to reload his plate before declaring himself ready to go ashore.

There were at least fifty other passengers on their tender. The Dirty Old Man was there, leering at the female crew members through his camera viewfinder. There was the Woman Who Might Be A Man and the Couple Who Only Spoke Polish. Sam's cheeks were grateful that BF Grandma was nowhere to be seen.

The last person on the boat was Marcus, the heavy set magician from the evening before. He nodded at some of the passengers who recognized him and took a seat across the aisle from the elves. His hair was uncombed and his shirt was still untucked on one side. Sweat glistened on his forehead and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

As the tender pulled away from the *Spectre*, Marcus reached into his baggy pants pocket and pulled out three coloured balls. He tossed them into the air and casually juggled them as the tender bobbed along the sea towards the shore. Even though the boat was rocking with the waves, he did not drop a single ball.

"Marcus seems to have his groove back," said Iggy.

"The antimagicon must still be on the ship," said Yugo. "Now that he's out of its range, he can do his magic tricks again."

"I don't want to hear any more talk of antimagicon," said Sam. "I'm on vacation and I plan to have some fun once we get to shore." The elves watched in silence as Marcus' balls went up and down and around and around.

They reached a wooden dock a few minutes later. Iggy, Yugo and Sam stepped out of the tender and immediately had their picture taken with a man dressed in a furry polar bear costume. With that essential step out of the way, they walked from the pier down to a little beach. Yugo skipped stones while Iggy and Sam hunted for shells.

"Here's a good one," said Iggy. He held up a round white clam shell.

"How about this one?" asked Yugo. He held up a round, white stone the size and shape of clam shell. "I'll bet I can make this one skip twenty times."

"Bet you a dollar you can't," said Sam.

"You're on." Yugo leaned back and hurled the stone out onto the smooth blue ocean. It struck the water with a small splash and then popped up, leaving a trail of expanding ripples behind it as it skipped across the sea.

"Seven, eight, nine," counted Yugo, each number coming a little faster than the last. "Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen ... "

Iggy joined the count, "sixteen, seventeen, eighteen ... "

"Nineteen," said Yugo, but before he could reach twenty, the stone bounced off the side of an approaching tender with a loud **CRACK!** A head poked out of the roof of the tender.

"Let's get out of here," shouted Iggy. The elves scrambled up the rocks that lined the beach and headed down the street. Unlike the other places they had visited, Sitka was a bustling city, with four lanes of traffic speeding down the

main street, which for some reason was called Lincoln Street.¹⁶ The elves scurried down the sidewalk and then turned right on Maksoutoff¹⁷ Street.

Sam poked Yugo on the shoulder and held out his hand. "You owe me a dollar," he said.

"Oh come on, Sam" said Yugo, "you know that rock would have skipped more than twenty times if that tender wasn't in the way."

Sam rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. "Nineteen skips isn't twenty. You owe me a dollar. Pay up."

Yugo grumbled a bit and then fished in his pocket and pulled out a golden dollar coin with a picture of William Henry Harrison¹⁸ on the side. He passed it to Sam who eyed it carefully before slipping it into his red velvet fanny pack.



The elves turned left and climbed up the road that led to the John O'Connell Memorial Bridge. The O'Connell Bridge is the long suspension bridge that connects Sitka to nearby Japonski Island, where the airport is located. It is the most prominent feature of the city skyline. The bridge was built in 1972 and named for John W. O'Connell, a past mayor of Sitka.¹⁹

The elves reached the top of the bridge and paused to take in the view of the harbour. It was dotted with tree covered islands. Sea lions splashed playfully in the water and little fishing boats tacked their way around them. A bald eagle settled onto the suspension tower beside them. In the distance, they could see the airport and the long dormant volcano that rose into the clear blue sky behind it.

¹⁶ There are about 5000 streets named 'Lincoln' in the United States. It is doubtful that Abraham Lincoln drove down all of them. It is fairly certain that he never drove down Lincoln Street in Sitka, Alaska. The most common street name in the United States is 'Second Street'. In many places, there is no First Street, and the street that one might expect to be called First Street has some other name, like Lincoln Street.

