

Stepping on Butterflies



Over
100
Fun Facts!

An Iggy, Yugo and Sam Adventure



STEPPING ON BUTTERFLIES

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM ADVENTURES

A Christmas Caroline
A Christmas Time Tale
Everyone Needs A Little Space at Christmas
A Christmas Mystery
Raiders of the Lost Christmas Cavern
The Last of the Snow Wolves
The Return of Leviticus Swyne
A Fairy Merry Christmas Tale
What's Past is Present
A Feast of Fools
Lucretia Alopeesha Takes a Vacation
Elves in Toyland
CD25: Christmas Day
The Treasure of the Claus
The Man in Sandy Clothes
Maggot, Lice and Worm
A Winter of Discontent
Ghosts of Christmas Future
Nightmare on Elf Street
The Fright Before Christmas
North Pole Stud
Here There Be Monsters
A Tale of Two Kidneys
What Are You Waiting For ... Christmas?
Freaky Christmasday
ELFolution
South to Alaska
Boys Will Be Boys
Murder at the North Pole
Christmas Night of the Evil Walking Living Dead
Iggy, Yugo and Sam in the War on Christmas
Iggy, Yugo and Sam Explain Everything
Died Hard
Sam Alone and Other Christmas Crackers
Iggy, Yugo and Sam and the Gelatinous Mass from Outer Space
Christmas: Boss Battle
The Naughtiest List



In the news ...

Santa Claus Will Not be at NYC Macy's for First Time in Almost 160 Years

USA Today, October 23, 2020

NEW YORK — Macy's said Santa Claus will not be greeting kids at its flagship New York store this year due to the coronavirus, interrupting a holiday tradition started nearly 160 years ago.

More than a quarter of a million people come to see Santa at Macy's in New York each year, the company said, making it hard to create a safe environment during a pandemic. Before taking a picture with the jolly old man, crowds walk in tight quarters through a maze-like Santaland that is filled with Christmas trees, running toy trains and elves in green costumes.

Santa also will not be showing up at its Chicago and San Francisco stores, which have similar Santalands. But he will still appear at the end of the televised Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, the company said.

Macy's will be offering a free online experience on its website at the end of November, where families can play games, get a virtual tour of Santa's workshop and take a selfie with Santa.

"Moving to a virtual engagement will safely bring the magic of Santa Claus to children of all ages this year," Macy's said in a statement to The Associated Press.

DR. FAUCI SAYS SANTA CLAUS IS IMMUNE TO COVID-19

Santa will be spreading lots of joy — not COVID-19 — when he visits millions of homes this Christmas.

That's because Kris Kringle is immune to coronavirus, according to the United States' top infectious disease expert.

“Santa is exempt from this because Santa, of all the good qualities he has, has a lot of good innate immunity,” Dr. Anthony Fauci claims.

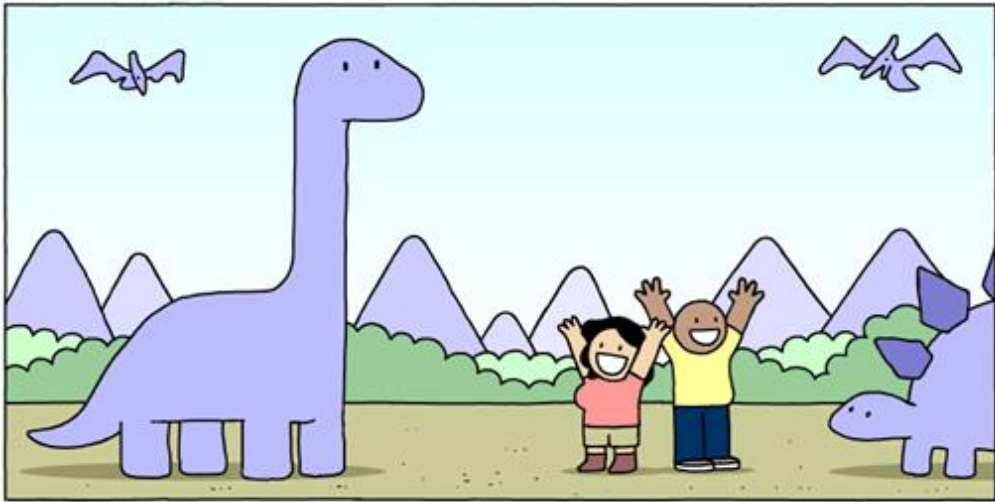
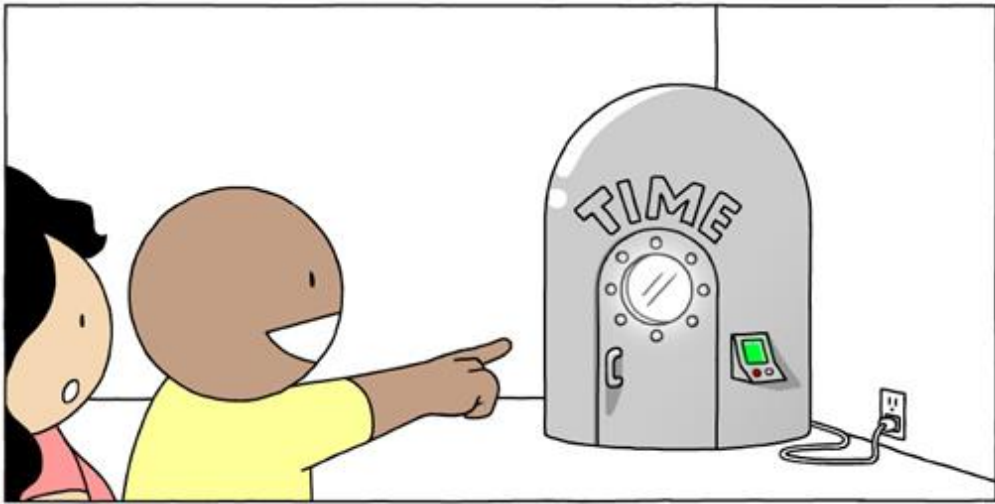
That is good news for the most elusive man in the world, who would otherwise be considered high-risk for a serious case of COVID with his global travels, obesity issues and history of smoking. Santa's staggering age — 1,750 or more — would not help either with the bug inordinately affecting those 60 and older.

But rest assured, one of the worst global health crises ever will not keep Santa down.

“Santa is not going to be spreading any infections to anybody,” Fauci said.

Thankfully, Santa's little helpers have been busy warding off the virus in the North Pole, according to Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

“I hear the ventilation in Santa's workshop is not the best, and opening windows in North Pole winters problematic,” Hotez told USA Today. “The good news is that mask compliance there is pretty good, and the elves are committed to social distancing. Mrs. Claus has implemented a program of regular testing and the reindeers now lead contact tracing.”



Other News and Notes ...

FORMER ISRAELI SPACE CHIEF CLAIMS ALIENS EXIST

Professor and retired Israeli general Haim Eshed claims that extraterrestrials have made contact with officials in the United States and Israel over the years. The aliens are apparently already among us on Earth, and that several species have formed a “Galactic Federation.” President Donald Trump also commented that he had heard “very interesting” things about Roswell, New Mexico. “I won’t talk to you about what I know about it, but it’s very interesting,” Trump said. Professor Eshed added that the aliens have yet to make themselves known because humanity is not yet ready.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE GETS COVID VACCINE

The first man to receive the COVID-19 vaccine in England is a gentleman named William Shakespeare, who claims to be an 81-year-old man from Warwickshire. Or a 454-year-old man, also from Warwickshire. Mr. Shakespeare’s true age has not been independently verified.

CHRISTMAS STAR TO APPEAR IN 2020

The Great Conjunction of 2020 will brighten the darkest day of the year as the two giant planets of our solar system draw closer together in the night sky than they have been in centuries.

By chance, the day that Jupiter and Saturn will appear closest for Earth-based stargazers is Dec. 21, the winter solstice, which is the longest night of the year in the northern hemisphere. The two planets will appear to be a giant star to the naked eye.

In which Iggy knows a Hallmark™ movie when he sees it

Yugo finds a sword, and

Sam gives a poet a piece of his mind.

And in which Iggy, Yugo and Sam save Christmas

(With a little help from Bogglin Jinks).

“It's not easy being green,
Having to spend each day the color of the leaves
When I think it may be nicer being red, or yellow or gold
Or something much more colorful like that”

- Kermit the Frog, *It's Not Easy Being Green*

“Christmas time is here again
Ain't been round since you know when
Christmas time is here again
O-U-T spells out!”

- The Beatles, *Christmas Time (Is Here Again)*

“A spaceman came traveling on his ship from afar
'Twas light years of time since his mission did start
And over a village, he halted his craft
And it hung in the sky like a star,
Just like a star

- Chris de Burgh, *A Spaceman Came Travelling*

“You see... What people just don't understand
Is that writing's demanding
It's mentally challenging and it's a bore
It's such a chore.”

- Christian Borle, *It's Hard to be the Bard*

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A Tale of 'Citement and Ventures

STEPPING ON BUTTERFLIES

An Unexpected Visitor



YUGO WAS NOT THE SORT OF ELF WHO RECEIVED VISITORS at midnight, particularly at Christmastime. Midnight Christmas visitors typically rattle the door knockers at the homes of greedy curmudgeons who regard Christmas as a humbug or worse.

Yugo was neither greedy, nor a curmudgeon, and the only thing he thought of as a humbug were the hard peppermint candies that old Mrs. Weevil kept in a tin can on her kitchen table. They were not the most pleasant sweets, but then, neither was old Mrs. Weevil.

Still, there was no reason for Yugo to receive a midnight Christmas visitor, instead of, perhaps, old Mrs. Weevil, but he had received one, nonetheless. He

was sound asleep, dreaming of the proof to Fermet's Last Theorem¹ when there came a gentle, but rapid knock at the door.

Yugo arose from his bed in a flash and reached for his doorknob. "Who could be knocking at this hour," he wondered. He threw open the door and then stepped back in surprise. For standing there before him was exactly the last person he ever expected to find rapidly knocking on his bedroom door in the middle of the night.

It was another elf in the doorway. An elf with an enormous black moustache and twinkling brown eyes. An enormous black moustache and twinkling brown eyes just like Yugo had. For the elf on the other side of the door was Yugo himself.

"Hello," he said.

"What are you doing here?" asked Yugo.

The other Yugo reached into the pocket of his coveralls and pulled out a small black device with meters and buttons on the side. "You are going to need this," said Yugo.

Yugo recognized the black device immediately. It had been a part of his snowmobile once. He took a step back and waved his arms. "No way. No, no no. No. I disabled that years ago and threw it away. It is nothing but trouble."

"I used to think that way, too," said Yugo.

"You should know better than anyone," said Yugo. "That is my old time-interface. I did not want to see it ever again."

"You are going to need it again and very soon," said Yugo. "You are going to need a working time travel mode in the snowmobile. You are going to need it to save Christmas."

"I am sure I will figure something out," said Yugo.

"Yes, you will," replied Yugo. "And this is what you figured out. "And this is what you figured out. To deliver the time-interface to yourself tonight." Yugo lifted his hand and offered Yugo the time-interface again.

Yugo hesitated.

¹ Fermet's Last Theorem is a mathematical problem developed by Pierre de Fermet in 1637 and which remained unsolved for 358 years. *The Guinness Book of Records* has deemed it the most difficult mathematical problem of all time (with Fermet's Next to Last Theorem a close second). Although a clever mathematician, by some accounts, M. de Fermet was the sort of curmudgeon who might have experienced the occasional midnight Christmas visit in his day.

“Come on, take it,” said Yugo. “If you can not trust me, then who can you trust?”

Yugo had to admit that Yugo had a point there.

“Give it over, then,” said Yugo. He took the device from Yugo and stuffed it into his own pocket. He was still in his pajamas, but Yugo’s pajamas were really just coveralls made of flannel. “But I’m bringing it back as soon as this is over.”

“I know you will,” said Yugo. “Where do you think I got it from?”

Patient Zero



HERE ARE SOME THINGS THAT SHOULD NEVER BE PUT INTO A STEW. Many people enjoy a good hearty stew. One made with carrots and onions along with beef or chicken or even tofu if one is so inclined. A proper stew can include all the food groups and be an excellent source of iron and fiber.

Stew is served everywhere in the world. In Mexico there is pozole, a spicy dish served on New Years Eve. Liverpool is famous for scouse, made from lamb and potatoes. There is a popular seafood stew called jjigae in Korea, not to mention lobby,² semur,³ and burgoo.⁴

Just about anything can be put into a stew. Hasenpfeffer, a tasty German dish, is made with rabbits. But there are some things which should never be put into a stew (including rabbits). One of the things that should never be put in a stew is an armadillo, especially one that had been found at the side of the road leading into Garland Grove, California by a highway worker named Floyd Calabash.

Floyd was not one to let anything go to waste, even a three days dead armadillo he found at the side of the road leading into Garland Grove. “He’s a little green, but I bet there is plenty of good eating on this fellow,” said Floyd as he placed the carcass into the back of his truck. “Why it even comes with its own bowl,” he added with a chuckle, referring to the armadillo’s bony backside.

One of the reasons that armadillo should never be put into a stew is that armadillos are not too particular about what they eat themselves. Their diet is mostly comprised of bugs, grubs and termites. Anyone foolish enough to put an

² Lobby comes from Staffordshire and is pretty much the same as scouse. People from Staffordshire just wanted their own thing.

³ From Indonesia, it is made with beef and potatoes mixed with soy sauce and cinnamon.

⁴ A popular concoction in Kentucky, where it is also known as “roadkill soup.”

armadillo in their stew pot will be getting their own fair share of bugs, grubs and termites.

It turns out that Floyd Calabash was just that foolish, and that very evening, he cooked up a hearty armadillo stew and then served it in its own bowl. He might as well have made a soup out of bugs, grubs and termites, because that is what he really had for dinner. And once anyone eats bugs, grubs and termites for dinner, then all bets are off.

To nobody's surprise, except perhaps Floyd himself, he woke up early the next morning with a stomach-ache. But he took a big slug of Pepto-Bismol™ with his morning oatmeal and declared himself cured. He headed off to work with a leftover serving of armadillo stew in his lunch bag. He brought a second serving for Connie at the dispatch desk.

"What's in it?" Connie asked sensibly, before taking a bite.

"It's an old family recipe," said Floyd. He was a little embarrassed to admit it was armadillo.

"Yeah, but what's in it?" asked Connie again.

"Carrots and stuff," said Floyd.

"What kind of stuff?"

"Proper stuff," replied Floyd.

Connie shrugged and took a bite. She squished up her face and said, "ooh, that's nasty. Tastes like bugs and grubs."

That was all it took. The next day, both Floyd and Connie woke up with stomach-aches. Connie was sensible and called in sick. Floyd took another dose of Pepto-Bismol™ and headed off to work.

Some of his co-workers noticed that Floyd looked a little green, but Floyd just explained that he had not been getting enough sun, even though he worked up and down the highway leading into Garland Grove, California which was a most sunny place indeed, even on days when the weatherman called for a bit of cloudy sky.

The next day his co-workers were feeling a little green themselves and the day after that all his co-workers were feeling a little green and before long half of the good people of Garland Grove, were feeling a little green. Another day or two and they were all feeling a bit green.

And what of Floyd? Well, Floyd went really green before all of his hair fell out. He spent most of the next few weeks in and out of his bathroom before he checked into the hospital and spent a couple of weeks in and out of the hospital

bathroom before he started to feel better. He was still green, and his hair never did grow back.

Nobody realized it then, but Floyd Calabash was patient zero in the Armadillo Flu epidemic.

The Armadillo Flu

BEFORE LONG, THE ARMADILLO FLU WAS EVERYWHERE. It started with a bowl of armadillo stew, but once it found a human host (Floyd) it turned out to be extremely contagious. It moved from Garland Grove to San Francisco and then moved up and down the west coast all the way from Vancouver to Tijuana and from there it made its way around the world. Soon there were cases in Canada, in Europe and China and everywhere else that people met other people and breathed on them.

Once someone caught it, the course of the disease was clear. First, there was the stomach-ache. Then a green pallor that started with just a hint of green, but soon blossomed into a bright lime green skin tone from head to toe. That was followed by the alopecia; complete hair loss; again, from head to toe. And all the while, the patient spent most of the next few weeks in and out of the bathroom.

Soon, grocery stores were unable to keep toilet paper in stock. More concerning, perruquiers⁵ were unable to keep wigs in stock. For although the bathroom phase of the sickness passed in a week or two, the green skin and baldness seemed to be permanent. Make-up and wigs were in great demand and, sadly, in short supply. Most people who caught the Armadillo Flu found themselves green, bald and out of toilet paper.

There was no cure for the Armadillo Flu and no vaccine. Scientists appeared on television and pointed at graphs covered in coloured looping lines. Some had loopier lines than others, but all agreed that there would eventually be more green bald people in the world than any other kind.

Since the only way to keep from catching the Armadillo Flu was to avoid other people, that is what everyone did. In no time at all the whole world was sheltering in place, isolating themselves from their families, friends and neighbours, to keep from running into someone with the Armadillo Flu who might sneeze or worse. Shops and restaurants were shuttered, and people only ventured outside to collect takeout grocery orders and even then, wore face masks that ranged from

⁵ A perruquier is a maker of perukes, which is just a fancy word for wig.

scarves to diving helmets. The Armadillo Flu was everywhere and the safest thing to do was to stay home and, if possible, avoid breathing altogether.

Six months after it all began, the entire world was shut in. Everything was closed and every door was locked. The Armadillo Flu was found in every part of the world and it was about to make its way to the North Pole.

Closing Time at the North Pole

IT WAS THREE DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were at their usual table at the *Walrus and Ulu*. This was the most popular drinking establishment at the North Pole and Iggy, Yugo and Sam were its most regular customers. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were elves, and elves were always welcome at the *Walrus and Ulu*. Indeed, every other customer was an elf as well.

Iggy was drinking an unsweetened water. He held the glass in his long, pointed fingers and brought it up to his pointed chin. Iggy was tall, for an elf, with dark unkept hair, pointed ears and a pointed nose. Iggy was always cheerful and optimistic.

Next to him was Yugo, who you met a little earlier. As noted then, Yugo had a thick black moustache and brown eyes that twinkled when he smiled. That was the only way anyone could tell he was smiling, on account of the thickness of the previously noted moustache. Yugo was the cleverest of elves with quick nimble hands and a quick, nimble mind. He was the sort of fellow who always saw animated mathematical equations floating in front of his eyes.

The third elf at the table was Sam. He was a rotund elf. The word rotund here is just a polite way of noting that Sam was morbidly obese. He weighed more than Iggy and Yugo put together. He was neither cheerful, nor optimistic. His round face was topped with a mop of brown curling hair and was always scowling.

“Here we are, three days before Christmas,” said Sam. “That’s when it always starts.”

“Not this again,” said Iggy. “Bad things do not always happen three days before Christmas. Lots of good things happen then, too.”

“Something strange did happen to me last night,” said Yugo. He pulled the black device from his pocket. “I had a visitor.”

“Who would come calling at this time of year?” asked Sam.

“It was me,” said Yugo.

“This is what I’m talking about,” said Sam. “Three days before Christmas. Every single year.”

“That sounds impossible,” said Iggy. “How could you visit yourself?”

“Time travel,” said Yugo. “It was me from sometime in the future.”