¹⁷ Russian colonists arrived in Sitka in the late 16th century and spent most of the next 70 years fighting off the native Tlingit people and then American settlers. They finally gave up and sold the works to the United States in 1867, but many places in Sitka still have Russian names. One of these is Maksoutoff Street, which is named for Princess Aglaida Ivanovina Matsoutoff, the wife of the last Russian governor of Sitka and whose grave is a local tourist attraction. Matsoutoff is a much less common street name than Lincoln.

¹⁸ William Henry Harrison was the most useless of the American presidents, and that's saying something. He was inaugurated on a cold, wet day in 1841, got sick and died on his 32nd day in office. He got his face on the money anyway when the U.S. Mint decided to issue a series of dollar coins commemorating each of the 43 presidents starting in 2006.

¹⁹ There is a large weathered copper plaque commemorating Mayor McConnell on one of the two bridge towers. Beneath this is a smaller weathered copper plaque that proclaims that the bridge is "In Memory of Bill Gute, Project Design Engineer." While the bridge is formally known as the John W. McConnell Memorial Bridge, it is unclear in whose memory it was really built.

It was majestic and serene. For the first time since they weighed anchor in Vancouver, Sam was at peace.

"There they are!" a voice shouted from the not so distant distance.

"Get them," shouted a second voice, from a slightly less distant distance.

A third voice just mumbled into his jacket cuff.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam turned and saw three large burly men in rumped black suits charging up the west side of the John O'Connell Memorial Bridge towards them. They looked unkempt and very, very angry. They also looked like they wanted to inflict unspeakable violence upon a certain trio of elves and that they knew how to do it. The bald eagle nestled at the top of the suspension tower flew away at their approach.



"Here we go again," said Iggy. He kneeled in a three point sprinter's stance, whispered "ho, ho, ho," and took off. Yugo decided to give the three point stance and the ho ho ho countdown a miss and was already 50 metres ahead of Iggy. Sam, who always fled at the very first sign of trouble, had turned and run down the east side of the bridge long before it had occurred to either Iggy or Yugo there might be some sort of a problem. He was more than 300 meters ahead of both of them before either of the others had started running. Sam knew well that he did not need to be the fastest elf; it was only essential that he not be the slowest.

Sam charged down the bridge and took a hard left turn. He ran around a marina and then sprinted across a park with a big totem pole and an old rusty anchor in the middle. Sam danced around the anchor and then ran towards the Sitka Pioneer Home across the street. Three or four elderly Alaskans

hobbled out onto the grass, waved their canes at Sam and demanded that he get off their lawn.

Sam had not expected to hear such coarse cursing on his vacation. He veered up Barracks Street and took a right on Seward. He passed a wooden turret and then sprinted across a sloping grassy field. He scarcely noticed the grave of Princess Aglaida Ivanovina Matsoutoff as he ran by it without stopping and then he charged along the road towards St Micheal's²⁰ Cathedral. Iggy and Yugo were catching up to him, so Sam bore down and ran even faster. At the end of American Street he turned and pounded up the winding trail that led to Castle Hill.²¹

The three black suited men were not far behind were closing in on the elves as they ran uphill. What Iggy, Yugo and Sam did not realize is that there is only one path that leads into and out of Castle Hill. They were running straight into a dead end.

THE TALL MIDDLE AGED GUY WAS MAKING THE BLONDE TEENAGER pose for pictures at the top of Castle Hill. She reluctantly posed next to a cannon for a shot. He asked her for another, and she agreed to climb up on top of the cannon if he gave her a banana. He was used to these sorts of odd requests and carried all manner of novelties, including a rich variety of fruits and vegetables, in the many pockets of his tan vest for just such an eventuality. He dug around for a few moments and then produced a banana from a pocket located somewhere near his armpit. She grabbed the banana, then climbed up onto the cannon and pointed to the sea.

"Hurry, hurry, lemon curry" a voice shouted from the entrance to the park at the top of Castle Hill. They turned and saw three short men in matching red and green velvet jackets come around the corner.

The Tall Middle Aged Guy turned to the Blonde Teenager. "There's something familiar about those guys," he said. "Do you recognize them?"

The Blonde Teenager took a bite of her banana. "I've seen them around," she answered.

²⁰ St Michael is the patron saint of grocers, mariners, paratroopers, police, and sickness. If you can figure out which of those things is not like the others, please let me know.

²¹ As its name implies, Castle Hill is a fortified lookout point at the top of a hill near Sitka Harbour. It was from this point that the Russians first saw the Tlinget and the Americans coming. This was also the place where the Russians finally turned over the keys to the Americans in 1867. These days it is a national historic site, with a very pleasant park that overlooks the harbour. If you ever find yourself in Sitka, be sure to visit Castle Hill.

"It's the strangest thing," said the Tall Middle Aged Guy. "I feel like I know them."

"They have those kinds of faces, I suppose," said the Blonde Teenager. She took another bite from her banana. The three burly men in dark suits charged into the park. "Uh oh," said the Blonde Teenager. "This can't be good."

"Those little guys are in trouble," said the Tall Middle Aged Guy. The three elves ran past the two of them, with the chubby one in the lead.

"They don't stand a chance against those three burly guys," said the Blonde Teenager.

"We really should do something to help them," said the Tall Middle Aged Guy. The three burly men drew nearer.

The Blonde Teenager finished her banana. "What could we possibly do to help?" she asked. She flipped the banana peel onto the pavement right at the feet of the first of the black suited men.

The sole of his patent leather shoe pressed down upon the banana skin. He slid²² across the pavement on one foot, waving his arms in the air. The second dark suited man, who had been speaking into his jacket cuff, ran right into his back. He was followed by the third man and together they rode the banana peel into the low concrete wall at the rim of Castle Hill. They flipped over the barrier and tumbled down the side of the hill, which was steep and covered with pointy rocks and sturdy trees with sharp needles.

"Oops," said the Blonde Teenager. She walked over to the low concrete wall and picked up the ragged banana peel. "I really shouldn't litter." She dropped the peel into a brown garbage can.

"Good job," said the Tall Middle Aged Guy. They walked down the path from Castle Hill and made their way to Valerie's Cafe, where they had a most excellent lunch indeed.

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM LOOKED DOWN AT THE THREE BIG MEN as they tumbled down the hillside, cursing and shouting with each bounce. The elves were all gasping for breath. Sam regretted that he had left his inhaler in his other fanny pack. He really could have used it now.

"That was a close one," said Iggy.

²² The banana peel gag is so ancient there are etchings of it on cave walls that are over 10,000 years old. Still, no living person has ever seen another real living person ever slip on a real banana peel even once. Nonetheless, the coefficient of friction of a fresh banana peel is about 0.05, which is dangerously unsafe to walk upon. So what happened here is theoretically possible, even if no real living person has ever seen anything like it.



"You got that right," said Yugo. "That kid with the banana saved us."

"She's on the Nice List for sure this year," gasped Sam.

The three elves caught their breath then worked their way back down the winding path from Castle Hill. They reached the pier by the harbour and lined up for a tender to take them back to the ship. Each and every member of the Sisterhood was lined up ahead of them, and each and every one of them took a picture of each and every other one of them boarding the tender. It was only after all the photographs had been taken that the elves were able to get onto the boat.

Once they reached the *Spectre*, Sam led Iggy and Yugo directly to the dining room, which had just opened for the first sitting. They hurried to their usual table, which was only twenty feet from Her. Sam sat transfixed through the first and second sitting, staring at Her as she polished off an entire ham hock, and then moved on to a beef hock, a chicken hock and a hawk hock. It was one of the best meals he ever ate.

Watching Sam eat was exhausting. Iggy and Yugo went straight to their stateroom after dinner. When they opened their door, there was a musk ox made of rolled up towels perched at the foot of Iggy's bed. Iggy ran over and carefully lifted the musk ox from his blankets. "Isn't he cute?" he asked. Nobody answered. "I think I will name him Cookie."