“But you got rid of the time machine in your snowmobile,” said Sam. “And a good thing, too. That was nothing but trouble.”

Yugo held up the black device. “Apparently I have it again. I came back last night to give me this. This is the time-interface from the snowmobile. It is the thing that lets the snowmobile travel through time.”

“You should use it to go to the future, find this other Yugo and give it back to yourself,” said Sam.

“I said that I was going to need it. To save Christmas.”

“Good timing,” said Iggy. “Christmas is only three days away.”

Sam stared coldly at Iggy. “Right,” he said. “I’m gonna need another drink.” He raised his empty glass and called for Cubby the bartender to fill it up with another Elfläger.

Cubby shook his head. “Sorry Sam, we’re closing up. The Armadillo Flu is coming.”

“Closing up?” said Sam. “How long?”

Cubby shrugged his shoulder. “Nobody knows. Could be weeks. Maybe months. We’re closed until they find a cure.”

Sam slammed his empty glass on the table. “Nooooooooo!” he cried.

“Sorry Sam,” said Cubby. “Maybe we’ll be open again next Christmas.” He showed the elves to the door. He closed it behind them and then placed a metal sign in the window that said:



Sam shook his head. “Well, there’s always the Kitty Kat Kantina on Peppermint Road.” He stomped off into the snow, with Iggy and Yugo following behind.

“Are you sure it was a future Yugo who gave you that gizmo?” Iggy asked.

“I’m sure,” said Yugo. “Nobody else has such a luxurious moustache.” He gave the end of his moustache a loving twirl.

“Do you think we should use it?”

“I do not know, but the other Yugo seemed sure that I would need it.”

They reached the Kitty Kat Kantina. All the lights were out, and the door was locked. There was a sign on the window that read:



“Nooooooooo!” cried Sam.

He looked frantically up and down Peppermint Road. The lights were out at the Bubby’s Barber Shoppe next door and the Patty Pancake Hut across the street was dark as well. And in window after window, the same sign:



A couple of other elves walked towards them. “What’s going on?” asked Iggy.

The other elves kept their distance. One of them said, “it’s the Armadillo Flu. Everything is closing. Santa Claus is having a meeting at the Pole to talk about it.”

“We had better get there,” said Iggy.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Sam. This was not unusual. Sam generally had a bad feeling about everything. But this time even Iggy had something of a bad feeling and that was most unusual indeed.

A large crowd of elves had gathered by the time they reached the big plaza in front of the Santa Claus Tower at the North Pole. But this gathering was different than most as every elf stood a socially distant two metres from the elf nearest them. Iggy, Yugo and Sam joined the throng, but kept a couple of paces apart from the surrounding elves.

A few moments later, Santa Claus stepped out of his office building and made his way to a podium at the front of the plaza. He pulled out a stack of cue cards, coughed quietly into the crook of his elbow and then began to speak.

“Thank you all for coming. I know you’ve all worked very hard this year building toys. I’m afraid I’ve got some difficult news to share with you.” He turned to the

next cue card in his little stack and continued. “As you know, the Armadillo Flu has spread around the world for the last few months. There is no cure and every house around the world has been locked down tight. Even the chimneys. Public health orders have been issued everywhere we go at Christmas. Nobody is allowed outdoors for any reason until this epidemic is over.”

“Unfortunately, and this pains me more than I can say, but that includes Christmas. We’ve been shut down too. The entire world is closed for Christmas. Everything has been bolted up or cancelled for the next few weeks or months or years or however long it takes to sort out this Armadillo mess. I’m saddened that I have to tell you all that Christmas is cancelled this year.”

“Noooooooooo!” cried Sam.

Yugo Has a Plan

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM WERE ISOLATING in their apartment in Elves Barracks B. The mood was sombre and quiet until Sam stepped out of the bathroom and said, “bad news, guys. We’re out of toilet paper.”

“We have bigger problems than toilet paper,” said Iggy.

“I’m not so sure,” said Sam. “This could be a really big problem.”

Iggy rolled his eyes and turned to Yugo. “Can you not figure out a cure for this thing?”

Yugo shook his head. He had several degrees in advanced pharmacology and knew that there was no easy answer. “It is not that simple. Every expert in the world has already been working on a cure. I mean, I am sure that I could do it in time. But we need to do tests and clinical trials. We would need months to figure out an effective treatment. Maybe longer.”

“Months? Christmas is in three days! We don’t have that kind of time,” said Sam.

Yugo turned the little black device in his hand. “Actually, we do,” he said. “We have all the time in the world.”

“What do you mean?” asked Iggy.

“This must be why I gave myself the time-interface.”

“To give you time to find a cure?” asked Sam.

“Not just a cure,” said Yugo. “We can go back in time and stop the Armadillo Flu from ever starting in the first place.”

“But you always say that time travel is trouble,” said Iggy.

“It is,” said Yugo. “Anything you change in the past can just mess up the future even more. But I do not see any other way.”

“How are we going to stop the Armadillo Flu?” asked Sam. “It’s a germ. You cannot even see it. How are we supposed to put a stop to it?”

“Every disease starts with one person,” Yugo picked up a red marker and began drawing circles and lines on a whiteboard that hung on the kitchen wall. “That person is called Patient Zero. Patient Zero encounters a new germ and then spreads it to the people they come into contact with and they spread it to other people and then you have the beginnings of an epidemic. With air travel, these new diseases can spread far and wide in a hurry.”

“We just need to find Patient Zero,” said Iggy.

“I have already found him,” said Yugo. Yugo wrote a name on the whiteboard and underlined it twice. “I have been scouring news sites from around the world. The first known case of something like the Armadillo Flu was reported by the *Garland Grove Weekly Shopper* on April 1st. That case involved a local man named Floyd Calabash, who had checked himself into hospital with symptoms of a lime green complexion and sudden hair loss.”

“Sounds like the Armadillo Flu to me,” said Sam.

“It sure does,” said Yugo. “But nobody knew that then. A few days later, a woman named Connie Kringle-Jones appeared at the Garland Grove Regional Medical Center holding hanks of hair in her green hands. She said Floyd had given her some strange stew a few days before. A few days after that, the nurses turned green, too. It seems that Mr. Calabash had made some stew out of an armadillo before he got sick.”

“Ew,” said Iggy.

“Ew is right,” said Yugo. “Armadillos eat bugs and grubs and things like that. Small wonder that this armadillo got sick. This disease would never have gone any further if Mr. Calabash had not put it into a stew and given some of that to his friend.”

“So, all we have to do is keep Floyd from cooking up that critter,” said Sam. “Seems simple enough.”

“Nothing is ever simple with time travel,” said Yugo.

“I am sure it will all work out fine,” said Iggy. His optimism was boundless. If asked the proverbial question about the half-filled glass of water, he would opine that there is always room for more water. “When can we get started?”

“As soon as I can install the time-interface,” said Yugo. “It should not take more than an hour or two.”

“I had better pack,” said Iggy.

“We should pick up some toilet paper while we’re out,” said Sam.

The Best Laid Plans

YUGO WAS UNDERNEATH HIS SNOWMOBILE when Iggy and Sam arrived two hours later. He kept the snowmobile in a private hangar about a quarter of a mile south of the North Pole. Of course, every private hangar in the area, along with every other thing in the world, is located south of the North Pole. There is only one way to go from the North Pole, and that is south.

Yugo’s snowmobile was unlike any other snowmobile in the world except, one supposes, like all of the others it was located south of the North Pole. But that was where their similarities ended.

Yugo’s snowmobile was bright red, with a heated cabin for passengers. The twin lithium fusion engines that powered the snowmobile made it the fastest vehicle on Earth. The fat chrome exhaust tubes on either side were painted with thin red and green stripes in the style of a candy cane. It could slide across ice and snow at an astonishing speed. With the flip of a yellow switch or the turn of a blue dial, it could skim across a lake or fly through the air. And now, with the installation of the time-interface, it could even travel through time.

Iggy arrived dragging an enormous steamer trunk. “I did not know what to pack,” he explained. “I have no idea what the weather is like in Garland Grove in the spring.”

“Are you ready to go, yet?” asked Sam.

Yugo slid out from underneath the snowmobile. “I have been ready for ages. I was just making a few modifications.”

“You don’t need any more modifications,” said Sam. “That contraption is scary enough already.” Sam was terrified of the snowmobile. He had been in it when he went into space and to the bottom of the ocean, each time at incredible speed.

Yugo pressed a button on his key fob and the back of the snowmobile slid open on smooth hydraulics. "Let me give you a hand with your case," he said. Together, he and Iggy lifted the big steamer trunk into the back of the snowmobile."

"That is sure heavy," said Yugo.

Sam looked into the back of the snowmobile. "You did not leave much room for the toilet paper."

"I might have packed too much, but you never know what you might need where we are going," said Iggy.

"It is a lot warmer in California than here," said Yugo with a smile.

"All right, all right, now that we're packed can we get this over with?" said Sam.

"There is no need to hurry," said Yugo. "We do have a time machine."

"And everything is closed," added Iggy.

"Harumph," harrumphed Sam. "I still want to get this over with."

The elves climbed into the snowmobile. Yugo was behind the wheel, with Iggy beside him. Sam sat on the large bench seat in the back. He pulled out a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips and began idly chewing on them. The crumbs that tumbled onto the crushed velvet seats were quietly disintegrated by Yugo's patented Crumb-Be-Gone[®] system.

Yugo carefully backed the snowmobile out of the hangar. He slipped it into gear and punched a bright red button. The snowmobile shot forward and skimmed across the snowy Arctic plain at an astonishing speed.

Sam gasped. "Do you have to go so fast?"

"We need to be going top speed for the time-interface to work," said Yugo.⁶

"Come on, Sam. This is fun," said Iggy.

Yugo punched a flashing orange button. "Let's get time travelling then."

A loud squeal rang out, like the sound an angry vacuum cleaner might make. Outside the windows colours and shapes swirled around the snowmobile like a trip through a rock video from the 1970s. The snowmobile slowly twisted through this psychedelic ether and then stopped with a sudden lurch.

"We have arrived," said Yugo.

⁶ In fact, Yugo did not have to go so fast and they did not need to be going top speed for the time-interface to work. Yugo just likes driving very fast.

“Not a moment too soon,” said Sam.

Yugo stared silently at the screen on his dashboard. “Maybe a few moments too soon,” he said.

“What do you mean, Yugo,” asked Iggy.

Yugo pointed at this screen. “According to this, we have arrived in 1612. We are four hundred years too early.”

December 22, 1612

“I KNEW SOMETHING LIKE THIS WOULD HAPPEN,” said Sam. “I just knew it. I said time travel was trouble. I said something would go wrong and it did. Something went wrong.”

“It is not all bad,” said Iggy. “Look on the bright side.”

“What bright side?” said Sam. “There is no bright side.”

Iggy was at the back of the snowmobile digging through his steamer trunk. He pulled out a silky looking garment. “This will give me a chance to wear these stockings. They were all the rage in the 1610s.” He held them up at his waist.

Sam slapped his forehead with his palm.

“You packed leotards?” said Yugo.

“You never know what you might need when you go on a trip,” said Iggy. He slipped on his stockings and then pulled on a pair of red velvet puffy breeches overtop.

“You packed breeches?” said Yugo.

“Puffy breeches,” said Iggy. “Very *au courant* among the nobility these days.”

“You packed a codpiece?” asked Yugo.

“An enormous codpiece, I will have you know. Everyone is wearing them.”

“Can we just get back in the snowmobile and get to the right spot?” asked Sam.

Yugo was still tapping at his monitor. “The time-interface was programmed to bring us here first. There must be something we need to do here.”

“Maybe the time-interface made a mistake,” said Sam.

“I do not see how,” said Yugo. “I programmed it myself. Or at least my other, future self programmed it.”

Sam was about to say something ill spirited and mean, but Iggy cut him off with a most unelfly glare.

Yugo climbed out of the snowmobile. He lowered the doors with his remote key fob. The slid shut silently and then clicked into place. “Let us have a look around.”

The snowmobile had arrived at a stand of trees a few meters from a dirt road. A horse drawn cart rattled past. The driver took one look at Yugo and Sam and snorted. “What strange garb be this?” Then he snapped the reins in his hands and the cart rolled along.

“How rude,” said Yugo.

“Maybe manners had not been invented yet,” said Sam.⁷

“Why do you think we are here, Yugo?” asked Iggy. “What happened in 1612 that is so important?”

Yugo pulled a tablet from his toolbelt. “Let me have a look.” His fingers danced across the screen. “Ooooh, that’s interesting”

“What is that?” asked Iggy.

“Galileo discovered the planet Neptune.”

“That’s probably not it,” said Sam. “When did he find Uranus?”

Iggy glared at Sam. Sam covered his mouth to keep from giggling. Yugo answered simply, “that does not happen until 1681. And it was Sir William Hershel who found Uranus, not Galileo.”

Sam dropped his hand and giggled out loud.

Iggy tried to get the conversation back on track. “What else happened in 1612?”

“Let me see,” said Yugo staring at his tablet. “Battle of Kingren. Battle of Swally. The Yule Log Frenzy. Quite a few witches burned at the stake.”

“What was that?” said Iggy.

⁷ The first published rules of etiquette are found in the *The Maxims of Ptahhotep*, which was written around 2750 BC. Ptahhotep was the vizier of King Djedkare Isesi of the Fifth Dynasty and, it is said, wrote down his maxims when he was 110 years old and ready to retire. Manners were invented long before 1612, but apparently there was no pension plan for royal viziers in ancient times.

“Witch burning? Terrible thing,” said Yugo. “But very popular in 1612.”

“No before that.”

“The Yule Log Frenzy?”

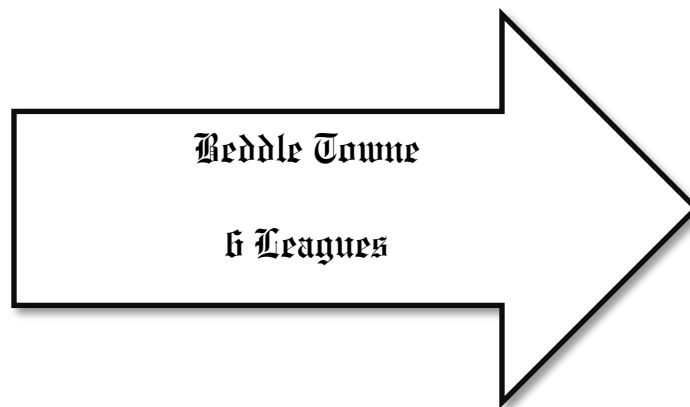
Sam nodded his head. “That does sound like our kind of jam.”

“Indeed, it does,” said Yugo.

“What was the Yule Log Frenzy?” asked Iggy.

“On Christmas Eve, 1612, there was a big bonfire in the middle of an English village called Beddle Towne. Fumes from the fire drove the townsfolk mad and they burned down the town. And then some witches were burned at the stake. But that part seems to be pretty standard fare for a Thursday night in these days.”

Iggy pulled on Yugo’s sleeve. He pointed at a sign at the side of the road. It said:



“What day is today?” asked Sam.

Yugo looked at his watch. “December 22, 1612. Just before lunch time.”

“I knew it,” said Sam. “Three days before Christmas.”

Frumenty for Three

SAM WIPED SWEAT FROM HIS BROW WITH HIS GREEN VELVET SHIRT SLEEVE. “How far is a league, anyway?”

“It is a measure of the distance a person can walk in about an hour,” said Yugo. “Three miles or so.”

Sam stopped in the middle of the road. "That's 18 miles. Why are we walking 18 miles when we have the snowmobile?"

"That is a good question," said Iggy.

"I thought we should be a little less conspicuous. They do not have snowmobiles in 1612," said Yugo.

"I say we go back and get the snowmobile," said Sam.

"We have already come five leagues," said Yugo. "We are almost there."

Sam counted on his fingers. He was not at all interested in another 15 mile walk back to get the snowmobile. "Fine," he said. "But let's be a little more conspicuous next time."

The sun was setting when they reached the edge of Beddle Towne about an hour later. "We better find someplace to stay for the night," said Iggy.

"How about that one," said Sam. He pointed in the direction of a tavern with a sagging roof. It was the sort of building that had been renovated repeatedly over the years, with assorted additions stabbing out in various directions. A sign hung from a rod above the door that said, *Moose and Pickle*. "It looks like my kind of place."

Indeed, it did. They climbed up the ancient stone steps to the door and were greeted by a big, old sturdy woman carrying an armful of horns filled to the top with some dark brown foaming beverage. She looked the elves up and down and said, "how about that. We don't get many of your kind here. Especially at this time of year."

Iggy struggled to decide whether to be offended or not. "What kind is that?"

"Christmas elves," of course. "Usually don't see Christmas elves till springtime. And even then, we hardly ever see elves in such fine pantaloons as those." She winked at Iggy.

Iggy blushed as the landlady introduced herself. "I'm Mrs. Wiggins. And this is our place, the olde *Moose and Pickle*."

"Funny name for an English pub," said Iggy.

"Moose live in the Americas," said Yugo. "There are not any moose within thousands of miles of here."

"No one knows where the name came from. The *Moose* has been around since Roman times. Burned down once or twice since then, but there's always been the *Moose* hereabouts. Now, let's get some supper into you. You fellows look like you could use a decent meal." She gave Sam a nudge with her elbow and led them to a long table filled with trenchers of bread and gravy.

Sam pointed to the foaming horns in her hand. “What do you call that stuff?”

“Elfmeäde,” she said. “It’s an old family recipe. It’ll cure what ails you. Even the plague, they says.”

Sam licked his lips and cleared a space on the table in front of him. “Two horns please and keep them coming.”

Iggy asked for an unsweetened water. Mrs. Wiggins shook her head and set a horn of elfmeäde in front of him. She returned with three tin bowls filled with brown stuff. Yugo took a careful spoonful. “Oh! Frumenty!”

Sam took a less careful spoonful and in a few moments his bowl was completely empty. He held it up. “Please ma’am, may I have some more?” She returned with an enormous ladle filled with brown stuff and dumped it into Sam’s bowl.

“Frumenty?” said Iggy.

“Typical medieval pub fare,” said Yugo. “Basically, it is porridge with whatever bits the cook has lying around the kitchen thrown in.”

“I got a turkey wattle in mine,” said Sam as he finished off his second bowl. “It was delicious.”

“Must be Christmas time if they are including turkey wattle,” said Yugo.

The hour was late when the elves⁸ finished their last horn of elfmeäde and made their way to their little room on the second floor of the inn. It was a modest room, with three small wooden beds with thin straw mattresses. A large clay pot sat at the foot of each bed.

“Hey guys, get a load of this,” said Iggy. He pointed at a painted over section of the wall that showed a series of vertical lines and cross hatches with a crudely etched note underneath:

SAM WAZ HERE

2-1-50

“Maybe you were here before,” Iggy said to Sam.

“Not me, it must have been another Sam.” And then he fell onto his bed with a heavy thud. A moment later he was snoring.

⁸ It was Sam who finished the last horn.

Iggy looked down at the clay pot at the end of his bed. “What is that for?” he asked.

“That is the indoor plumbing,” said Yugo.

Iggy looked at him with a confused expression on his face. Then he blushed again when he realized what Yugo meant by indoor plumbing. He also resolved to himself to hold it in until morning.