Day 6 - Prince William Sound

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM AWOKE TO SEE small icebergs floating past their window. Iggy ran for his camera while Sam desperately tried not to think about the movie, *Titanic*. The thought of the interaction between the iceberg and the cruise ship in that film was nearly enough to put him off of his breakfast. But not quite.

They would not stop at any ports on their last full day at sea. Sitka is nearly 600 miles away from Anchorage and they would spend the whole day and much of the night steaming up the Alaska coast to get there on time. Many of the passengers would spend the whole day in the onboard gift shops, searching for bargains on little jade bears and duty free vodka.

The elves spent the morning by the pool. Iggy and Yugo wore bathrobes from the stateroom that dragged on the floor behind them wherever they walked. Sam was dressed in his smallest red velvet Speedo. He was working on his

third flaming volcano margarita when a short haired person walked over and stood at the deck chair beside him.

"Is this seat taken?" asked the Woman Who Might Be A Man. Sam shook his head. He motioned for Iggy and Yugo to come closer. The three elves waited with anticipation for her or him to go into the pool, hoping that they might be able to solve at least one mystery on this cruise. She or he lay down and started reading a fat novel. A moment later, the Woman Who Might Be A Man was joined by another longer haired person, who was also dressed in a cruise ship bathrobe. Iggy stared, but the best he could determine was that this new companion was a Man Who Might Be A Woman. He or she set down two drinks on the little table between the deck chairs and settled down with a fat novel of his or her own.

They spent a little while by the pool, and then they went downstairs to Slaggers, the karaoke lounge on the third level. Iggy took a stab at singing a reggae version of *Last Christmas*,²³ Yugo crooned a haunting version of *Elf's Lament*, and Sam took a stab at *Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer*, staring across the room at BF Grandma throughout the entire song. She smiled and made a cheek pinching gesture with her hands.

From the karaoke lounge, they headed up to the Promenade Deck to take in the view of Prince William²⁴ Sound. They were in a large bay that was ringed with massive snow covered mountains. Gleaming white glaciers squeezed between each mountain and shed hundreds of little icebergs into the water.

Nestled in one of the fjords that rings Prince William Sound is the little town of Valdez, which is just about the unluckiest place on Earth. On Good Friday 1964, a massive earthquake struck Alaska. The resulting tsunami levelled Valdez and changed the landscape forever for miles around. The town was mostly rebuilt by 1989, when an oil tanker called the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on Good Friday and spilled over 10 million gallons of oil into the Sound and ruined the ecosystem in Valdez and the surrounding area for a generation. It is probably best to avoid Valdez around Eastertime.

Yugo unpacked his Cetacean Location Creation™ and lowered it into the water to listen to the sounds of the Sound. He found some fin whales and pointed them out to Iggy and Sam. There was a pod of orcas in front of the ship that chirped and chattered into Yugo's headphones. He increased the sensitivity of the sonar microphones and was sure he heard the whoosh of a giant squid far, far below.

²³ According to the website www.last-christmas.com, there are no fewer than 430 recorded cover versions of *Last Christmas*, many of them with a reggae arrangement. It would take over 30 hours to listen to all known versions of *Last Christmas* back to back, if one had both the patience and the lack of a life needed to do so.

²⁴ Prince William Sound is not named for the rakish lad who is second in line for the English throne, but for his great-great-great-great-great-great uncle Prince William, who was later King William IV.

He was about to pack it up when he heard a tinkling sound, and then some familiar voices crackled into his ears. He pulled Iggy and Sam closer and flipped the device to speaker mode.

It is almost time, said the first voice.

Everything is finally in place, said a second voice.

Soon, very soon now, the North Pole will be ours!

What's left of it, anyway!

This was followed by a lengthy stream of cackling and maniacal laughter. Yugo turned off the speaker in disgust.

"Nothing has changed," said Iggy. "They are still planning to destroy the North Pole."

"And we are no closer to stopping them," said Yugo.

Sam scowled. This was not the way his vacation was supposed to go. Nor was it the way the story was supposed to go; usually they saved Christmas.

The three dejected elves shuffled to the dining room for their last meal onboard. The Dirty Old Man was speaking to the hostess at the door. He was standing on his tip toes in an effort to look down her blouse. Iggy, Yugo and Sam shuffled around him and sat down at their usual table. Sam was so despondent that he only ordered two entrees and barely touched his desert. To make things worse, the wide woman who usually sat at the next table was nowhere to be seen. Her absence left a hole in Sam's heart that not even a pail of chocolate melting cake could fill.

All things considered, it was one of the worst meals he ever ate.

Day 7 - Anchorage and Beyond

CRUISE SHIPS THAT SALE TO ANCHORAGE do not actually go to Anchorage at all. They make their final port in Whittier, which is on the other side of a mountain range from Anchorage. To get to Anchorage, one has to take the Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel through the mountains. The tunnel is nearly three miles long and the genius engineers who designed it provided for only one driving lane with railroad tracks imbedded in the asphalt. The tunnel is open to eastbound traffic every other hour; unless the train is in the tunnel, then it is closed to all traffic. It really is a pain in the neck to get out of Whittier.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were on the starboard side of the Promenade Deck watching passengers queue up on the port below for the busses that would take them to Anchorage. They would not be taking a bus. Once their luggage was unloaded, Yugo would unpack his snowmobile and they would scoot home in that. In the meantime, they studied each of the passengers as they left the boat, looking for somebody who was carrying 500 pounds of antimagic. The Couple Who Only Spoke Polish walked off, followed by the Woman Who Might Be A Man and the Man Who Might Be A Woman. None of them were carrying any luggage at all.

The Sisterhood paraded down the gangway, taking one last series of a thousand photographs as they left. The Dirty Old Man waited for them to finish, with one gnarled arm wrapped tightly around the waist of a female security officer at the gangway. The Man With The Bad Toupee got off, and so did Fashion Mother. She was dressed in a sleek navy blue overcoat and a matching sequined baseball cap with a diamond encrusted representation of the Alaskan flag on the front. BF Grandma was the next off the boat. She looked up and blew a kiss to the elves.

"What are you kids doing here?" asked a voice behind them. Iggy, Yugo and Sam spun and saw Marcus, the sweaty magician with the untucked shirt. "You should all be off the ship by now. Where are your parents?"

"We're not kids," said Iggy.

"Sure," said Marcus. "Then why are you wearing those?" He pointed to the fluorescent green wristbands that were still wrapped around their wrists.

"It was a mistake," said Yugo. "But these things are really hard to get off." He tugged on the wristband.

"How about we hang out together until your parents show up?" said Marcus. "Look, I found a dollar." He reached behind Sam's here and pulled out a gold coin with a picture of William Henry Harrison on one side. He passed the coin to Sam, who quickly stuffed it into his fanny pack.

"Can you do it again?" asked Sam. Marcus shrugged, but obliged Sam by pulling out a John Tyler²⁵ dollar coin from behind his ear. Sam collected the dollar from Marcus and slipped it into his fanny pack. "Got any more?" he asked.

Marcus shrugged and quickly retrieved dollar coins depicting James Polk, Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore. He was reaching for a Franklin Pierce when Iggy raised his hand and said "Stop right there."

"Why?" asked Sam and Marcus in unison.

²⁵ John Tyler succeeded William Henry Harrison as president upon the latter's premature demise in 1841. He is remembered as the second most useless of the American presidents. He got his face on the money in 2009.

Iggy reached into Sam's fanny pack and pulled out the Millard Fillmore dollar coin. "You and I both know that this one hasn't even been minted yet. How did you do that?"

Marcus shrugged and replied, "what can I tell you, kid. It's magic."

Iggy flipped the coin to Yugo. "Did you hear that? It's magic."

Yugo's face went white. "If he can conjure up a coin that hasn't even been minted yet ... then he's doing real magic. And that means the antimagicon..."

"Isn't on the ship anymore," finished Iggy. He finished other people's sentences a lot. Iggy and Sam were not entirely comfortable with it, but they were both too polite to say anything.