Yugo Has a Another Plan

A RAVEN CROWED AT THE CRACK OF DAWN. Or perhaps it was a crow which ravened. It is hard to tell the difference sometimes.

Iggy jumped from his bed. He looked down at the empty clay pot at the foot of his bed and decided that he could hold on a little while longer. Yugo was already awake, studying his tablet. Sam let out a prodigiously tough snore. Iggy shook his shoulder. “Hey Sam, wake up.”

Sam rolled over and kept on snoring. Iggy picked up the empty clay pot and held it close to Sam’s head while striking it with a stick. “Go away, Iggy,” said Sam and immediately went back to snoring.

“What are you reading, Yugo?” Iggy asked.

“I’m reading up on the Yule Log Frenzy of 1612. Tomorrow night the town will have a big bonfire to celebrate Christmas. After that, everyone goes crazy and uses the logs from the fire to burn down the entire town. It has always been assumed that there was something about the logs that made everyone go crazy when they burned. Mold maybe? Some kind of fungus? Nobody has ever really known for sure.”

“All we have to do is keep the town from holding their big bonfire, then,” said Iggy.

“Easier said than done. The bonfire is a Christmas tradition. It’s been going for a thousand years. These folks will not give up their big tradition easily.”

“What are we going to do then?”

“I have another idea, but it will not be easy,” said Yugo.

“What is your idea?” asked Iggy.

“Simple, really. The townsfolk will be setting up their bonfire today. All we must do is to replace all the logs with logs we cut ourselves. We can test all of them to make sure they are all safe.”

“How many logs are we talking about?” asked Iggy.

“Not that many. Three or four hundred. No more than that.”

Iggy blew out a long breath. “We had better get chopping, then.”

Sam let out an even tougher prodigious snore than before. Iggy was finally able to wake him up by holding Sam’s own clay pot over his head and threatening to dump it out.

“I’m up, I’m up,” said Sam as he slowly raised his head. “I just need a little quiet time.”

“No time for that,” said Iggy. “We have work to do.”

Thirty minutes later, the elves walked across the town square, where a group of burly men were stacking wood. Sam whistled. “What hard work that must be, hauling and stacking all those logs.”

They stopped at a blacksmith’s shop at the edge of the square. The blacksmith was a giant of a man, with forearms as thick as yule log. He introduced himself as one Jeremiah Jones. And then he asked, “what would ye wee folk be needing of old Jeremiah on this fine winter morning?”

“Axes,” said Yugo. “Sharp ones. And a cart.”

“Off to do a little chopping are you?” said Jeremiah. “Well good luck to ye. Most of the best trees hereabout have already been knocked down for the big Christmas fire. But ye should be able to find some good oak and maple trees a league or two down the road. Them trees is hard wood, though. No easy chopping around here.”

Yugo thanked the smith, and the three elves took their cart and axes up the road until they found a stand of maple trees a few miles out of town. The wood was every bit as hard as Jeremiah had promised, but by the time the sun went down, the elves had managed to knock down three big trees and reduce them to more than three hundred logs.

Sam sat on a stump to catch his breath. “That is mighty hard work.”

“What do you mean, Sam,” said Iggy. “Yugo and I did all the chopping. You just sat on the stump and watched it.”

“I know hard work when I see it,” said Sam. “I can’t imagine how sore you guys will be in the morning.”

The job was still not finished. They had to cart all their replacement logs into town under cover of darkness. Iggy and Yugo made eight trips to move all their new firewood. Sam spent the night sleeping on his stump.

But finally, the job was done. As the raven crowed (or the crow ravened) to mark the new day, Iggy and Yugo had built a fine new bonfire in the middle of the town square. All the moldy logs had been carted away. They just had to go back to the stump and collect Sam.

“I would kill for some frumenty and elfmeäde right now,” said Sam. He rode in the little cart as Iggy pushed it up the road. “Lumberjacking sure looks like thirsty work.”

Jeremiah Jones and the Yule Log Frenzy of 1612

MRS. WIGGINS HOSTED A HUGE CHRISTMAS EVE SUPPER for most of the people in the town. She served frumenty from a big iron pot and filled horns with elfmeäde from a nearby cask.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were squeezed at long table at the *Moose and Pickle*. Father Stuber sat to their left. He was the vicar of the town church. He was also grotesquely obese. To their right sat Jeremiah Jones, who was even bigger, though there was not an ounce of fat on him.

Father Stuber leaned into Iggy. “Are you excited for the fire, lad?”

Iggy could barely move but gave a little nod.

“Aye, I remember when I was a wee boy like you. Nothing like a big bonfire at Christmas to warm the soul.”

Sam took a slurp from his horn as Mrs. Wiggins set a second bowl in front of him.

“Now that’s good frumenty,” said Jeremiah Jones. “Tell me what yer secret is Mrs. Wiggins. What have you slipped into it?”

“A little something special for Christmas,” said Mrs. Wiggins. Her face was split with a big grin. “Mr. Wiggins caught an armadillo this morning. Can you imagine? You never see an armadillo around here.⁹ But we figured we’d throw him into the pot. Make it special for Christmas!”

⁹ Mrs. Wiggins was correct. She would never see an armadillo in the wild in medieval England. Perhaps this one escaped from a zoo. King Henry VIII was known to keep a

Yugo dropped his spoon.

Jeremiah Jones scooped another heaping spoonful of frumenty into his mouth.

Yugo reached to his left and knocked the spoon out of Iggy's hand. "Don't eat the frumenty," he said. He reached over to grab Sam's spoon, but Sam used his spoon to rap Yugo on the back of the hand instead.

"Hands off, that's my frumenty. Get your own."

"Do not eat any more, Sam," said Yugo. "It is not good for you."

"What do you mean," said Iggy.

"We were wrong. It is not the logs. There was never anything wrong with the logs," said Yugo. "It is the frumenty that is bad."

"You mean we cut down all those trees for nothing?" said Sam.

Iggy gave him a sideways glare as Jeremiah Jones rose from the table. He smashed his horn of elfmeade onto the dirt floor and yelled, "Merry Christmas ya gang of blackguards!" and he punched the diner to his right.

That fellow picked himself off the floor and then shattered his chair over Jeremiah's back. Jeremiah Jones just laughed, picked up his own chair and smashed it over the head of the diner to his left, who happened to be Sam.

Iggy and Yugo scrambled under the table. Sam lay unconscious on the floor and they pulled him under the table with them.

By then the frenzy was on. Even Mrs. Wiggins was in on the action, throwing spoons, forks and, yes, knives into the crowd. "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Wiggins!" shouted Jeremiah Jones as he hurled a pot of gravy back in her direction.

Soon the mob had spilled out into the street, just as the Christmas Eve bonfire was lit. Jeremiah Jones ran up to the fire, pulled out a burning branch of hickory¹⁰ and threw it through the stained-glass window of the church. Father Stuber just laughed and then hurled a burning log of his own through the church window.

Everyone in the town square was laughing and throwing logs into nearby buildings. Jeremiah Jones' smithy was aflame, but the big blacksmith just chortled and threw another log onto the fire.

menagerie of exotic animals at the Tower of London. Maybe it came from there. Yes, that is probably it. It escaped from the Tower of London.

¹⁰ An extremely hard wood indeed.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam barely escaped from the safety of their spot under the table when Mr. Wiggins threw a burning log into his own inn. They scrambled into the town square to see everything in flames. The town hall, the schoolhouse and every other house they could see were all on fire.

“What fun,” said Sam and ran towards the bonfire to get a burning log of his own. Iggy and Yugo tackled him before he could get close, but it took all their strength to hold him down.

“Bad frumenty,” said Yugo.

Sam grunted. “Frumenty good.”

Iggy and Yugo had to hold Sam down until morning. By then Beddle Towne had been burned to the ground. The only thing that had not been burned that night were three accused witches, who had escaped to the next town in all the confusion. The remaining townsfolk walked around in a daze, putting out what little fires were still burning.

As they walked back to the snowmobile six leagues up the road, Iggy said, “we did all that work, but nothing changed. The townsfolk burned down the town all the same. It is like we were never here.”

“That is the thing about time travel,” said Yugo. “You cannot just fix things with a time machine. Sometimes you just make things worse.”

“Or you fix it so that it is just the same as before,” said Sam.

“Or that,” said Yugo.

“Let’s get home,” said Sam. “I have a stomach-ache.”

They reached the snowmobile and climbed into their usual seats. The snowmobile rocketed down the road away from what was left of old Beddle Towne. Yugo pressed the orange button on the time-interface and in a flash the snowmobile was gone.

December 22, 1984

ONCE MORE THE SNOWMOBILE TUMBLED AND WEAVED through the psychedelic panorama of a 1970s rock music video.

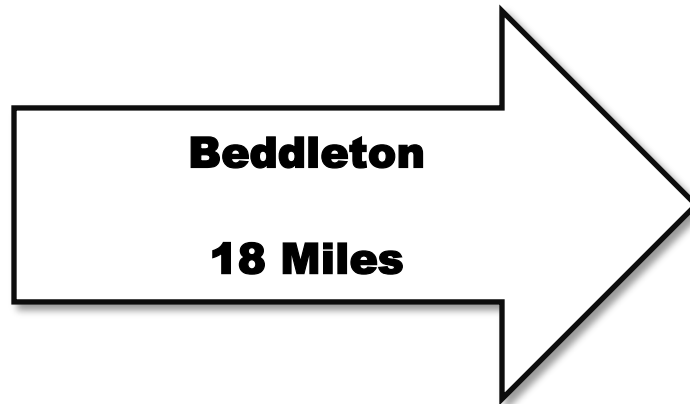
“This is not helping my stomach-ache at all,” said Sam. His stomach replied with a prodigiously tough gurgle.

The snowmobile popped out of the rock music video and stopped suddenly at the side of a paved road. A boxy Dodge Daytona drove past them. Iggy, Yugo and Sam stepped out of the snowmobile.

“Where are we?” asked Iggy.

Yugo looked around. “There is something familiar about this place.”

Sam tapped Yugo on the shoulder and pointed to a sign a little way up the road. It said:



“We are still in the same place,” said Iggy.

“But not the same time,” said Yugo. He looked at the screen on the dashboard of the snowmobile. “According to the time-interface, we are in 1984.”

“What day?” asked Sam.

“December 22nd.”

“I knew it,” said Sam. “Three days before Christmas. Something weird is going to happen any minute. It always does.”

“Why are we here? Why are we here at this time?” asked Iggy.

“I do not know,” said Yugo. “The time-interface seems to have a mind of its own.”

Iggy went to the back of the snowmobile and dug through his steamer trunk. He returned dressed in a tight pink T-shirt and skinny jeans with leg warmers pulled up to his knees. He had a turquoise headband and had brushed his hair back in the style of a mullet. “Good thing I remembered to pack leg warmers.”

“I am sure you will fit right in,” said Yugo.

“If we are going to be stuck in 1984, we should get something to eat. Do you remember whether the McRib¹¹ was available then?” said Sam.

“I am sure there will be someplace to eat in town,” said Iggy.

“Let’s go then,” said Sam. “But let’s drive this time, kay?” He climbed into his seat in the back of the snowmobile.

Yugo slipped behind the wheel and guided the snowmobile onto the roadway. Ten minutes later, they found themselves driving through a picturesque county town filled with gabled cottages and red brick buildings. In the middle of the town square there was a statue of a heavily decorated soldier standing in front of a bronze biplane and pointing to the sky.

“Beddle Towne has come a long way in 350 years,” said Iggy.

“It is Beddleton, now,” said Yugo. “You would never know that the whole place had burned down once.”

“Stop! Stop!” yelled Sam. He pointed out his window. “Look, it’s still here.”

Yugo brought the snowmobile to a stop in front of an older building with a thatched roof. There was a sign over the door with the words *Moose and Pickle* written in gold paint.

Sam could move surprisingly quickly when he was hungry. He was out of the snowmobile and through the front door of the *Moose and Pickle* before Yugo had finished parking. He was seated at his own table by the time Iggy and Yugo walked in.

There was a Christmas tree near the door and Christmas lights were draped around the room. Framed photographs lined the walls. Iggy paused in front of one of them. It was an old sepia toned image of a freckled woman and three children posed in front of a Christmas tree. “There is something familiar about that one,” said Iggy.

¹¹ The McRib is a particularly nasty pork sandwich which was served at McDonalds™ restaurants between 1981 and 1985. It features a pork patty pressed into the shape of a miniature rack of ribs, covered in barbecue sauce and served on a submarine style roll. Unfortunately, it returns to the menu periodically. It has been continuously available in Germany and Luxembourg since the 1980s.

Yugo looked at the photograph. All the faces were blurry. "I cannot recognize any of those people. Are they famous?"

"Just familiar," said Iggy.

Yugo pointed at one of the figures in the photograph. "The picture is so fuzzy it looks like that kid has a moustache. And that fat kid's face is a complete blur."

A middle-aged woman with streaks of grey in her red hair came up and showed them to Sam's table. "It's been a long time since we've had elves in here," she said. Then she stopped and stared. "Iggy? Is that you? I thought I recognized you. You haven't changed a bit."

Iggy squirmed uncomfortably. "It feels like only yesterday, but we have not been here for a long time."

"I can't believe its you! It's Abigail. Abigail Wiggins. Don't you remember me?" said the waitress.

"Mrs. Wiggins?" said Sam. "She must be hundreds of years old by now."

"I think this is a different Mrs. Wiggins," said Yugo.

"The *Moose* has been in the Wiggins family for longer than anyone can remember. There have been a lot of Mrs. Wigginses over the years. I'm the newest one," said the newest Mrs. Wiggins. She paused for a moment and then said, "Funny. That's what you called me then. The newest Mrs. Wiggins you said. But I wasn't a Wiggins yet. Not quite. Now sit yourself down and let me get you something."

"Frumenty please," said Sam. "And a big foaming horn of elfmeäde."

The newest Mrs. Wiggins looked at him, confused. "It's been quite a piece since anyone ordered frumenty. I could get you some porridge instead if you like."

Sam looked disappointed. "What about the elfmeäde?"

"We might have an old bottle of that," said the newest Mrs. Wiggins. "That stuff never goes off." She headed out of the room.

"What a strange conversation," said Iggy.

The newest Mrs. Wiggins returned a few minutes later with a clean glass and a very dusty bottle. She pulled out the cork and filled Sam's glass. "I found a whole case of it in the basement. It's probably been there since the dark ages."

Sam smiled and took a big pull from his glass. He wiped the foam of from his lips and said, "that's some darn fine elfmeäde."

Iggy and Yugo settled for water while Sam ordered another elfmeäde. "What brings you fellows to Beddleton?" asked the newest Mrs. Wiggins.

Sam was about to answer, “broken time machine,” but Iggy cut him off. “Just seeing the sights.”


“Not that many sights to see in Beddleton, especially in winter,” said the newest Mrs. Wiggins. “There is a big Christmas Dance you could go to at the church.”

“That sounds like fun,” said Iggy.

“It’ll be starting in about an hour,” said the newest Mrs. Wiggins. She looked at the dusty case of elfmeäde she had brought up from her basement. “If you guys are going, maybe you could take this old stuff with you as a donation.”

“Happy to oblige,” said Iggy.

Dance, Dance Fever

 THAT WAS HOW IGGY, YUGO AND SAM FOUND THEMSELVES at a Christmas dance at the basement of the Beddleton Community Church three days before Christmas, 1984. Iggy and Yugo carried the case of elfmeäde down the stairs. It was lighter by another bottle by the time they reached the basement.

In the basement, people were dancing to Christmas songs. With his pink shirt and leg warmers, Iggy fit right in. They were greeted at the foot of the stairs by the vicar, who introduced himself as Reverend Stewart Burr. “Another Reverend Stuber?” said Sam. “What is the deal with this place?” He popped the cork out of another elfmeäde.

Reverend Burr placed the bottles on a long table near a big punch bowl. It was not long before they had all been snatched up. Iggy and Yugo made their way out to the dance floor.

“Come on, Sam,” said Iggy.

Sam shook his head. “I’m feeling a little dizzy. I think I’ll sit this one out.” Sam took a seat near the punch bowl.

“Suit yourself,” said Yugo. He joined the crowd on the dance floor who were twirling and swaying to *Last Christmas*. A silver disco ball hung from the ceiling and reflected shifting colourful Christmas lights on all the dancers.

The DJ was playing *Thank God It’s Christmas* when it started. A howl filled the room and Sam leapt onto the dance floor. His legs kicked and hopped as he bounded around the room.

“Looks like you are feeling better,” said Iggy.

"I'm not better," said Sam. "I've got a fever and the only cure is ... dancing!" He jumped and bopped across the floor.

"I do not think I have ever seen Sam dance before," said Yugo.

"Not like this," said Iggy.

Sam danced like an elf possessed. He swirled, he pranced, he twirled and oh did he dance. He did the mambo, he did the twist, he tangoed. He crouched down and did Russian leg kicks and then skittered across the floor on his toes like a ballerina.

He spun past Iggy and Yugo and panted "I can't stop."

"Then you go," said Iggy with a laugh.

"I mean it. I can't stop." Sam turned to the other dancers and extended his leg in an awkward arabesque.

One of the other dancers howled like Sam had a few minutes earlier. Yugo looked out on the floor. Yet another dancer howled and jumped into the air. Soon they were madly pirouetting like Sam.

"Something is wrong," said Yugo.

"What could be wrong? Everyone is dancing like crazy," said Iggy.

"That is what is wrong. They are going crazy. Look at Sam. He is completely out of breath, but his legs will not stop moving."

Iggy looked out at the dance floor. Two more dancers howled and then started jitterbugging like, well, jitterbugs. Sam skipped back towards Iggy and Yugo. He gasped. "Help me." Then he wriggled back out to the middle of the floor where some of the other dancers were madly doing the hustle.

"I am going out there," said Yugo. He charged out into the whirling mass of dancers, his head down and his right arm straight out in front of him. He pushed past two sweaty dancers and then threw himself at Sam. He drove his shoulder into Sam's enormous belly and pulled him to the ground.

Sam lay on his back with Yugo on top of him. His legs still kicked and wriggled.

Iggy worked his way through the dancing throng and dropped down to try and hold Sam's legs still. It was no use. Sam could not stop dancing, even though he was pinned to his back by a pair of helper elves.

"We cannot hold them all down," said Iggy.

“We cannot even hold Sam down,” said Yugo. Sure enough, Sam wriggled out of Yugo’s grasp and hopped back to his feet, his feet tapping and skipping to the beat of *Do They Know It’s Christmas*.

“They all have dance fever,” said Iggy. “How could something like this happen?”

Yugo worked his way out of the crowd. He stopped at the long table with a row of empty bottles by the punch bowl. He picked one up and looked at it. “The elfmeäde. There is something wrong with the elfmeäde. Sam was the first to have some and he was the first to get the dance fever. But now everyone else who had some is dancing up a storm.”

“What can we do?” said Iggy. “Somebody is going to get hurt if they do not stop dancing.”

Yugo snapped his fingers. “There is one way to make people stop dancing. Turn off the music.” He walked over to the table where the DJ was queuing up the next song and pulled a plug out of the wall. *Christmas Without You* stopped in mid chorus.

Sam and several of the other dancers fell to the floor, exhausted.

“Sam panted. “I need a drink.”

“No more elfmeäde,” said Iggy.