"We have to get out of here," said Sam. Nonetheless, he turned to Marcus and asked, "have you got any more of those?"

Marcus made an elaborate gesture and then opened his hand. Spread across his palm were dollar coins commemorating Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant and Rutherford B. Hayes. Sam snatched them up.

Iggy said, "hurry up, Sam."

The three of them scrambled down seven flights of stairs to the gangway on the third floor. They waited there as the Man With The Bad Toupee, the Tall Middle Aged Guy and the Blonde Teenager all slowly departed the ship.

The elves cleared security for the last time and ran down the gangway. There was a heap of luggage piled near the ship and Iggy, Yugo and Sam dived into it, looking for the large case that held the snowmobile.

Iggy pulled out a large brown trunk and lifted the lid. It was filled with sparkly, silky clothes. He pulled out a nearly transparent gown and looked through it at Yugo, who said, "that's one of Fashion Mother's trunks. Mine is much darker brown and has a snowmobile inside it."

Iggy tossed the gown back onto the pile of clothes in the large brown case and dove back into the luggage. They tore open suitcase after suitcase and dug through layers of Alaskan souvenirs before Sam raised a gleaming silver tailpipe in the air and shouted, "Ah ha!"

Yugo lunged ahead of Iggy to collect his beloved snowmobile. He pulled parts out of the trunk and laid them down carefully on the ground. Once that task was complete, he walked around the bits and pieces and carefully assembled the snowmobile.

"Hurry up," said Iggy. "They'll be miles away by now."

Yugo pressed a button on his key fob. It chirped shrilly and the doors on either side of the snowmobile rose up on smooth hydraulics.

The three elves scrambled inside and fastened their seatbelts. Sam checked the seatback in front of him and was pleased to see that it contained an

unused air sickness bag. Yugo pressed his thumb on a red button and jammed his foot on the gas pedal. The snowmobile shot forward, leaving a rubber skid mark on the pavement.

Thirty seconds later, Yugo hit the brakes and joined the queue behind the long line of busses waiting for permission to enter the Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel. Iggy and Sam watched the atomic clock on the dashboard as the minutes slowly ticked past.

Sam snorted. "They're getting away and we're stuck in a traffic jam."

"Not for long," said Yugo. He pulled back on black lever and the snowmobile jerked backwards. He pushed a blinking orange button and the snowmobile slowly rose into the air. He flipped a blue toggle switch and the snowmobile glided forward over the long line of traffic waiting to get through Maynard Mountain.

"Can't get through it," Yugo grunted.

"Gotta go over it," added Iggy.

"I'm not afraid," said Sam, even though he was.

The snowmobile rose above the line of traffic. Yugo steered it over the side of the mountain and they flew over the brilliant green landscape. He looked at the dashboard and then pointed the snowmobile due north. That was the direction that anyone with antimagicon was headed. Yugo just hoped that the snowmobile would overtake them in time.

The snowmobile curled around Lazy Mountain and skimmed across the Alaskan tundra. Green meadows soon gave way to snow covered fields. The elves searched the ground through the window, but there was nothing but sweeping drifts of snow in every direction. Yugo dropped the snowmobile lower to give them a better look, but Alaska is a vast place and finding 500 pounds of antimagicon there was like searching for a moose on the moon.

"Look, a moose," said Iggy. They scooted past the moose and then buzzed over a small pod of walruses. The snow was becoming thicker and deeper the further north they traveled.

Finally they spotted a dark shape moving across the white ground. It was a small dog team skidding north across the snow. Yugo pushed down on the steering column and the snowmobile descended. As they approached, they could see that there were two figures on the back of the heavily laden sled.

"We've got them," said Yugo.

"How are we going to stop them?" asked Iggy. The dog sled had veered right as they got closer.

"Leave that to me," said Yugo. "I've made a few modifications to the snowmobile for just such a circumstance." He pressed a few buttons on the dashboard and an eyepiece descended from the roof of the snowmobile and

covered his face. He tapped a blue button a few times and then shouted "arm the kibble cannon." The snowmobile lurched a bit and then corrected its course. Iggy and Sam looked at each other and shrugged. Yugo nodded and then poked a flashing orange button.

The kibble cannon fired and launched its payload into the ground ahead of the dog sled. The dog team pulled up short, raising their noses as one and sniffing about. Soon they were digging about to retrieve the kibble that had fallen from above. The sled slid sideways and stopped.

Yugo pressed a back button and the snowmobile dropped to the ground like an elevator with a broken cable. It bounced in front of the stalled dog sled and the doors on either side rose open on smooth hydraulics.

The three elves tumbled out onto the tundra and scrambled to the stalled dog sled. A small figure in a fur trapper hat stepped down from the back of the sled and turned to the elves.

"That's close enough," he said. He reached into his overcoat, drew out a large a very dangerous looking hand gun and aimed it at the elves.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam skidded to a stop. Iggy gulped.

Yugo did not gulp at all. "I see you have the Lasermatic 360," he said.

"Indeed," said the small figure in the trapper hat. "Take one step closer and I'll shoot."

"I don't think so," said Yugo. he took a step closer.

"I mean it, this thing has a hyperbolic sequencer and zapper overdrive. Don't think for a minute that I won't use it."

"I don't think for a minute that you'll use it," said Yugo. He took another step closer. The other figure raised the Lasermatic 360 and pointed it Yugo's head. Yugo took yet another step closer.

He pulled the trigger. The Lasermatic 360 made a whirring noise. Green lights flashed on the side and sparks spurted from the barrel. Yugo reached out, grabbed the Lasermatic and pulled it out of the other figure's hand. He tossed it into the snow.

Iggy breathed out slowly. "You're okay," he said.

"Of course," said Yugo. "There's no such thing as a Lasermatic 360. It's just a toy."

"It still looks like a very dangerous toy," said Sam. "He might have put your eye out with that thing."

The three elves converged on the short figure in the fur trapper hat. "Who are you anyway," asked Iggy. He pulled off the trapper hat.

"It's that Funny Looking Kid," said Sam. The Funny Looking Kid glared at Sam.

"He's not a kid," said another voice. "He's my boyfriend." A slim woman stepped from the back of the dog sled. She raised her right arm. The silver charm bracelet on her wrist twinkled as she pulled back her hood.

Sam took a step back. "It can't be," he murmured. His face was as stern as the back of a cruise ship.

"I'm sorry, Sam," She said. "I think you're really sweet, but I'm afraid that I'm spoken for." She put her arm around the Funny Looking Kid.

"But he's just a Funny Looking Kid," Sam sputtered.

"I'm not a kid," sneered the Funny Looking Kid. "I'm an elf, just like you."

"An elf," said Iggy. He peered at the Funny looking Kid and slowly realized that the things that made the Kid so Funny Looking: the goofy grin, the bandy legs, the nimble fingers and the pointed ears, were the sort of things that made an elf regular looking. "Why would an elf want to destroy the North Pole?"

"There's only one elf who might want to do that," said Yugo. "Isn't that so, Rongo?"

"That's right Yugo," said the Funny Looking Kid. "I'm Rongo. Rongo the elf. I used to work at the North Pole just like you, making toy trains and cars and useless toy laser guns." He glanced at the Lasermatic 360 that was slowly sinking into a snow bank.

"But then I discovered antimagicon. I tried to show Santa how we could use it to power the workshop and make even better toys. But the old man wouldn't listen. He said it was too dangerous. I went ahead anyway and built a race car powered entirely with antimagicon. When Santa found out, he kicked me out of the North Pole and told me to never come back." Rongo spat. "Well, now I'm coming back, and I'm bringing enough antimagicon to level the place."

The slim woman beside him smiled. "We've been planning this for years," She said. "I carried the antimagicon onto the ship under my dress. We collected all the provisions we needed in Ketchikan and enough fireworks to blow it all up in Juneau."

"You were the kid who bought the fireworks at Vicky's Joke Shop," said Iggy. Rongo grinned. He was still kind of funny looking, even for an elf.

"We learned all we needed to know about dog sledding in Skagway," She went on. "And now here we are, on our way to the North Pole to finish the job."