Yugo slipped one of the empty bottles into his toolbelt. “I am going to take this home to analyze it, but I am sure that something must have mutated in this old elfmeäde and it made everyone who had some sick. Just like we saw with the frumenty.”

“And the armadillo stew,” said Iggy.

“We need to get Sam home,” said Yugo. Together, he and Yugo lifted Sam back onto his feet, which was no easy task. They made their way back to the snowmobile and carefully helped Sam into the back seat.

Yugo powered up the lithium fusion engines. “This is the problem with time travel. We have seen two different epidemics and we have not been able to stop either one. In fact, we might have caused one of them.”

“And we still have not prevented the Armadillo Flu,” said Iggy.

“We are going to take care of that right now,” said Yugo. “And then I am getting rid of the time-interface forever.” He tapped some numbers on his keypad and the snowmobile rocketed out of Beddleton and out of 1984.

December 22, 1914

THE SNOWMOBILE SKIDDED TO A STOP IN THE MIDDLE OF A MUDDY FIELD. A moment later it was hit with gunfire coming from two sides. The bullets bounced harmlessly off the snowmobile's titanium fuselage and hardened polypropylene windows.

"I do not think we are in Beddleton anymore," said Iggy.

"It's like we've landed in the middle of a war zone," said Sam.

"Indeed, we have," said Yugo. "According to the time-interface we are in 1914. At the beginning of the First World War." Another cascade of bullets rattled off the side of the snowmobile.

"What day?" asked Sam.

"December 22. December 22, 1914," said Yugo.

Sam grunted. "I knew it."

Yugo pulled a green lever and the snowmobile jerked backwards, its rear tires spinning in the mud and snow. Bullets flew past the windows.

The snowmobile was surrounded by fog and smoke. "I can not see a thing," said Yugo. He twisted the wheel as the snowmobile bounded over the uneven ground. Yugo reached out to activate the radar system when the snowmobile suddenly dropped into a hole that had been dug into the soft earth. It twisted as it fell, and slammed to the ground on its side, sinking nearly a foot into the muddy bottom.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam slowly climbed out of the snowmobile through the passenger door. They were in a long muddy ditch about seven feet deep. The ditch was occupied by a group of men in brown canvas clothes. The nearest one of them had a rifle pointed at their faces.

"Hello," said Iggy, cheerfully.

The man slowly lowered his rifle. "Elves? We don't see many elves down here in the trenches." He waved at the nearby soldiers to lower their rifles.

Iggy extended his hand. "I'm Iggy."

"Private Alistair Wiggins. You can call me Al. I'm supposed to shoot anyone who tries to get into the trench, but you fellows seem harmless enough. And that contraption of yours is not going anywhere soon."

Yugo looked back at his snowmobile. It lay on its side, half buried in mud. "I guess we will be staying for a bit. It is going to take some time to dig the snowmobile out of there."

"Where the heck are we anyway," asked Sam.

Private Wiggins looked confused. "You don't know where you are?"

"It is a long story," said Iggy. "Thirty pages so far."

Private Wiggins looked even more confused. "This is the western front. Northern France. Out there," Private Wiggins waved at the top of the trench, "is no man's land."

"It must be someone's land," said Yugo.

Private Wiggins shook his head. "Beyond that is another trench just like this one filled with the German Fifth Brigade. They are fighting us for it."

"Who wants it?" said Sam. "I've seen it. It's all mud and burned up trees."

"We have our orders," said Private Wiggins. Sam just shook his head.

"It was nice meeting you," said Iggy. "But we have to be on our way. You would not happen to have a shovel by chance?"

Private Wiggins snorted. "We have hundreds of shovels. Where do you think this trench came from?" He led Iggy and Yugo to a small shed built into the side of the trench. They each took a shovel and walked back to the snowmobile.

Iggy climbed inside and dug into his steamer trunk. He emerged a few minutes later dressed in a brown khaki coat and pants. "I am sure glad I remembered to pack my beret," he said as he placed a brown felt beret on his head. He grabbed his shovel and together he and Yugo began digging out the snowmobile. Sam sat nearby and ate potato chips.

Yugo frowned. "Are you going to help?"

"I hurt my hip with all that dancing yesterday.¹² I'd be no use to you. You guys are doing a great job, though."

Just then a shell exploded at the lip of the trench. Dirt rained down on the snowmobile, covering it with another six inches of mud.

"Tough break," said Sam.

¹² In this case, "yesterday" actually refers to a date 70 years in the future. Sam could have better described that day as septuagintaday, which means a day seventy years from now. Time travel requires a certain level of temporal vocabulary with which most people are not familiar.

Private Wiggins and the other soldiers quickly loaded up their own mortar and returned fire. Shells exploded in the sky over no man's land. Jagged metal shrapnel stabbed into the wall of the trench. And into a surprised Private Wiggins.

"Gah!" said Private Wiggins and he dropped to the ground. Iggy and Yugo dropped their shovels and rushed to his side. The other soldiers kept firing.

Iggy watched in horror as Private Wiggins pulled long black metal shard from his shoulder. Blood gushed out onto his jacket.

"That is awful," said Iggy.

"Oh, that's nothing," said Private Wiggins, his upper lip so stiff that he mumbled as he spoke. "You should have seen the one I pulled out last week. That was a big one."

Yugo looked concerned. "Can I see?"

Private Wiggins grunted and rolled up his left pant leg. A swollen red scar zigzagged down his shin. It was black in places and yellow goo leaked out the edge. The skin below the knee was a greenish purple colour. Gurple, if you will.

"Oh, this is not good," said Yugo.

"It's just a flesh wound," Private Wiggins mumbled around his stiff upper lip. "Nothing to worry about."

"It is plenty to worry about," said Yugo. "This injury is infected. Gangrene is starting to set in. If this is not treated right away, you are going to lose this leg. Or your life."

Private Wiggins' lip stiffened even more.

"There must be something we can do to treat this," said Iggy.

"It's no problem," said Sam, still gnawing on his potato chips. "Just give him a shot of penicillin and Bob's your uncle."

"Bob is my uncle. Bob Wiggins," said Private Wiggins. "He runs a pub back home."

"Let me guess," said Sam. "The *Moose and Pickle*?"

"Just the place," said Private Wiggins. "Have you ever been there?"

"Once or twice," said Iggy. Then he turned to Yugo. "What about a shot of penicillin? Should that not clear up this infection?"


Yugo twisted his mouth, then said, “sure it would. But there is no penicillin here or anywhere. Antibiotics will not be discovered for another fifteen years.”

“There must be something you can do.”

Yugo’s mouth twisted the other way. “Maybe. Is there any mold around?”

Private Wiggins let out a prodigiously tough guffaw. “Look around, son. You’re in a damp hole in the ground. We have more mold than shovels here!”

Yugo Has Yet Another Plan

 HE SUN ROSE OVER NO MAN’S LAND. Somewhere a raven cawed but was immediately silenced by machine gun fire. Yugo had been working for hours in the chemistry lab at the rear of the snowmobile. Private Wiggins was right. There was mold throughout the trench. It was the least sanitary place Yugo had ever seen.

Yugo had easily collected a basket full of mold. From there it was just a matter of chemistry, distilling the spores in flasks, then fermenting the works before he let it simmer for a bit.

He climbed out of the snowmobile. Iggy was still digging it out of the mud. Sam sat nearby. He turned his bag of potato chips over and let the remaining crumbs fall into his hand.

“How did it go?” asked Iggy.

“I think it will work,” said Yugo. “We are going to have to let it stew for a day or two, but we can not go anywhere until we finish digging out the snowmobile, anyway.”

“What is the mold for, anyway?” asked Sam as he ripped open another bag of potato chips.¹³

“Mold is the principal ingredient in penicillin and other drugs like that,” said Yugo. “It is the stuff that makes those medicines effective on certain kinds of germs.”

“Cool,” said Sam. He crunched down on another crisp.

¹³ The other blokes in the trench called Sam’s chips “crisps.” To them, chips were French fries and something to be served with fish.

Yugo picked up a shovel and helped Iggy dig out around the snowmobile. They passed the day that way, with Iggy and Yugo digging, Sam crisping and bombs exploding nearby now and then.

That evening, Yugo returned to his chemistry lab and retrieved an Erlenmeyer flask¹⁴ filled with a bubbling green liquid. He carried it to Private Wiggins who was resting in his bunk. His face was so pale that you could even say he glowed. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Hey lads,” he said. His lip was not so stiff this time.

Yugo slid to the side of his bunk. Private Wiggins’ leg was raised and was an unhealthy purple black colour. Plack, if you will.

Yugo passed him the flask. “Drink this,” he said. “It should help.”

Private Wiggins looked doubtfully at Yugo’s green brew.

“It is good for you,” said Iggy, helpfully.

Private Wiggins shrugged and drained the flask in one gulp. He passed the empty flask back to Yugo. “Now what?”

“Now we wait,” said Yugo.

Silent Night

RAVENS CROWED AS THE SUN ROSE OVER NO MAN’S LAND and were immediately silenced by artillery fire. Guns and cannons roared the rest of the day, pausing only long enough for one side or the other to reload. Neither side gave an inch, nor did either side advance an inch into no man’s land.

By lunch time, Iggy and Yugo had finally cleared away enough dirt and mud to work the snowmobile loose and rock it back onto its skids. Yugo rubbed his hands together, satisfied. “Now we can finally get on our way.”

¹⁴ An Erlenmeyer flask is a laboratory flask that looks like this: →
It was invented by Emil Erlenmeyer in 1860.



“Not a minute too soon,” said Sam. “How can anyone sleep in this place with those machine guns going off at every hour of the night?”

“What about Private Wiggins?” asked Iggy.

Just then, Private Wiggins stepped out into the trench. He walked with a cane, but his colour was much improved. “Merry Christmas, blokes,” he said to Iggy, Yugo and Sam.

“You look better,” said Yugo.

“I feel better, thanks to you chaps.” He rolled up his pant leg. His shin, once plack or gurple or some other unfortunate hue was a puffy pink.

“How about that,” said Iggy. “Your sure worked!”

Yugo crossed his arms. “It is encouraging that we finally cured something. This mission is not a total failure.”

“Good,” said Sam. “Now let’s get out of here.”

Yugo pulled a key fob from his pocket and pressed a little red button. The snowmobile’s doors clicked open and slowly lifted.

“That is some contraption,” said Private Wiggins.

“It gets us where we are going,” said Yugo, humbly.

“Sometimes,” added Sam.

Iggy had stepped into the snowmobile when he stopped and raised his hand to his ear. “What is that noise?”

“I do not hear anything,” said Yugo.

“Me neither,” said Sam.

“That is what I mean,” said Iggy. “Ever since we arrived there have been guns going off and bombs exploding. But it has just gone quiet.”

“You are right,” said Yugo. He ran down the trench to investigate. He reached a wooden ladder, took a few steps up and looked out over the lip of the trench into no man’s land.

Five hundred yards away a bayonet rose above another trench. A white piece of cloth was wrapped around the pointy bit. It slowly waved back and forth.

“What is it?” asked Iggy from the foot of the ladder.

Yugo squinted. “I think it is a pair of underpants. I can not be sure.”

“Underpants? What does it mean?” asked Sam.

“Of course,” said Yugo. Then he climbed up the ladder and out of the trench.

“Yugo! Get back!” Yelled Iggy.

Sam just shook his head. “He’s going to get himself blown up if he goes over the top.”

Yugo looked down into the trench. “Come on up, it is perfectly safe.”

Iggy shrugged and climbed up the ladder. All along the trench, the other soldiers climbed out and stepped into no man’s land. The soldiers on the other side climbed out as well.

“What is going on?” asked Iggy.

“It is the Christmas truce,” said Yugo. “During the First World War, all along the Western Front, both sides laid down their arms on Christmas Eve and celebrated Christmas together.”

“No way,” said Sam, who was looking out from the safety of the trench. “That never happened.”

“It really did,” said Yugo.¹⁵

“It is the magic of Christmas,” said Iggy.

On the other side of no man’s land, a Christmas tree was raised out of the opposite trench. A group of German soldiers walked slowly towards them; the underpants wrapped bayonet held out before them. They reached the English side and both sides shook hands.

Yugo manipulated his key fob and soon a reggae version of *White Christmas* broadcast out of the snowmobile’s speakers.

Private Wiggins struggled to get up the ladder with his injured leg, but soon he joined the elves at the top, with a football¹⁶ in his hand. He tossed it out into

¹⁵ It really did.

¹⁶ In this case, the “football” was a soccer ball. Throughout Europe, soccer is typically called football. It is, after all, a game which is played with one’s feet, whereas “football” in the North American sense is a game played by very strong men who use their feet and their hands to play the ball. North American football would be better described as handandfootball. Soccer is an abbreviation of the term “association football”. Thankfully, the creators of the term elected to use the second syllable of the word “association” to come up with the term, “soccer”, or the sport might have come to be known as “assball”, which would have been most unfortunate.

the crowd of soldiers and soon both sides were engaged in a friendly game. The pitch was mostly mud with the occasional patch of grass or undetonated bombs, but none of the soldiers seemed to care.¹⁷ Iggy jumped into the action and became the first elf to ever score a goal in an international football match.

It was late when the elves finally made their way back to the snowmobile. Yugo had brewed up another bottle of his mold medicine and left it with Private Wiggins.

Private Wiggins tipped his khaki beret. “Until we meet again,” he said.

“I look forward to it,” said Yugo. Then he took his usual seat behind the wheel of the snowmobile and slowly floated up and out of the trench. He took a long loop around no man’s land. The soldiers on both sides were singing *Silent Night* and exchanging gifts and pleasantries.

“How nice,” said Iggy.

“Too bad it will not last,” said Yugo. “In a day or two, they will both be back at it, launching bombs from their trenches for the better part of the next four years.”

“How awful,” said Iggy.

“Indeed,” said Yugo. Then he reached out, engaged the time-interface and the elves and the snowmobile left the war behind.

December 22, 1848



HE SNOWMOBILE SKIDDED TO A STOP AT THE SIDE of a narrow river surrounded by a stand of redwood trees.

Sam squinted through his window. “This doesn’t look like the North Pole. There are no trees at the North Pole.”

“Only Christmas trees,” added Iggy, helpfully.

Yugo stared at his dashboard monitor. “I do not understand. I was sure I had fixed it.”

¹⁷ After almost 100 years, there are still regions of France which are designated the *Zone Rouge* (which very roughly translates to the “red zone”) where the land remains littered with unexploded shells and grenades and the ground is still so polluted with chlorine and mustard gasses that nobody can safely live there.

“If we are not at the North Pole, then where are we?” asked Iggy.

Yugo tapped on his little keyboard. A stream of numbers scrolled across his screen. “Looks like we have arrived in northern California. Not too far from San Francisco.”

“Great,” said Sam. “I’m going to Disneyland.”

“Not just yet,” said Yugo. “It will not be built for another hundred years or more.”

Sam leaned over and stared at the floor of the snowmobile for a long time. “Are you telling me that you brought the three of us to California in the 1800s? And that we are out in the middle of a forest where there is no Disneyland, no monorails, no freeways, no TV and no running water?”

Yugo put a finger on his screen. “Yes, that is when we are. 1848, to be exact.”

“It’s December 22nd, isn’t it?”

“As a matter of fact, it is,” said Yugo.

“That is quite a coincidence,” said Iggy. “Everywhere we go, we arrive on December 22nd.”

“It’s no coincidence,” said Sam. “It always starts on December 22nd.”

“I am going to have a look around,” said Iggy. “I am not used to such nice weather at Christmastime. Maybe there are some palm trees nearby.” But first, Iggy dug into his steamer trunk. He stepped out of the snowmobile dressed in a garish red and green Hawaiian shirt with matching shorts, both of which had flowers, triggerfish¹⁸ and surfboards printed on them. He also had a set of Mickey Mouse ears perched at a jaunty angle on his head.

Yugo eyed Iggy up and down. “I’m not sure that you have made the correct fashion choice this time, my friend.”

Iggy stretched his arms out, dumbfounded. “Whatever do you mean? I am perfectly dressed for sunshine, good times and California girls!” He flipped open a pair of red sunglasses and perched them on his nose. Then he wiped a streak of white sunscreen across each of his cheeks. “I am ready.”

¹⁸ The triggerfish is the official state fish of Hawaii, where it is known by the local name, humuhumunukunukuapua'a. It is pronounced exactly like it is spelled.

“I guess we might as well have a look around while we are here,” said Yugo. “It is not often one finds oneself in nineteenth century California. Maybe we can find an original bazingo board.”¹⁹

The three elves made their way down a narrow path in search of bazingo. Yugo and Sam were still dressed in their red and green velvet jackets. Yugo, of course, wore his tool belt.

It was a warm afternoon, with woodpeckers darting between the thick trunks of redwood trees. The path sloped gently downward. Before long, they reached the rocky bank of a winding creek. A man with a thick russet brown moustache and dressed in a dirty canvas jacket squatted on the opposite shore with a tin pan filled with gravel and water in his hand. A little way up the river another fellow dug at the ground near the river with a pick.

“Why would anyone want a pan full of mud?” asked Sam. “Why not a nice pork chop and maybe some peppers and onions. And another pork chop?”

“He is not cooking, Sam,” said Yugo. “He is prospecting for gold.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “Gold?”

“Maybe this fellow knows where we can find a bazingo board,” said Iggy. He walked carefully across the stream and approached the squatting prospector, only to suddenly find himself face to face with the dangerous end of a Winchester repeating rifle.²⁰

“Clear off,” the prospector said. “This is my claim.”

Iggy raised his arms and took a step back.

“Easy, easy,” said Iggy. “We do not want any trouble. We are just looking for a bazingo board. You would not happen to have one, would you?”

The prospector spat a long brown streak into the river. “Ain’t no bazingo here. Now git a move on ya’ undersized varmints afore I fills ya full of lead.” He waved his Winchester menacingly.

Yugo peered at the rifle and then laughed. “It is okay, Iggy, you can relax.”

¹⁹ Bazingo was a board game that was popular in the United States in the 1850s. It is played on a triangular board which contains 157 triangular spaces. The players each have 18 tokens and take turns attempting to capture each other’s game pieces. The player who captures 16 of his opponent’s pieces is the winner. No doubt the winner would signify his victory by loudly declaring “Bazingo!”

²⁰ This is an example of an anachronism. The Winchester repeating rifle was not available until 1866 and, as such, cannot possibly exist in a story set in 1848.

“Relax and I’ll blow yer head off,” said the prospector.

“You will not,” said Yugo. “That is a Winchester repeating rifle. And as everyone knows, the Winchester repeating rifle will not be invented until 1866. You are threatening my friend with a rifle that does not exist yet.”

The prospector sneered and turned to point his Winchester at Yugo. Yugo just shrugged and said, “go ahead.”

The prospector chuckled, pulled the trigger and his rifle dissolved into a cloud of anachronistic dust.²¹ He shook his head and then waved his grubby finger at Yugo. “Never you mind. Just you move on along and find yer own gold. This here is my claim.”

Sam nodded and said, “gold?”

Iggy extended his hand. Now that he did not have a rifle pointed at his face, his usual friendly demeanour had returned. “I’m Iggy and this is Yugo and Sam. Do not worry, we have no interest in your gold. We are just looking for a bazingo board.”