Sam was in despair as She told her story. His chest ached. He was sure his heart was shrinking with every word. He looked at Her, tears running down his cheeks. "You mean you aren't big like me?" he whispered.

She laughed. "Not at all." She did a quick pirouette. "It sure feels good not to be carrying all that antimagicon around."

"We won't let you get away with it," said Iggy defiantly.

"You aren't going to stop us," said Rongo. He pulled out an ulu and waved it menacingly. Iggy and Yugo backed away, and Sam dove into a snow bank. He dug for cover and then his hand wrapped around the handle of the Lasermatic 360. It was not much of a weapon, but it did look like a most dangerous toy.

Sam clambered out of the snow bank, waving the Lasermatic 360 and shooting wildly. Sparks flew everywhere.

"Be careful!" shouted Rongo. "You'll put someone's eye out!" He covered his face and ran for cover. Sam kept on shooting, spraying sparks all around him. One of them landed on the edge of the dog sled, right beside a big paper bag of fireworks with 'Vicky's Joke Shop' printed on the side.

Rongo's eyes widened. Small flames sprung up on the bag. "It's going to blow!" shouted Rongo. He grabbed Her and ran for cover. Iggy and Yugo ran over to the sled. Yugo started throwing snow on the paper bag to put out the fire.

One of the firecrackers went off with a loud **POP!** Then another exploded. They were crackling and fizzling noises and even more sparks spurted from the bag. Iggy and Sam joined Yugo in throwing snow onto the sled.

But it was too late. All at once the rest of the fireworks exploded together with a tremendous **BANG!**

The three elves were thrown back into the snow. The contents of the sled flew up into the air. Bricks of antimagicon flipped up into the sky and disintegrated. The pieces danced like snowflakes in the air and were swept away in the breeze, falling harmlessly on the vast Alaskan tundra.

Rongo and the girl were already half a mile away by the time the firecrackers exploded. They were still running hours later when they were picked up by a state trooper just outside of Fairbanks and booked on charges of vagrancy. They might still be languishing in the Fairbanks city cells, for all anyone knows.

It was some time before Iggy, Yugo and Sam were able to get back on their feet. They were bruised and their ears were ringing, but there seemed to be no broken bones or eyes that had been put out. They brushed the snow and sparkling antimagicon particles from their clothes and stood around the sled. The dog team looked at them curiously, then returned to nibbled on their kibble.

"That really is a dangerous toy," said Iggy.

"It ought to come with a warning," agreed Yugo.

Sam just stared at the two of them and pointed.

"What is it, Sam?" asked Iggy.

"It's all over," said Yugo. "You've saved Christmas again. There's nothing to worry about now."

Sam was always worried about something, even when there was nothing to worry about. But this time there really was something to worry about.

"Your ears ..., " he said to Iggy. He pointed to Yugo. "And your moustache ..."

Iggy reached up and touched his ears. There were no points there. He looked over at Yugo. His moustache lay in a black spidery heap in the snow at his feet.

"The antimagicon," said Yugo. "We were covered with it after the explosion. It's knocked the magic right out of us."

They looked at each other. They did not look like elves anymore. They were just three little boys dressed in red and green velvet, standing in the snow.

Yugo ran to his snowmobile. He brushed the shiny antimagicon dust from it. The stubby little wings and the satellite dish were gone. He lifted the hood and looked at the engine. There was no lithium fusion reactor, no frammingaster propulsion system and no waffle maker. It was just a regular snowmobile.

He let go of the hood and it closed with a dull thud.

"What are we going to do?" asked Iggy.

Yugo walked back to the others. "There's lots of magic at the North Pole. I'm sure we can figure out some way to put this right."

"How are we going to get to the North Pole without the snowmobile?" asked Sam.

Yugo stepped on to the platform on the back of the dog sled. "We have a fully provisioned dog sled. If we get started now, we should be able to make it home by Christmas."

Iggy and Sam shrugged. What else were three boys in the wilderness to do? They climbed onto the back of the dog sled with Yugo.

"Mush!" yelled Iggy.