The prospector grunted and then took Iggy’s hand. “Yellowstone Wiggins,” he said.

“Wiggins? We sure seem to run into a lot of Wigginses,” said Iggy.

“But we have never met a Yellowstone. That is an unusual name,” said Yugo.

“Well, my Ma named me John, but ever one around here calls me Yellowstone. They call me that cuz I’m always diggin’ fer those little yeller stones.”

Sam nodded. “Gold?”

“That’s right, little feller,” said Yellowstone Wiggins, with a yellow gleam in his eye. “Gold. These hills are filled with the stuff. Mebbe today will be the day that I find it.”

“Find what?” asked Iggy.

“The mother lode. The big seam o’ gold that’s out in these hills somewhere. The river washes nuggets off the mother lode and if yer lucky yer can find one with yer pan.”

Sam nodded. “Gold?”

“Have you ever found any?” asked Iggy.

²¹ Time travel sure is a funny thing, is it not?

Yellowstone Wiggins shook his head. “Still, I keep lookin’. If I can find me some of them yeller stones, then I can git Ma Wiggins and the little ones somethin’ nice fer Christmas.”

“Have you considered doing something else?” asked Yugo.

Yellowstone Wiggins chuckled. “Oh, sure I have. But there ain’t nothin’ like diggin’ and pannin’ fer gold. Jes like ever one else ‘round these parts I got me a bad case of the gold fever.” He looked over at Sam, who seemed to be in a daze. His eyes were glazed over, with dollar symbols where his pupils should have been. “Looks like yer little pal got a case of the gold fever hisself.”


Iggy put his arm around Sam’s shoulder. “We will look after him.”

“Can you show us the way to town?” asked Yugo.

Yellowstone Wiggins pointed down the river. “Jes follow this crik ‘round that hill. You’ll make yer war to the city. T’ain’t much of a place, mind you.”

“Thank you kindly,” said Iggy. The elves turned down the path along the river, and left Yellowstone Wiggins to his prospecting.

Sam Has a Plan

 THEY PASSED DOZENS OF OTHER PROSPECTORS ALONG THE WAY. Some were working the river; others were digging at the ground with picks and shovels. One of them was still digging at the bottom of a hole that was deeper than he was tall.

Yugo shook his head. “They have all got gold fever.”

Sam nodded. “Gold?”

“Gold fever,” said Yugo. “In 1848, someone discovered gold in California. Before long, thousands of people came to California to dig for gold. They were all hoping to strike it rich, though not many of them did. They all had gold fever. The excitement that comes with the chance of making a big find. It is as contagious as the Armadillo Flu. Poor old Yellowstone Wiggins has a bad case of it.”

“So does Sam, I think,” said Iggy.

Sam nodded. “Gold?”

“Is there any cure for gold fever?” asked Iggy.

Yugo laughed. “Only once all of the gold has been dug up. But that will take years.”

“Maybe Yellowstone Wiggins will strike it rich today,” said Iggy hopefully. “It would be nice to see the little ones get some Christmas presents.

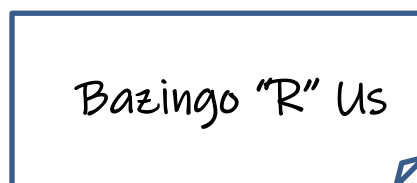
They came around a hill and a small town came into view. It was not much more than a main street with some wooden hotels and other buildings down either side. There was a sign at the side of the road:



“Wow! San Francisco!” said Iggy. “Cable cars and the Golden Gate Bridge. I cannot wait to see it all.”

“You will have to wait quite a while,” said Yugo. “None of those things will be built for decades. Right now, it is just a frontier town. Most of the people who live here are prospectors like Yellowstone Wiggins. But maybe we can still find that bazingo board.”

They walked past some wooden buildings that were built so closely together they seemed to be leaning on each other. Wooden signs at the front advertised various businesses, a barber and surgery office,²² and an undertakers next door. More than a few shops sold prospecting tools like picks and shovels. They passed a shop with a sign in the window that said:



“This looks like just the place we are looking for,” said Iggy.

Sam came out of his trance at that moment. “Hey guys,” he said. “I have a plan.”

“You have a plan?” said Yugo.

“I know how to help Yellowstone Wiggins,” he said.

²² In the nineteenth century, many barbers performed minor surgical procedures, like pulling teeth, lancing boils and bloodletting. Some of them even cut hair.

“Help him how?’ asked Iggy.

“Help him find his gold,” said Sam.

“I do not think Yellowstone Wiggins needs our help,” said Yugo.

“But Yugo. Think of the little ones,” said Sam. “It is only three days until Christmas. Unless Yellowstone finds some gold in a hurry, there won’t be any bazingo boards under the Christmas tree for the little Wigginses.”

“That would be terrible,” said Iggy.

“Yup, it sure would,” said Sam. “And after all, saving Christmas is our jam, isn’t it?”

Iggy turned to Yugo. “Sam is right. Saving Christmas is our jam.”

Yugo crossed his arms. “All right, Sam. What is this plan of yours?”

Sam explained. “You know how your snowmobile is full of all sorts of gizmos like frimminjammers and stratofibblers? All we have to do is adjust the settings on of those gadgets to turn it into a gold finding thingamy and then we drive the snowmobile straight to the motherlode. Then Yellowstone Wiggins will have all of the gold he can eat.”

Yugo stroked his moustache. “You know, that just might work. Gold is very heavy. If we increase the polarity on the ramjumpers we could set the fizzlewhimp to attune to its atomic weight, and if we can control for the geologic noise, we might be able to use the stiggrampler to isolate any gold deposits in the area.”

“You mean it might work?” asked Iggy.

Sam clapped Yugo on the back. “I knew you could figure it out. Now, why don’t you guys gather up your bazingo things and I’ll meet you back here in ten minutes.”

“Where are you going?” asked Yugo.

“I just want to see the sights. Maybe feed the sea lions by Pier 39,” said Sam.

Iggy and Yugo both rolled their eyes and then stepped into the little shop. As soon as the door closed behind them, Sam scampered across the dusty street and into a little one-story building with a plaque above the door that said:

Land Surveyors

Of course, Sam had not revealed his complete plan to Iggy and Yugo. Helping Yellowstone Wiggins out with his Christmas shopping was only phase one of the plan. For Sam, the real plan was phase two. And phase two started at the land surveyor's office.

Sam walked to the back of the room where a short stout man, about the size of Sam himself, sat at a small desk chewing on a cigar and staring at a large map on the wall.

"Hello my good man," said Sam.

The little man just looked at Sam and chewed on his cigar. "Don't see many elves around here."

"Yes, yes," said Sam. "I'm looking to get into the prospecting game. I need a claim. You wouldn't happen to have any for sale, would you?"

By the time Sam met up with Iggy and Yugo an hour later, he had an armful of picks and shovels and a pocketful of land claims. In fact, he had secured all the claims around the little patch worked by Yellowstone Wiggins. If there was gold in those hills, Sam was going to find it.

Bazingo!

CORMORANTS ARE BIG AND NASTY BIRDS and they give a big and nasty call when the sun comes up. By the time the cormorant crowed, Sam was already at work, digging at a sandy patch of earth a hundred yards west of the snowmobile. A thin line of rope separated his new claims from those of Yellowstone Wiggins. So far, he had dug up a lot of dirt, a few rocks and a museum quality arrowhead. He studied the arrowhead carefully before tossing it over his shoulder into the stream. Gold fever can limit an elf's focus.

Yugo had initiated the habitat mode of the snowmobile the previous evening. The passenger compartment expanded to form a small room with three little bunk beds stacked neatly on top of one another. Iggy awoke when a crow cormoranted at the first light of dawn.²³ He slipped outside quietly, leaving Yugo snoring softly. He could see that Sam's bunk had not been slept in.

"Yo, Sam," he called. "What are you doing up so early? Usually you sleep until lunchtime."

²³ The sun rises in that part of the world at about 7:20 on December 23rd. Every year, even in 1848.

“No time to sleep,” said Sam. “I’ve got a lot of digging to do. The gold is not going to dig itself up after all.”

“Yugo was up late working on his gold detecting technology. It is not as easy as he thought.”

“Nothing takes the place of hard work,” said Sam, digging his pick deep into the ground.

Iggy blinked. Sam hated hard work. He hated work of all kinds, but hard work was the sort of work he could not stand in the least. He had the gold fever and he had it bad. Still, Iggy wondered, if it made Sam see the value of hard work, maybe the gold fever was not as bad as all that.

Yugo joined them a little while later. He held a silver device in his hands with a lot of corners and a silver disc on top that spun slowly and emitted an enthusiastic pinging sound every few seconds.

“Here it is,” said Yugo proudly. “I call it the Gold Detecto-Matic 3.0. If there is any gold out here, this finely tuned machine should sniff it out.”

Iggy clapped his hands enthusiastically. “I cannot wait to see it in action.”

Yugo flipped a red switch on the side and the Gold Detecto-Matic 3.0 hummed and pinged even more enthusiastically. Then a green beam shone out onto a rocky heap near Sam’s hole.

“Try that spot,” said Yugo. Sam climbed out of his hole with some difficulty and then dug into the rocky heap. Soon he had replaced the heap with another hole in the ground. A hole which was definitely not occupied by any gold.

“I’m not digging up any gold here,” Sam panted. He tossed another shovelful of dirt onto the ground. Sprinkled here and there in the pile were fragments of a dull grey metallic rocks.

Iggy pointed. “Look at that. It is shiny, like gold.”

Yugo picked up one of the glittering stones. “This is osmium. How can this be? Osmium has an Atomic number of 77. That is not even close to gold.²⁴ The only thing osmium is good for is making fountain pens.” He tossed the rock back on the pile and fiddled with some buttons on the side of the Detecto-Matic. “The tuning on this thing is just so delicate. There. Can we try again?” Yugo pressed the red button and the Detecto-Matic shone a green beam on another pile of rocks across the river.

Iggy pointed. “Dig there Sam.”

²⁴ Yugo is being a little hard on himself. Gold has an atomic number of 79.

Once more, Sam climbed out of his hole. He waded across the river and dug into the earth on the other side. Before long he had unearthed a pile of shiny brown rocks.

Yugo slapped the side of the Detecto-Matic. "No, no, no, no, no. That is bismuth. Atomic number 83. It is even more worthless than osmium." Yugo tucked the Detecto-Matic under his arm and skulked back to the snowmobile. "Back to the drawing board, I guess."

Sam called out from the bottom of his newest hole. "I'll just keep digging until you figure it out."

Iggy and Yugo returned the next morning to find Sam at the bottom of yet another hole. His bunk had still not been slept in. The piles of dirt that surrounded his holes were nothing but osmium, bismuth and even more worthless rocks and dirt.

"Have you found any gold yet, Sam?" Iggy called into the hole.

Sam climbed out of the hole. He was covered in dirt and mud. "I think I'm getting closer," he said.

Yellowstone Wiggins wandered over from his neighbouring claim. He was just as grimy as Sam and had found just as much gold as Sam had in the last two days. "Anytime now, Sam," he said. "I kin feel it in me bones. Thar's gold down there. We jes' gotta dig it up."

"Maybe we can help," said Iggy. He nodded at Yugo, who pressed the button on what was now version 4.0 of the Detecto-Matic. It hummed and pinged and then a green beam lanced out and lit up a spot on the side of a nearby hill.

Sam scrambled over to the spot and swung his pick at it. "Lemme give yer a hand," said Yellowstone Wiggins, and together they dug a trench in the side of the hill, surrounded by a pile of silvery gray rocks.

"Rhenium," said Yugo in disgust. "Atomic number 75. I cannot seem to get the adjustments right."

Although it would not be discovered until 1895, the San Andreas Fault lay directly below the spot where Sam and Yellowstone Wiggins were digging. A major earthquake occurs along the fault line about every 20 years. Minor earthquakes occur all the time. This happened to be one of those times.

Iggy was the first to feel the earth move under his feet. He stumbled to the side, along with Yugo. Neither Sam nor Yellowstone Wiggins noticed anything. Rocks rattled down the side of the hill and rolled past. Iggy picked up a shiny one and put it in his pocket.

Yugo lost his balance and the Detecto-Matic tumbled from his hands. It bounced onto the rocky ground and started humming and pinging. A green beam shone onto a lump of ground on Yellowstone Wiggins' side of the rope boundary that separated his claim from Sam's. The ground broke open at the spot where the beam pointed and glowed with a golden light.

Iggy gasped. "Bazingo!"

"It works!" shouted Yugo. "The earthquake must have shaken something loose in the cranberring valve. It has fixed my machine!²⁵ I think we've found the motherlode!"

Sam and Yellowstone Wiggins turned and looked at the golden glowing spot. "Well, I'll be hornswoggled," said Yellowstone Wiggins.

"Me too," said Sam. They both ran towards the light. But when they reached the rope boundary Yellowstone Wiggins held out his arm. "Not so fast young feller. That there gold is on my claim. You go find yer own gold."

Sam stopped at the rope line. Then he picked up his pick and started digging. Yellowstone Wiggins headed over to his claim and filled his pockets with gleaming gold nuggets.

Iggy walked over and helped Yellowstone Wiggins gather up his gold. "It looks like it is going to be a happy Christmas for the little ones, after all."

"You betcher," said Yellowstone Wiggins.

"I hear bazingo boards are all the rage this year," said Yugo.

"I'm gonna git 'em all the bazingo they can eat," said Yellowstone Wiggins. "Then I think I'm gonna retire from stompin' around these gold fields. Mebbe I'll open up a saloon."

Iggy and Yugo exchanged a look and then turned away. "I guess our work is done then," said Iggy. "Christmas is saved, and Yellowstone Wiggins is cured of his gold fever."

"But what about Sam?" said Yugo. They reached the new hole that Sam had dug up. Yugo pressed the red button and scanned all of Sam's claims with the Detecto-Matic. There was plenty of bismuth and osmium and other worthless dirt, but not a speck of gold anywhere.

"Figures," said Sam. He threw his shovel into the river, along with all his other gold-digging supplies. "I've had it with this prospecting game, anyway. I've got

²⁵ You will never find a *deus ex machina* that is quite so literal as the earthquake that banished the ghost from Yugo's machine.

blisters everywhere. And blisters on top of my blisters. And I need a bath. Let's get out of here."

"Sounds like you have been cured of the gold fever," said Iggy.

Sam snorted. "I'm never picking up a shovel again as long as I live."

Iggy reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny rock the size of his fist. He passed it over to Sam. "Yellowstone Wiggins wanted you to have this. He said he got it from his mother and it always brought her good luck."

Sam turned the golden nugget over in his hands. His eyes widened and his pupils took on the shape of dollar signs again.

"Merry Christmas, Sam," shouted Yellowstone Wiggins. Sam waved and the three elves headed over to the snowmobile.

"Time to go," said Yugo as he slipped into his seat. He flipped on the time-interface and then pressed a flashing green button. A moment later, the snowmobile was gone.

December 22, 1848

"**W**E DON'T GET MANY ELVES IN HERE." Iggy, Yugo and Sam were seated at what had become their usual table at the *Moose and Pickle* in downtown Beddleton. Another Mrs. Wiggins stood nearby with a notepad in her hand. "We have frumenty and elfmeade on special today."

"Thank you, but no," said Iggy, before Sam could place his order.

Twenty minutes earlier, the snowmobile had come to sudden stop at the side of a familiar road. Sam flew forward into the back of Iggy's chair.

"Oof, I forgot to wear my seat belt."

Iggy was also a little shaken up by Sam's collision with his seat. "Where have we landed this time?"

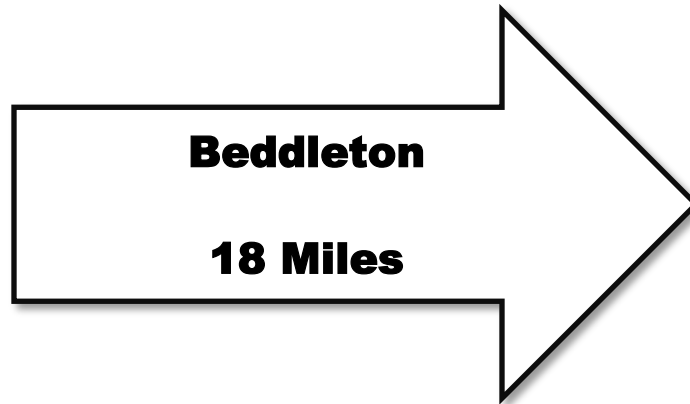
Yugo studied his monitor. "How strange. The time-interface says that we are still in December 1848."

"Let me guess," said Sam. "December 22nd?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," said Yugo.

“But, where are we?” asked Iggy. “There are no palm trees. We cannot be in California anymore.

“I think I know where,” said Yugo. He pointed out the window at a familiar sign:



Naturally, their first stop when they reached Beddleton was the *Moose and Pickle*, still run by a Mrs. Wiggins, this one shorter and stouter than the previous two, with freckled cheeks and red curly hair that swirled around her shoulders. Iggy ordered three meat pies and a tankard of unsweetened water for the table.

Yugo held out his hand. “No water.”

Iggy raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry luv,” said the other Mrs. Wiggins. “Your wee friend is right. We cain’t serve the water anymore. Bad for your health, they says. Full of the cholera, they says.²⁶ Try the elfmeäde instead.”

“Elfmeäde has not always agreed with us,” said Yugo. “Maybe some mulled wine instead.”

“With extra mull,” added Sam.

“As you wish,” said the other Mrs. Wiggins. She left the elves alone and headed into the kitchen.

Iggy had questions. “I’m confused. Why would the time-interface bring us back to Beddleton? And at the same time as our last stop?”

Yugo had no answers. “I do not know.”

²⁶ The third cholera pandemic took place in England between 1846 and 1860. It was in the course of this epidemic that the scientists of the day learned that cholera was transmitted by drinking untreated or contaminated water.

Sam had an idea. ““You know what I think? We keep bouncing around and finding places with diseases, but it’s the snowmobile that’s really sick.”

“What do you mean?” asked Iggy.

“It’s that time-interface,” said Sam. “That’s what’s wrong. It’s got a virus in it or something.”

Yugo sat quietly as their meat pies arrived. “You might be on to something, Sam. No matter where or when I try to take the snowmobile, the time-interface takes us somewhere else. It is like it has a mind of its own. Almost like it was controlled by something else. It could very well be a computer virus.”

“Figures,” said Sam. “We went on this trip to stop a virus, but we can’t do that because our snowmobile has a virus of its own.”

“Maybe we need to find a cure for the snowmobile first,” said Iggy.

“I agree,” said Yugo. “But where can we find a cure for a computer virus in 1848? There is no such thing as an anti-virus program. There is no internet and there are no computer shops. We are on our own.”

“Surely you can just whip something up?” said Sam.

“It is not as easy as it sounds,” said Yugo. “The only computer we have is the one in the snowmobile. But if that computer is infected with a virus, then the virus itself will keep me from doing anything to delete it. Viruses are tricky that way.”

“So, what can we do?” asked Iggy.

Yugo sat thoughtfully for a moment and then said, “I could always build another computer. I could write the antivirus program on that and then load it into the snowmobile’s computer.”

“Can you do that?” asked Sam.

“Tricky,” said Yugo. “I cannot use plastic, that has not been invented yet. If I had some gold, that might help with some of the circuits.”

Sam sighed, then reached into his pocket and pulled out the nugget from Yellowstone Wiggins. “Would this do?”

Yugo studied the nugget with a grin. “Perfectly!”

The other Mrs. Wiggins returned, with three large servings of meat pie and a big jug of steaming mulled wine. It was dark red, the colour of mahogany.

Sam poured himself a tumbler of mulled wine and dug into his pie. “That is some good pie. What’s in it?”

The other Mrs. Wiggins smiled. “Pigeon. Fresh caught by Mr. Wiggins this morning.”

Sam paused, a spoonful of pie inches from his mouth. Then he shrugged and swallowed it down. It was good pie. Iggy and Yugo just smiled and shared the breadsticks from a jar in the middle of the table. Sam emptied his tumbler and waved for another tankard of mulled wine. “A little more mull, this time,” he asked.

The other Mrs. Wiggins smiled and nodded. “You can never have too much mull, I says.” She turned and headed back to the kitchen.

Iggy turned to Yugo. “Once we finish here, we should head back to the snowmobile so you can work on the computer fix.”

“It will take me a few hours,” said Yugo.

“I am sure we can find something to do,” said Sam as the other Mrs. Wiggins poured him another glass of mulled wine, with extra mull. Sam finished his pie and then ate Iggy and Yugo’s pies for dessert.

“Can you imagine,” said the other Mrs. Wiggins. She was seated on a high stool behind the bar, reading the latest issue of the *London Daily News*. She turned the front page towards Iggy, Yugo and Sam. “Look at what those crazy royals have got up to this time. They’ve gone and planted a tree in their front room.”

Iggy smiled. “That is a Christmas tree,” he said. “Nothing so crazy about that.”

“It is nearly Christmas, after all,” said Yugo.

“A Christmas what now?” said the other Mrs. Wiggins.

“A Christmas tree,” said Sam. He pulled a small feather from between his teeth. “Every-one’s got one.”



“Never heard of such a thing,” said the other Mrs. Wiggins. She shook her head and made a tutting noise. “The royals²⁷ are always up to some peculiar thing or another, I says. But what can you expect when you marry your own cousin, I says.”

Iggy Has a Plan

“**M**RS. WIGGINS HAS NEVER HAD A CHRISTMAS TREE,” said Iggy. “That is such a shame.”

Yugo had parked the snowmobile at the edge of town. Iggy and Sam leaned against the rear fender while Yugo bustled about inside, using a soldering iron to wire a circuit board with melted pieces of Sam’s gold nugget. It was cold and there was snow on the ground, but Iggy and Sam scarcely noticed. People who live at the North Pole seldom feel a chill when they are anywhere else.

Sam answered with a grunt. He was eating pigeon pie takeout from the *Moose and Pickle*.

“We should get her a Christmas tree,” said Iggy.

“You heard her,” said Sam, between mouthfuls of pigeon pie. “She’s never seen a Christmas tree before. She thinks they’re peculiar. They don’t do Christmas trees in Beddleton. So there won’t be any Christmas tree lots in Beddleton, either.”

“It just so happens that I have a little familiarity with the woods around here.” Iggy went around to the back of the snowmobile and pulled two slightly dull 17th century axes from his steamer trunk. “This is not my first time chopping trees in Beddleton. We will be able to find the perfect tree just a little ways up the road.”

Iggy passed Sam one of the axes and led him down the dirt road, whistling the chorus of *I Want a Hippopotomas for Christmas* while he skipped along.

They walked for a half hour or so until they reached a break in the fence. Iggy led them to a copse of trees, and he carefully inspected each one. “not this one. No. Not. Not this year. Not this one. No.”

²⁷ The royal family in 1848 was headed by Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert, who was, in fact, her first cousin. Their great-great granddaughter, Elizabeth II presently wears the English crown.

Sam leaned on his axe handle and waited. He knew from long experience how picky Iggy could be.

The sun was low in the sky by the time Iggy made his choice. He led Sam to a Scots pine deep in the woods. It stood at least 35 feet²⁸ tall. The trunk was nearly 18 inches²⁹ thick at the base.

Sam took a step back to take in the whole tree. "This tree is huge!"

"I know," said Iggy. "It is perfect, is it not?"

"It's way to tall for the *Moose and Pickle*. It won't even fit through the door."

"I am sure it will all work out. Come on, help me cut it down." Iggy swung his heavy axe into the trunk of the tree. It dug less than a quarter of an inch³⁰ into the bark. Iggy pulled his axe out with some difficulty. Then he took another cut, leaving a similarly insignificant dent in the bark. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "This is going to take a little work."

An hour later, as the sun was going down, Iggy said, "We are going to have to come back tomorrow to finish this job." There was a small notch in the trunk of the tree, which was surrounded by a ring of tiny wood chips.

"Tomorrow?" said Sam. "This job is going to take years at this rate."

"Oh Sam, you are a riot. We should head back and see how Yugo is doing."

The elves camped out that night in the snowmobile. Yugo showed them his new circuit board. He had used up most of Sam's nugget tracing hundreds of thin gold lines that zigged and zagged across a thin board. "It is nearly done," he explained. "Once I finish these circuits, then I can start writing the code. We should be ready to test it out tomorrow afternoon."

"Great," said Iggy. "We should have that tree cut down by then."

Sam just rolled his eyes and climbed into his bunk.

²⁸ England uses the imperial system of measurement. Other places might regard this particular tree as about 10 and a half meters high.

²⁹ Forty-five centimeters.

³⁰ Sixty-three millimeters.

A New-Fangled Invention

SAM WAS WRONG. IT DID NOT TAKE A YEAR to finish cutting down the tree. But it did take another two days.

“I’ve never worked a harder day in my life,” said Sam as the gigantic tree finally toppled over. “Because at the exact same time I have been hacking away at this tree, I have also been digging holes in California.”

“Time travel is funny like that,” said Iggy.

It just after lunch time on Christmas Eve when they hauled the tree up to the front door of the *Moose and Pickle*.

Sam was also right. There was no possible way to fit the tree through the door. It was nearly fifteen feet³¹ wide at the base. At its highest point, the ceiling of the *Moose and Pickle* was less than half of the height of the tree. It was not just a tight fit, it was no fit at all.

In the end, Yugo solved the problem by suggesting they use the top third of the tree only. When Iggy lifted his axe to start chopping again, Yugo solved that problem with the careful use of the snowmobile’s front laser array. Then he reduced the rest of the enormous tree into logs for the fireplace at the *Moose and Pickle*.

Sam marveled at how quickly the laser beam cut through the tree trunk. “Maybe you two should have done this the last time you were cutting firewood.” Iggy glared at him, though he had to admit to himself that Sam was also right about that.

The elves carted the tree into the *Moose and Pickle* and then stood it up before a stunned other Mrs. Wiggins.

“What are you hooligans doing bringing that tree into my place!” she shouted.

Iggy and Yugo stood the tree up in the middle of the room. “It is a Christmas tree, ma’am,” said Iggy.

“Just like in the newspaper,” said Yugo. “You remember? With the picture of the queen and her children around the tree?”

“Are you saying that if I put up this tree in my place then I’ll be just like Vicky and Albert?”

“Yes ma’am,” said Sam.

³¹ Four and a half meters.

The other Mrs. Wiggins paused for a moment. “Well that’s all right then. If it’s good enough for them royals then it’s good enough for me, I says. But what am I supposed to do with it, then?”

“We need to decorate it!” said Iggy triumphantly. “Just wait here a moment.” Iggy ran out of the pub. He returned a few minutes later with a cardboard box in his arms. It was piled high with coloured Christmas decorations.

“Where did you get all of this stuff?” asked Sam.

“I packed a few things before we left. You never know when you might need a garland,” said Iggy. He passed a red ball to the other Mrs. Wiggins and showed her how to hang it from one of the branches. Iggy and Sam joined in and soon the tree was festooned with coloured balls and draped in silver tinsel.

The other Mrs. Wiggins took a step back to take in their handiwork. “Well, I never.”

“You just did,” said Yugo. “The first Christmas tree in Beddleton.”

“It’s even prettier than Vicky and Albert’s, I says,” said the other Mrs. Wiggins. “Let me get Mr. Wiggins. He has to see this.”

She scampered out of the door behind the bar and returned a few minutes later, dragging a white haired man with a thin white moustache behind her. “Look, Alistair. It’s a real Christmas tree. Just like Vicky and Albert got.”

“Better than Vicky and Albert, I says,” said Sam.

“You didn’t tell me you had customers,” said Mr. Wiggins. He pulled a mask over his face. It was made of leather and looked like the face of a long beaked bird.

“Don’t you pay him no mind. Alistair is just worried about getting the cholera.” The other Mrs. Wiggins slapped him on the arm. “Take that darn fool thing off, Alistair. You can’t catch cholera from elves, everyone knows that, I says.”³²

Mr. Wiggins lifted the mask off of his face. “If you’re certain.”

“Course I’m certain,” said the other Mrs Wiggins. “Now we need a daguerreotype³³ of the tree. Hurry and get your camera.”

³² Cholera is transmitted through contaminated water. Mr. Wiggins’ face mask would be of little use. And, as the other Mrs. Wiggins correctly noted, no one has ever caught cholera from an elf.

³³ A daguerreotype was an early form of photography where the image was captured on a silver-plated copper sheet instead of film. This form of photography was slow and cumbersome and was rendered obsolete by the 1860s by other better and less expensive processes.

Mr. Wiggins shuffled off out the back door and returned a minute later with a black box and a tripod folded up under his arm. He set the tripod down and carefully set the black box on top of it.

“Now gather around the tree, boys,” said Mrs. Wiggins. “I bet you’ve never seen one of these contraptions before. It’s a new fangled invention. It’s called a camera-a.” The other Mrs. Wiggins pronounced each syllable slowly. “It’s from France, he says.”

The elves huddled around the tree with the other Mrs. Wiggins. Mr. Wiggins pointed his camera at them and reached for the lens cap.

“Everyone stay absolutely still now,” said Mr. Wiggins. The other Mrs. Wiggins and the elves stood stone still as Mr. Wiggins removed the lens cap. “Perfect. Now hold that pose for five minutes.”

One of the drawbacks of daguerreotype photography is that it required long exposure times. It is hard for an elf to stand still for five seconds, let alone five minutes. At one point, Sam sneezed and wiped his nose, but otherwise they all stood still until Mr. Wiggins slipped the lens cap back on. He folded up his tripod and shuffled back out the door.

“He won’t be but a minute loves. Mr. Wiggins is in his darkroom. No interruptions, he says. He needs to fiddle with the chemicals, he says. Now sit you down and have some mulled wine while we wait. I’ll toss in some extra mull for you, Sam.” The other Mrs Wiggins slipped behind the bar and began pouring and mixing an array of coloured liquids in a large pitcher.

She returned to Iggy, Yugo and Sam’s usual table with three large glasses and an even larger one for herself. She raised her glass in a toast. “Here’s to Vicky and Albert and all their wee ones.³⁴ A merry Christmas to them, I says.”

Mr. Wiggins returned an hour later and set a thick page on the table. It was a black and white photograph of Iggy, Yugo and Sam posed beside a Christmas tree with the other Mrs. Wiggins off to the side.

The other Mrs. Wiggins tutted. “Oh Sam, you blinked. Still, it has turned out marvelously. I’m going to hang it by the front door for everyone to see that we’ve got a bigger and better tree than those royals do.”

And so she did.

There was a big Christmas celebration at the *Moose and Pickle* that night. The good townsfolk of Beddleton came from all around to see the remarkable

³⁴ Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had 6 children by Christmas 1848. They would go one to have three more wee ones.

Christmas tree, that was even bigger and better than the one at Buckingham Palace.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam did not return to the snowmobile until nearly midnight, with the sounds of Christmas carols still ringing in their ears. Yugo had a copy of the *London Daily News* rolled under his arm.

“I am keeping this as a souvenir,” he said. “Christmas trees are a German tradition and they were not common in England in the 19th century. Prince Albert was raised in Germany so he grew up with Christmas trees. So he set one up for his family at Christmas. When it appeared on the cover of the *London Daily News* in December 1848, everyone wanted to get one. England has had Christmas trees ever since.”³⁵


“Cool,” said Iggy.

“And the *Moose and Pickle* got the first one,” said Sam.

“So it did, Sam,” said Yugo.

They climbed into the snowmobile and Yugo fired up the twin lithium fusion engines. “Now we will see about that virus. If I have done this correctly, we should be back in the North Pole a few minutes after we left.” He tapped a few commands into his keyboard and then pressed a red button. There was a brilliant flash and the snowmobile finally spun out of 1848.

December 22, 2194

“ WE ARE DEFINITELY NOT IN BEDDLETON, ANYMORE,” said Iggy after the snowmobile lurched to another sudden stop. They were inside a circular room with a domed roof. The walls were lined with metal tanks of various sizes. The middle of the room was filled with rows of shelves and one (1) snowmobile. A mechanical hum resonated from all around the room.

“Woah,” said Sam. “What is this place?”

Yugo consulted his control panel. “You are not going to like it.”

“I like it, I like it,” said Sam. “I feel three hundred pounds lighter. Those push-ups have paid off.”

³⁵ True story.

Yugo cleared his throat. “The reason you feel lighter is because we are ...” He paused. “There is no easy way to say this. We are on the moon. In the year 2194.”

“Is it December 22nd?” asked Sam.

Yugo just nodded. Sam just nodded back.

“The moon?” said Iggy. “How on earth did we end up on the moon?”

“The time-interface steers us through time and space. This time it took us further away than before,” said Yugo.

“I thought you had this thing fixed,” said Sam, waving his much lighter arms in the air.

“So, did I,” said Yugo. “There must still be some bugs I have not found.”

A horn sounded then, and a mechanical voice intoned “intruder alert ... intruder alert.” Just then, a group of three men charged into the room, each of them dressed in foil coveralls and white helmets with gleaming black visors. They each brandished dangerous looking ray guns.

“Come out with your hands up!” shouted the one in the middle. He waved his dangerous looking ray gun in a manner that looked most dangerous indeed.

Yugo pressed the brown button that opened the snowmobile doors. The three elves slowly climbed out, their arms raised in the air. There was little else they could do, with the low gravity in the room, their arms virtually raised themselves.

The one in the middle lowered his gun and motioned to the others to do the same. “Tool down, boys. They’re just elves. Elves never hurt anyone.”

Iggy was not sure whether he should be pleased or offended. He decided he should be pleased. Yugo stepped forward.

“I am Yugo. These are my friends, Iggy and Sam.” Iggy bowed. Sam just stood at the back. He was offended.

The one in the middle removed his helmet and shook Yugo’s hand. “I’m Commander X Æ A-12 Wiggins of the International Moon Mission. You can call me Commander Wiggins.”

“X Æ A-12? That is an unusual name?” said Iggy.

“Not where I come from,” said Commander Wiggins. “There were three other X Æ A-12s in my first-grade class. And an X Æ A-13, but everyone thought he was a little strange. This is my security team. First Sergeant Epsilon Terwilliger and Second Sergeant Gandalf Hobbs.”

The foil dressed men at his side removed their visored helmets and nodded.

“What is this place?” said Yugo.

“Welcome to Moon Base Gamma Six,” said Commander Wiggins. “The finest of the moon bases if you want my opinion.” The other two astronauts nodded in agreement. “Let me show you around.”

Yugo and Sam attempted to follow but as soon as they took a step, they floated a few feet off the ground. Iggy clomped along behind Commander Wiggins without any difficulty. He was wearing the iron boots he had packed in his steamer trunk in the event of a low gravity or underwater situation. “You never know what you might need,” Iggy always said.

Commander Wiggins requisitioned some iron boots from the supply module for Yugo and Sam. Fortunately, there were some child sized boots on the shelf.

Once everyone was properly outfitted with their iron boots, Commander Wiggins led the elves on a tour of Moon Base Gamma Six. It was not a long tour as Moon Base Gamma Six was not a large place. It was comprised of three domed structures connected by tubular corridors in a triangular configuration. The dome the elves had arrived in was the supply module. The metal tanks along the wall contained oxygen and water. Food and other supplies filled the rows of shelving. There was also a snowmobile in there.

The second dome was the resident module. There were twelve small rooms around the periphery which the occupants of Moon Base Gamma Six could call home. There was a galley in the middle where they gathered for meals. Fitness equipment and other diversions took up the rest of the space. There were two astronauts playing the slowest game of table tennis that Iggy had ever seen.

The third dome was the operations module, where the astronauts directed the giant excavating equipment that worked the ground outside the base. This was the primary function of Moon Base Gamma Six. The excavation and extraction of valuable ore and minerals from the lunar surface.

“Osmium and bismuth, that’s what we dig up here,” explained Commander Wiggins. “The two most valuable minerals in the universe. The Earth’s supply has been used up, so now we dig it up on the moon.” He led the elves to a window in the working module. They could see enormous earth moving³⁶ machinery outside, scraping and boring the ground.

“Osmium and bismuth?” said Iggy. “I always thought the moon was made of green cheese.”

³⁶ It would be more precisely correct to refer to this earth moving equipment as moon moving equipment.

“That is just a children’s story,” said Yugo.

“Sometimes I think that my whole life is a children’s story,” said Sam.

Commander Wiggins turned and looked down on the elves. In truth, it was the only direction he could look if he wanted to keep them in view. “Now that you know all about us, there is just one thing I need to know. What are you boys doing in my moon base anyways?”

Christmas on the Moon

“**W**E SEEM TO BE LOST,” SAID IGGY. “We were trying to get to California.”

“We have been having trouble with our navigation system,” said Yugo

“Troubles that were supposed to have been fixed,” added Sam, with a scowl.

“We should really be going,” said Iggy. “You have been very kind, but we should get back to Earth.

Commander Wiggins snorted. “You don’t want to be headed back to Earth right now. News just came in over ethernet. The whole place is full of the Armadillo Flu. Every couple of years there’s another outbreak. It’s always the same thing. People turning green and losing their hair. But not up here. There’s never been a case of the Armadillo Flu on the moon. Maybe it’s the gravity or the recycled air. Can’t go wrong living on the moon. You couldn’t catch me earthside these days.”

Iggy whispered to Yugo, “If there is still Armadillo Flu on Earth that means our mission has failed. We have never cured the Armadillo Flu.”

“We have not cured the Armadillo Flu yet,” said Yugo.

Sam shook his head. “Time travel is just the worst.”

“Sorry boys, I don’t mean to eavesdrop but the acoustics in these domes mean that you hear everything. You can’t break wind without everyone knowing about it, am I right First Sergeant Terwilliger?” said Commander Wiggins with a chuckle. “I’m afraid there’s no cure for the Armadillo Flu. It’s been going on for almost 200 years, now. Don’t think they haven’t tried.”

“I guess we are spending Christmas on the moon then,” said Sam.

“Christmas?” said Commander Wiggins with a puzzled look on his face. “You boys really aren’t from around here. Nobody celebrates Christmas anymore. Not

since it got cancelled all those years ago. We never had Christmas again after that. All on account of that Floyd Calabash fellow.”

“Floyd Calabash? He was patient zero,” said Yugo.

“He was the worst person in history,” said Commander Wiggins. “Gave the world the Armadillo Flu. Christmas has been cancelled ever since. Now instead of Christmas we do the Cala-BASH. Put up a statue of Floyd instead of a tree and then let all the kids bash it to pieces.”

“What about peace and good will?” asked Iggy.

“What about presents?” added Yugo.

“Nope, none of that. Just bashing.”

“What about the eating and drinking?” asked Sam. “Please tell me people still gorge themselves with an enormous meal.”

“We still do some of that, I suppose,” said Commander Wiggins. “Bashing is hungry work.”

“I’m in then,” said Sam.

“Speaking of which, it’s dinnertime,” said Commander Wiggins. “You fellows are welcome to join us.”

“That would be nice,” said Iggy.

“Especially since we have nowhere else to go,” said Sam.

The elves gathered with the astronauts in the resident module, where Second Sergeant Hobbs served a meal which consisted of a plain grey cube in the middle of a plate. There was a sprig of parsley on the side of the plate.

“Oh, you guys are in for a treat. It’s grey cube night. That’s my favourite,” said Commander Wiggins.

Sam shrugged and bug his fork into his grey cube. He took a big bite and said, “not bad. Reminds me of pigeon pie.”

Iggy looked at Yugo and then said, “I think I will just stick with the parsley. And perhaps a glass of water. Unsweetened if you have that.”

“You don’t want the water,” said Second Sergeant Hobbs.

“Don’t tell me. Cholera?”

“Heck no. But all the water here is recycled. You don’t even want to think about where some of it has been.” Iggy decided to settle for an unsweetened orange juice.

Commander Wiggins burped and then passed up his empty plate for another serving of grey cube (with parsley). Sam did likewise.

After dinner, Yugo asked, “we need to troubleshoot our navigation system before we can leave. Would it be okay for us to plug it into your base computer?”

“Why not?” said Commander Wiggins. “It’s not like you can make a muddle of our navigation system. We aren’t going anywhere.”

Yugo collected his crude circuit board from the snowmobile and attempted to connect it to the base computer. Of course, none of his plugs fit. “I will never understand why they keep changing these things.”

Yugo was still hard at work at a computer terminal when Iggy found him the next morning. He had spent most of the night fashioning an adaptor that would connect his device to the moon base computer. When Iggy came upon him he was staring at the monitor, his eyes glazed.

“The coding is so beautiful,” he said. “So elegant. So far advanced from anything I have ever seen.” Yugo pressed the enter key and then leaned back. “I am copying an anti-virus program from this computer into mine. It is far more powerful than anything I could ever come up with. Once we load it into the snowmobile, we will be able to get the time-interface sorted out for good.”

“That is good news. How long will it take?”

Yugo whistled softly. “This is sophisticated stuff. The systems in the snowmobile are antiques compared to the computers of Moon Base Gamma Six. It will take quite a while to process it. Hours and hours.”

“Even better. Commander Wiggins has invited us to the Cala-BASH party.”

“But it will not be Christmas for another two days?”

“Commander Wiggins says moon days are different than Earth days.³⁷ It is already December 25 here.”

Commander Wiggins and Sam joined them. Sam had a plate of grey cube in his hand. Commander Wiggins clapped his hand on Iggy’s shoulder. “That’s right. It’s Cala-BASH Day at last. Come on, let’s go bash that old weasel.”

³⁷ A lunar day is actually 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, and 3 seconds long. This is how long it takes the moon to complete one rotation on its axis relative to the Sun. Because the moon is tidally locked to the Earth, its day is also equal to the time it takes to complete one orbit around the Earth. The sun will shine on Moon Base Gamma Six for two full weeks before it sets ahead of a two weeklong night.

He led the elves into the resident module where First Sergeant Terwilliger was putting the final touches on a papier-mâché statue of a man, holding an armadillo by the tail. The traditional design of the Cala-BASH statue. The figure was painted with purple pants and a yellow shirt. His face bore a lopsided moustache and crossed eyes. In all ways it appeared to be a statue of a complete and unhinged odd ball.

“Let me at him,” said Sam. He held out his hand and Second Sergeant Hobbs obligingly placed a wooden cricket bat there. Sam gripped it loosely and made a couple of slow practice swings. Then he set to the papier-mâché statue with particular vigour.

Sam’s first swing tore the armadillo from the statue’s hand and sent it spinning in slow motion across the room. It eventually bounced off the far wall and then slowly drifted to the ground.

By then, Sam had attacked the statue again with a brutal slicing swing that struck the head from the statue. From there, he hacked his way down until there was nothing left above the knees but strips of shredded newspaper. He paused then to catch his breath.

Commander Wiggins looked upon the devastation and said, “Usually, we take turns.”

“Sorry mate,” said Sam. He passed the cricket bat to First Sergeant Terwilliger. “I guess I got carried away. I thought there was candy inside.”

“Why would anyone put candy inside a papier-mâché statue?” asked Second Sergeant Hobbs incredulously.

Commander Wiggins shook his head. “Looks like Cala-BASH is over for another year.”

“Not just yet,” said Yugo. “I have a gift for you.”

“A gift?” said Commander Wiggins. “Gifts on Cala-BASH night? How odd.”

“Maybe you can start a new tradition?” said Iggy.

Commander Wiggins unwrapped the package Yugo had handed to him. It was a black box with lights and buttons on the side.

“I call it the Detecto-Matic 4.0,” said Yugo. “It finds different minerals. You can use it to find the osmium and bismuth you are digging for on the moon. I tested it this morning and you might be interested to know there is a huge deposit of gold underneath this very moon base.”

Commander Wiggins raised an eyebrow. “Gold, you say?”

“I say,” said Yugo.

“Most useless stuff in the solar system,” said Commander Wiggins. “Sure, it’s pretty, but it’s no good for anything. But if we can use this to find some osmium than this is a wonderful gift, indeed.”

That was the end of Cala-BASH night. There were no other presents. No stockings hung by the chimney with care. No seasonal songs, though Commander Wiggins did recite a most offensive limerick concerning Floyd Calabash and the places in which he might insert his head. Iggy thought it was extremely rude. Sam laughed until he fell off his stool. The evening ended with another serving of grey cube (with a side of parsley).

The next morning, the elves said their goodbyes to Commander Wiggins and the crew of Moon Base Gamma Six. Osmium recovery had already increased over sixty percent since the Detecto-Matic 4.0 had been put into service.

“Gonna miss you boys, I really am,” said Commander Wiggins.

“We don’t get many elves around here,” said Second Sergeant Hobbs. The crew lined up in a row and saluted as Iggy, Yugo and Sam climbed into the snowmobile.

Yugo lowered the doors on their smooth hydraulics and studied his console. “Everything seems to be in order, and the time- interface seems to be working nicely. When I hit this orange button, it should take us straight to Floyd Calabash himself.” Yugo pressed the orange button.

“That was weird,” said First Sergeant Terwilliger as the snowmobile winked out of the storage module.

Commander Wiggins nodded his agreement. “No question, First Sergeant Terwilliger. They sure were weird.”

December 22, 1962

AN E MAJOR CHORD STRUMMED ON A GUITAR. That was the sound the snowmobile made as it spun out of the time vortex and screeched to a stop behind the shelter in the middle of a roundabout.

“Did it work?” asked Iggy.

Yugo studied his monitor. “It did not work.”

Sam pouted. “You said it would work this time. I should have known better.”

“It looks like the computer in the snowmobile has not finished processing the code I downloaded from the moon base. It was very sophisticated code. It has stopped here until it can finish the job. It will probably take a while.”

“That’s just great,” said Sam.

“We just need a little more time,” said Yugo.

“Where are we anyway?” asked Sam.

Yugo glanced back at his monitor. “We are in Hamburg. In Germany. In the year 1962.”

“Don’t tell me, let me guess,” said Sam. “Is it December 22nd?”

“Yes, it is, yes it is,” said Yugo.

“Germany?” Weren’t we fighting a war against these guys a few days ago?” asked Sam.

“It just feels like it was a few days ago,” said Yugo. “But it was really years and years ago. Time travel is like that.”

“Everybody is friends now,” said Iggy.

“I’m so confused,” said Sam. He unlatched his seatbelt and reached for his door. “But if we’re all friends now, then I’m going to get a hamburger. There must be good burgers around here. The place is called Hamburg, after all.”³⁸

“You better wait a minute, wait a minute” said Iggy. He climbed over the back seat and reached into his steamer trunk. When he joined Yugo and Sam at the side of the snowmobile, he was dressed in lederhosen and a Tyrolean cap.³⁹

“You packed lederhosen?” asked Sam.

“And a jaunty cap,” said Iggy.

³⁸ Though a number of different people claim to have invented the hamburger, all agree that the principal ingredient in the hamburger is the Hamburg steak, or frikadelle, which is a patty made from ground meat, usually beef or pork and which was a popular dish in Hamburg in the 19th century. German sailors who travelled to New York introduced it to America, where anything can be made better by serving it on a bun. A Hamburg steak, in a bun, became known as a hamburger.



³⁹ A Tyrolean cap is a hat that looks like this →

They stood at the end of the Repperbahn, a long straight road with restaurants and shops along either side. A cobblestone plaza separated the two lanes of traffic, where pedestrians walked about, between booths and carts peddling things like bratwurst and schnapps. One cart featured a large sign with a painting of a hamburger beneath the phrase: **Gebraten Frikadelle auf Einem Brötchen**.⁴⁰ Sam took off in the direction of the hamburger cart like he had been shot from a cannon. Sam moved surprisingly swiftly where food was concerned.

He sidled up to the hamburger cart and said, "I'll have a double cheeseburger with bacon and extra onions, please and danke." Sam's German vocabulary left several thousand words to be desired.

The woman in the booth looked at Sam with a blank expression. "Nein double cheeseburger. Ve haf frikadelle. Mit cheese und bacon und onions, ja."

Sam pondered for a moment and then said, "Ja. But you better make it two."

"Zwei?" said the woman at the booth.

"Sure, zwei. Anyway, you like as long as you fry up two of those bad fellows."

By the time Iggy and Yugo caught up to him, Sam was halfway through his second double cheeseburger with bacon and extra onions. He licked his chubby fingers and said, "I can't for the life of me figure out why they don't call it a hamburger in Hamburg, but that is some darn fine frikadelle. I think I'll have another." He looked back at the booth and raised three fingers.

"That is okay Sam, I am not hungry," said Iggy.

Sam looked confused. "Those are for me," he said. "Get your own frikadelle."

Yugo ordered a single fried frikadelle on a bun, with a side of sauerkraut. He took one bite and then nodded his approval. "You are right Sam. That is really good frikadelle."

Suddenly Sam's eyes grew wide. He gulped down the last of his double fried frikadelle on a bun with cheese and bacon and extra onions and was off like a shot again. Iggy and Yugo could do nothing but stare as Sam scrambled into a large brick building with the word **Bierhalle** above the doors. Above the word **Bierhalle** was a large neon sign depicting a frosty mug of beer.

"We have lost him," said Iggy.

"We had best go and find him," said Yugo.

They followed Sam through the doors and into a raucous room filled with the sounds of an oom pah band playing a polka and leading the crowd through a

⁴⁰ Fried frikkadelle on a bun.

series of toasts. Every chorus ended with the oom pah band imploring the crowd to “trink!”. And trink they did.

The room was arranged with long tables that stretched from the stage to the dark and misty regions of the back. They found Sam near the middle of one table just as a stout waitress set three large steins in front of him.

“That is okay, Sam, I’m not thirsty,” said Iggy.

Sam looked confused. “These are for me. Get your own Hefeweizenlagänbräu.”

Iggy ordered a water, while Yugo asked for a large unsweetened parsnip juice. Although he could scarcely be heard over the hooting and tooting of the oom pah band, Iggy struck up a conversation with the couple seated across from them.

“You look familiar,” he said. “Have we met somewhere before?”

“I think I’d remember if I’d met an elf before,” said the young, freckled woman seated across from them. “You don’t see many elves in places like this.”

“I know who you are,” said Yugo. “You’re the newest Mrs. Wiggins!”

“Not yet, I’m not,” she said. “I’m still boring old Abigail Hobbs. But my Herbie just proposed!” she waved her left hand to show off her twenty-carat golden ring.

The slight man with the slight moustache seated beside her blushed and then nodded. “Herbert Wiggins. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“His family owns a pub! Can you believe it?” said the future Mrs. Wiggins.

“I can believe it,” said Iggy.

“Congratulations,” said Sam. “That calls for a toast. He held up three pudgy fingers and another three Hefeweizenlagänbräus duly arrived. Then he realized he had not ordered anything for anyone else, so he held up another three fingers.

Three rounds later and the future Mrs. Wiggins and Iggy were dancing a jig on the table. It was an old northern dance, but the future Mrs. Wiggins learned the steps easily. She only returned to her chair when the oom pah band took a break.

“Isn’t this the best time?” she said as she fell into her seat.

“Hard to say,” said Yugo. “We have been to so many times.”

“Elves say the strangest things, don’t they, Herbie?” said the future Mrs. Wiggins.

Herbert Wiggins just nodded. One of the waitresses brought the bill. “Gotta go, said Sam and he dashed off to the washroom. Herbert sighed and paid the tab.

The future Mrs. Wiggins grabbed Iggy by the arm. "You guys have to come to the show tonight."


"What show?" asked Iggy.

"The lads are playing tonight. We've come all the way from Beddleton to see them."

"Is it a Christmas concert?" asked Iggy.

"I suppose you could call it that. It is Christmastime after all. The Star Club. Nine o'clock. We'll see you there. It will be fab."

The Star Club

 THE STAR CLUB WAS HOPPING WHEN IGGY, YUGO AND Sam arrived at a little before 9:00 PM. Which is a metaphorical, and not a literal description of the club. There was a lot of noise and excitement in the club that night, but the Club itself was not hopping. The building remained rigidly attached to its foundation.

A large crowd milled around the door. With some difficulty, Iggy, Yugo and Sam tracked down Herbert and the future Mrs. Wiggins near the front door.

"There you are, I thought I'd never find you. Had it been another day, I might have looked the other way," said the future Mrs. Wiggins. She wrapped her arms around Iggy. "But now we've found you. Come on, let's get inside."

Sam let Iggy and Yugo pay for his ticket and soon they were led to a seat in the middle of the fourth row. It was a dim crowded showroom, with rows of seats clustered around a small stage. The murmur of the crowd grew to a roar as the band took to the stage. They were four young men, with matching page boy haircuts and dressed in matching grey suits with thin black ties and pointed black boots.

The crowd erupted as the band played eight quick bars that sounded a little bit like this:

♩ = 150

The musical score is for a piano piece in 4/4 time, key of D major (two sharps). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 150. The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains four measures. The second system begins with a measure number '4' and a repeat sign, followed by four measures. The right hand in the second system plays chords, while the left hand plays a continuous eighth-note pattern.

The future Mrs. Wiggins started screaming. Iggy started screaming. Everyone was screaming.

Everyone but Yugo and Sam.

“I cannot hear a thing over all of the screaming,” said Yugo. After decades of working with power tools, Yugo’s hearing was not the best.

“I can hear it fine, I just don’t like it,” said Sam.

“What did he say then?” asked Yugo.

“As best as I can tell, he is singing of a conversation he had with his girlfriend the previous evening, and apparently she is not even trying, so he is endeavouring to woo her by repeating the phrase “come on, come on,” over and over again and then there is some more wooing and then there is some hooing and it was all woo hoo after that as far as I can tell.”

“Is that what the song is about?”

“Pretty much. He does all the pleasing and it’s so hard to reason with her. It does not even rhyme.”

“It is an assonance,” said Yugo.

“What’s a assonance,” asked Sam.

“It is when a poet uses a word that is close to, but not quite a rhyming word.”

“Ah. So, assonance is a word that does not rhyme. Where I come from, we call that a word that does not rhyme.”

“I come from where you come from,” said Yugo. “And we call it assonance.”

By this point, the first song was finished, and the band bashed out the opening chords of their next number, which sounded rather like this:

♩ = 148

2 3 1 1 5 4 4 2 2 3 3 4 3 3 3 5 5

1 1 1 5 1 1 1 5 2 1 1 2 2 1 1 2 1 1 1 4

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 5 2 2 5 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 5 2 2 5 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

Em A⁷ C

“Yeah!” shouted Iggy.

“Yeah!” shouted the future Mrs. Wiggins.

“Yeah!” shouted Iggy again.

“I still cannot hear a thing,” said Yugo.

“Pay attention,” said Sam. “In this case, a young man has confided to his colleague, that although he may believe he has lost his girl, she still loves him for some reason. The reason why this might be so is not given, and seems to involve the band shouting ‘yeah, yeah, yeah’ over and over again.”

“Yeah!” shouted Iggy.

“Yeah!” shouted the future Mrs. Wiggins.

“Yeah!” shouted Iggy again.

Yugo looked down the row at Iggy who was screaming and shaking his head. His Tyrolean cap had long since disappeared into the cheering mass.

“Do you know what this is Sam?” said Yugo, excitedly. “Hamburg? 1962? Yeah, yeah, yeah?”

“Yeah?” said Sam unconvincingly.

“Yeah,” said Yugo. “That band on the stage is the Beatles. In another few months, they will be the biggest band in the world.”

“The Beatles?” said Sam. “Never heard of them.”

“Of course, you have, Sam. They are the biggest band ever. *Yellow Submarine*. *A Day in the Life*. *Yesterday*. Some of the greatest songs ever.”

“Never heard of them,” repeated Sam. “What kind of a band is named after a bug anyway?”

“Only the greatest band ever,” said Yugo. “I wish I could hear them.” But Iggy, the future Mrs. Wiggins, and the rest of the crowd were screaming much too loudly for that.

“Looks like Iggy has it bad,” said Yugo.

“Has what bad, now?” said Sam.

“Beatlemania. Iggy’s got it and so does Abigail.”

“What’s a Beatlemania?”

“It is an intense fan frenzy surrounding the Beatles that was prevalent in the early 1960s. It was like a religious fervour. It mostly involves a lot of screaming.”

Indeed, Iggy and the future Mrs. Wiggins screamed all the way through the rest of the song. And so, Yugo only heard a rhythmic beat as the band moved on to their next number and Iggy and the future Mrs. Wiggins screamed even louder than before:

Moderately

The musical score is for a piece in 4/4 time, marked 'Moderately'. It is written in G major (one sharp). The bass line consists of a steady eighth-note rhythm. The treble line features chords and melodic fragments. Chord diagrams for C and D are provided above the staff.

“Oh, I do remember this one,” said Sam. “It’s about holding hands or something. Awful.”

The rest of the show played out in much the same way. Iggy and the future Mrs. Wiggins screamed their heads off and Sam narrated each song in turn to Yugo. There were songs about this boy and that girl who was standing there. The fact that she was just seventeen was a cause for some concern.

“You know what I mean,” said Sam.

Yes, I suppose that I do,” replied Yugo.

The show finally reached its end. The band took a low bow together as the crowd cheered madly.

It took nearly half an hour for the cheering to wind down and for the crowd to filter out of the building.

“That was the greatest thing I have ever seen!” Iggy shouted. His shout was only a little louder than a whisper, for he was hoarse from all the screaming he had done during the show.

They wound their way back onto the Reeperbahn alongside the future Mrs. Wiggins and Herbert.

Iggy whispered loudly. “We have to go back tomorrow.”

“And the night after that,” said the future Mrs. Wiggins.

“We should get their autographs,” said Iggy.

“That would be so groovy,” said the future Mrs. Wiggins.

“We can work it out,” said Iggy. “I just need a plan.”

Iggy Has a New Plan

“**H**ERE IS THE PLAN,” said Iggy over lunch the next day at the Bierhalle. Iggy and Yugo shared a plate of potato salad with a sprig of kale on the side. Sam had a pile of bratwurst and sauerkraut on his plate and a big stein of Hefeweizenlagänbräu in his hand.

Iggy set an 8 x 10 glossy photograph on the table. It was a picture of four floppy haired young men with “The Beatles” printed in black type along the bottom. “I picked this up at the Star Club.”

Sam leaned over to have a closer look and accidentally tipped his stein of Hefeweizenlagänbräu all over the picture.

“Oops,” he said.

Iggy lifted the picture off the table. Hefeweizenlagänbräu dripped from the bottom. He set the ruined photograph aside and said, “fortunately I have another one.” He set a second copy of the photograph on the table.

He glared as Sam leaned forward a second time with a second large stein of Hefeweizenlagänbräu teetering dangerously in his hand. Sam paused and then leaned back slowly.

Iggy looked down reverently at the photograph. "These are the Beatles." He ran his finger over their faces. "That is John. That is Paul and George. And that is Ringo. Ringo plays the drums."

"Are you all right Iggy?" asked Yugo. "You seem a little obsessed."

"I am not obsessed." He smiled. "I feel fine."

"Could've fooled me," said Sam. He polished off the last of his sauerkraut and then ordered a marshmallow pie for dessert.

"The Beatles are staying at the Hotel Pacific this week," said Iggy. "I looked it up on the snowmobile computer."

Yugo looked shocked. "How did you log in? You need a password."

Iggy chuckled. "It was not that hard. Your password is 'password.' You might think about changing that."

Yugo looked chuffed. He was sure that his password plan was so clever no one would think of it. "So, what is this great plan, then?"

"Simple," said Iggy. "We walk over to the Hotel Pacific; it is only about 15 minutes away, and then we sneak into their room and ask them to autograph this picture."

"Seriously? That's your plan?" said Sam. "That's a terrible plan."

"What is wrong with it?" asked Iggy.

"Breaking into peoples' hotel rooms is against the law. You won't get an autograph; you'll get arrested is what you'll get."

"I am with Sam on this one," said Yugo. "You can't do that."

"We could dress as bell men and sneak in that way," said Iggy. "I think I have something in my steamer trunk that might work."

"I'm sure that you do," said Sam. "But we don't look anything like bellmen. In case you haven't noticed, we are only three and a half feet tall."

Iggy reached across the table and grabbed Sam by his velvet lapels. Hefeweizenlagēnbräu splashed everywhere. "You guys have to help me if you can. I need that autograph."

Yugo winced. "Our Iggy is gone. The Beatlemania has him. We are going to have to do this if we ever hope to get him back."

Sam twisted out of Iggy's grip. He straightened out his crumpled lapels. "Fine. But if I end up in prison, you better run for your life."

Three hours later, Iggy, Yugo and Sam arrived at the Hotel Pacific, disguised as three miniature bell hops. The hotel was surrounded by hundreds of screaming fans. Iggy immediately started screaming along with them.

“Cut it out,” said Sam.

“Sorry,” said Iggy, hoarsely. “I just cannot help myself.

They stood at the back of the throng. All they could see at their height were legs and beltloops.

“Come on, let me through,” said Iggy, his unsigned 8 x 10 glossy photograph clutched in his hand.

“This is hopeless,” said Yugo. “We will never get past this crowd.”

Iggy crouched low and tried to squeeze between the legs of the woman in front of him. He suddenly found himself in the grip of her very large and very annoyed boyfriend. “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” pleaded Iggy. Despite the sincerity of his apology, he returned to Yugo and Sam with a black eye.

“You are going to want to ice that,” said Yugo.

Just then, the roar of the mob grew even louder. “They’re here!” shouted someone from the front.

And so, they were. Four lads from Liverpool had entered the lobby. They smiled and waved at the fans who had gathered there. They were, however, surrounded by a group of seven large Hamburgers,⁴¹ which here means a group of seven large men from Hamburg, who had been engaged to see them safely to their next show at the Star Club.

Despite Yugo and Sam’s warning, Iggy plunged face first through the crowd. He squeezed past the nearest group of fans and waved his photograph over his head. His progress was impressive, but he never got past the hired German muscle, which greeted his arrival to the front of the throng with a second blackened eye.

Iggy retreated to Yugo and Sam and said, “I think we need another plan.”

⁴¹ It is true. People from Hamburg are called “Hamburgers.” People from Frankfurt are called “Frankfurters.” When they get together it is burgers and hot dogs all around.

Meet the BEATLES!

IGGY'S NEXT PLAN WAS NOT SO VERY MUCH DIFFERENT FROM HIS ORIGINAL PLAN, except this plan involved him wearing a pair of oversized sunglasses to conceal his black eyes. In all other respects, the plan was the same. Arrive at the Hotel Pacific disguised as an undersized bellman, work his way to the front of the crowd and then hope for the best.

Perhaps a more fully realized plan would have led to a better result. This newer plan, despite the oversized sunglasses, resulted in a result which was broadly the same result as the last result.⁴² The principal difference was that this time, Iggy's sunglasses were broken a moment before his eyes were blackened a third time.

Otherwise, the entire scheme played out pretty much as it had the night before. Screaming fans, a group of large Hamburgers and some determined violence centered on the ocular areas of a certain elf.

"This happened once before," said Yugo.

"You're going to want to ice that," said Sam.

"I need to have that autograph," said Iggy. "But I do not know how many more beatings I can take."

Sam helped Iggy to his feet. "Don't sell yourself short. You're an elf of the North Pole. I bet you can take plenty more beatings."

"We should try again tomorrow," said Yugo. "But we should dress like Christmas elves. Tomorrow is Christmas after all. Nobody could possibly punch an elf on Christmas."

Sam was not so sure. He had punched a few elves himself on Christmas, after three or four pints of elfläger, and once the sleigh had been loaded and Santa was on his way.

And so, it was, on Christmas Day, 1962, three elves, dressed in red and green velvet attended at the lobby of the Hotel Pacific. The tallest one, who wore sunglasses, held a photograph in his hand.

⁴² Going out on a limb here, but this could be the first time in the history of the English language that the word "result" was used four times in a single sentence. Inquiries have been made of the *Guinness* people.

In the end, jolly elf suits of red and green made little difference. Punches hurt just the same no matter what one wears.

You would be surprised how often an eye can be blackened and the range of hues of the ensuing bruises. Not simply black, but deep indigo, magenta and plum. A veritable cocktail of colours, with hints of chocolate and elderberry alongside black cherry, bougainvillea and blackberry.

This was how Iggy's eyes appeared after seven burly Hamburgers had worked him over a third time.

It was so bad that Iggy could barely see the band at the concert that night. But that did not stop them from going back to the Star Club for the fourth night in a row. The future Mrs. Wiggins was there too, along with a tired looking Herbert.

The Beatles bashed out a few cover tunes and the crowd responded with its usual roar. Even though he could not see very well, Iggy waved his photograph over his head and screamed along with the rest of them.

"It's all too much," said Sam. "Give me that." He pulled the photograph from Iggy's hand and then bulldozed his way to the front of the crowd. He jumped up onto the stage and stuck it in front of the nearest Beatle. "Can you sign this for me sir, it's for a friend."

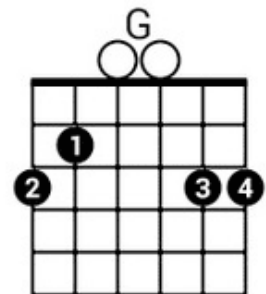
"Sure mate," said John. "What's your friend's name?"

"Sam," said Sam.

John took the photo and scribbled his name on it. He passed it over to Paul, who had just finished a chorus of 'yeah yeah yeahs.' He signed it and gave it to George. George scrawled his name in the corner and then gave it to Ringo, who signed it without missing a beat.

John gave the photograph back to Sam and then brought the song to an end with a crashing G chord.

Sam maneuvered through the crowd and placed the picture in Iggy's hand. It said: "*For Sam John Paul George Ringo.*" Iggy clutched it to his chest. There would have been tears in his eyes if they were not so swollen.



The band finished their last number and took their bows. Then John leaned into his microphone and said, "Hey Sam's friend." Sam looked up. "It's Christmas. We're going out for dinner. Who don't you and your friends join us?"

"We're having frikadelle," said George.

And so, they did.

The Beatles played the Star Club every night until December 31, 1962. Iggy and the future Mrs. Wiggins went to every show. By New Year's Day, Iggy's eyes were a rusty amber colour and no longer swollen shut.

"Time to go," said Yugo.

"Have you fixed the time-interface?" asked Sam.

"I have run a diagnostic, and everything seems to be in order. The time-interface is running its original programming."


"That's what I'm afraid of," said Sam.

Iggy stood outside the snowmobile and waved at the future Mrs. Wiggins. "See you then," he said and climbed inside. The snowmobile wavered for a moment then disappeared.

Abigail turned to Herbert and said, "see you then? What an odd thing to say."

"Odd sort of people, elves," said Herbert.

December 22, 46

 HE SNOWMOBILE GROUND TO A STOP AT THE SIDE OF A cobblestone road that ran in a straight line in either direction as far as the eye could see. Yugo consulted his monitor and then gave a soft whistle. "We have gone way back this time. All the way to the year 46 A.D."

"I do not believe it," said Iggy.

"I do," said Sam.

"I was sure that the time-interface was fixed this time. It must still be processing that beautiful new code," said Yugo.

"It has been processing your beautiful new code for weeks," said Sam. "Maybe years. I don't understand all this time travelling."

Yugo rubbed his chin. "It should have processed the new programming by now. There must be something else we have not tried yet."

"So, what day is it," said Sam. "Don't tell me, let me guess. Is it December 22nd?"

Yugo winced. “Apparently so, although it is January 4th where we come from. They used another calendar in 46 A.D.⁴³ We are in a really different time zone now.”

“It always starts on December 22nd,” said Sam.

It started exactly one minute later. A hundred armoured men marched up to the snowmobile in perfect lockstep. They were led by a man wearing a steel breastplate with a golden eagle embossed upon it, a leather skirt and an ornately feathered helmet.

The column of soldiers marched right up to the snowmobile, then stomped to a halt and raised their spears in formation.

“At ease, men,” said the soldier with the feathered helmet, who stood at the head of the column. Then he turned to the snowmobile. “You there! You, elves! I command you in the name of the emperor: Come before me! Come before First Centurion Terwilligum!”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam stepped out of the snowmobile. “Hi there,” said Iggy meekly.

“Silence!” shouted First Centurion Terwilligum. “Where are you from and what is your business in Britannia!”

The elves stood, mute.

“Speak!” shouted First Centurion Terwilligum.

“You told us to be silent, just there,” said Yugo.

“And now you want us to speak,” said Sam.

“Silence!” shouted First Centurion Terwilligum.

The elves stood quietly at attention.

“Your business in Britannia! Now! Speak!” bellowed First Centurion Terwilligum.

“I do not know what to do,” said Iggy.

“Do we speak or not?” asked Yugo.

⁴³ The Julian Calendar was adopted by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. It did not measure leap years correctly and by the 1500s the date on the calendar did not match the weather outside. The Gregorian Calendar corrected this error and was adopted in 1582. It made a one-time adjustment by dropping 11 days from the month of October, 1582. October 4th, 1582 was followed immediately by October 15th. People with birthdays on October 10th got no presents that year.

“I wish you would make up your mind,” said Sam.

“Silence!” shouted First Centurion Terwilligum. The soldier to his left coughed and then leaned over to whisper in his ear.

“Second Centurion Hobbus makes a fair point,” said First Centurion Terwilligum. “Perhaps I could be a little clearer. My command is that you tell me your business in Britannia and that you not be silent unless and until I further command you to be silent, in which case I command that you be silent at once. Is that understood?”

“Perfectly,” said Iggy.

“Silence!” shouted First Centurion Terwilligum.

The elves did not speak another word.

First Centurion Terwilligum looked back at his second in command. “I’ve done it again, haven’t I?”

Second Centurion Hobbus nodded.

“Very well then.” He turned back to the elves. “Here are my final commands which I command you to obey in every particular. Keep in mind that there are one hundred spears pointed at you right now by men who know how to use them. Failure to obey these final commands will result in death by a hundred spears, which I assure you is most unpleasant indeed. These are my final commands, and my final commands are these.”

First Centurion Terwilligum counted off each command on his fingers:

I. You are not to be silent unless and until I command you to be silent a further time, in which event you must immediately be silent, without further command.

II. Until such time as you are commanded to be silent, you will speak in answer to my further commands, up until I further command you to be silent, and then and only then must you be silent.

III. You are commanded to speak and in so speaking to explain precisely about where you are from and the nature of your business in Britannia.

IV. Upon speaking, you shall speak only of those two topics and those two topics only. For further clarity, the two topics of which you are exclusively commanded to speak are where you are from and then you shall immediately address the second subject of these commands, which subject is the nature of your business in Britannia.

V. You shall speak of those two matters only and shall address no further or other matters of any nature or kind.

VI. You shall not speak of the weather nor shall you speak of your luncheon plans nor shall you speak of any other trivial matters concerning topics of which you have not been commanded to speak.

VII. Upon having spoken of those matters as outlined in previous Commands III and IV, and only of those two matters and without digression into a discussion of matters of which you have not been commanded to speak, you are then, and only then, commanded to be silent without further command.

VIII. Failure to honour and obey each of the aforesaid commands in every particular shall result in your immediate and painful termination by spearpoint, without further command or warning of any kind.”

First Centurion Terwilligum crossed his arms and said, “well then?”

“This is all very confusing,” said Iggy. “I still do not know what to do.”

“Speak!” shouted First Centurion Terwilligum, his face red. Spit showered down on the elves.

Yugo bowed and then took a knee. “We are humble travellers from the north. We seem to have lost our way.”

“We’ll be moving right along now,” said Sam. “Don’t want to make any trouble.”

“Silence!” shouted First Centurion Terwilligum.

“What should we do, my liege?” asked Second Centurion Hobbus.

“We will take them to Wigginus. Wigginus will know what to do,” said First Centurion Terwilligum.

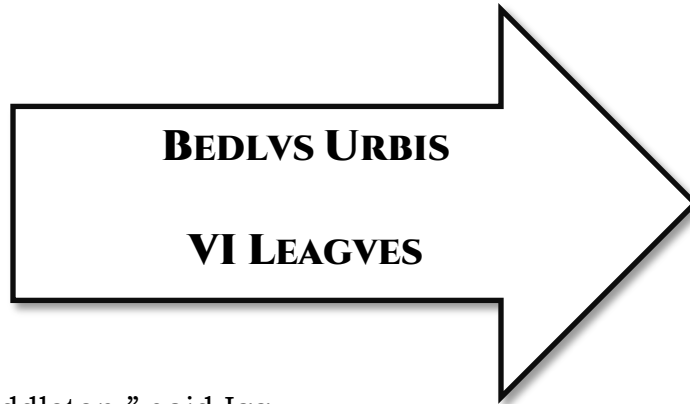
Three legionnaires stepped forward and grabbed the elves.

Iggy shrugged free and said, “I will be right back. I just need a moment to change.” He crawled into the back of the snowmobile and dug into his old steamer trunk. He emerged a few minutes later dressed in a gold trimmed toga and sandals. A laurel wreath rested on his ears and circled the back of his head. “When in Rome,” he said.

“We are not actually in Rome,” said Yugo.

“If we are not in Rome, then where are we?” asked Iggy.

Yugo pointed to a newly built sign that stood on the nearby grass:



“Good old Beddleton,” said Iggy.

“I don’t believe it,” said Sam.

“It is true,” said Yugo. “In 46 A.D., Beddleton and all of England was part of the Roman Empire. They called it ‘Britannia.’”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Sam. “I don’t believe we are going to have to march another 18 miles.”

The House of Wigginus

EIGHTEEN MILES LATER, IGGY, YUGO AND SAM ARRIVED at a stone building with marble columns. First Centurion Terwilligum halted his column and raised his right arm in salute as a tall grey-haired man dressed in a gold trimmed toga with a laurel wreath on his ears stepped out onto the marble steps and said, “What have you brought me today, First Centurion Terwilligum?”

Terwilligum lowered his arm and roughly shoved Iggy forward. Iggy looked around and then knelt awkwardly.

The tall man skipped down the steps and clapped his hands. “What is it, what is it?”

“Elves, I think,” said First Centurion Terwilligum.

“Elves! How delightful. We don’t see many elves around here, do we Terwilligum.”

“Not so much, sir.”

The tall man extended his hand and helped Iggy to his feet. “Welcome to my home. I am Wigginus, Tribune of Beddus Urbis.” He whispered loudly to Yugo, “I report directly to Emperor Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, you know.”

The First Centurion rolled his eyes. He well knew that as Tribune, Wigginus reported to the Legate, who reported to a Patrician, who reported to a Senator who reported to a Consul who, in turn, reported to a High Consul who, finally, reported to the Emperor. Terwilligum doubted that Emperor Claudius had read any reports from Wigginus or, indeed, had ever even heard of him. After all, Beddus Urbis was a small outpost and it was a long, long way from Rome.

“Thank you so much for these elves,” said Wigginus with a giggle. “Elves are such hard workers. They really do make the best slaves.” He wrapped his arms around Iggy, Yugo and Sam. “Come along. Let me show you around.”

He led them up the marble steps and through an arched doorway with a sign above it that read:



“It cannot be,” said Iggy.

“That is a most unusual sign,” said Yugo. “What does it mean?”

“Well, that is an amusing tale,” said Wigginus. “When I was first appointed Tribune of Beddus Urbis, by the Emperor Claudius himself, mind you; I was given this villa. But upon my arrival I found it overrun with mice. Mice everywhere. So, I laid out traps of all kinds to catch the mice. We baited them with cheese and dates and the kinds of things that mice like. Soon the villa was free of mice.

“Except for one clever mouse. Night after night he collected his cheese and dates and what not yet eluded all our traps. I called on my best inventors to build me the cleverest of traps, and yet they could not catch the mouse. So, I had those inventors all executed and then I found some more inventors who built me ever so much cleverer contrivances but they all failed to catch the mouse and so I had them all executed as well.

“As you might expect, it was not long before I was entirely out of inventors.” Wigginus giggled and continued. “I despaired that the mouse would never be caught. Then one morning, there was no sign of it. We searched the villa from top to bottom and finally found him in the wine cellar, drowned and pickled in

an urn of falernian.⁴⁴ This clever mouse defeated all our traps yet succumbed to the trap of the fermented grape. This was plainly a sign from the gods to abstain from the fermented grape myself. That very day I broke open and emptied every cask in the cellars. Then I raised up that sign so that everyone who came to this villa would know of the fate of the clever mouse and that there will never be any wine served at the House of Wigginus!”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” said Sam.

Wigginus clapped Sam on the back so hard that it dropped him to his knees. “Oh Sammus. Can I call you Sammus? Yes, I will. You are my Sammus and you fill me with such mirth. I shall make you my house fool. These other two,” he waved an imperious hand in the direction of Iggy and Yugo, “shall work in my stables.”

First Centurion Terwilligum and Second Centurion Hobbus led Iggy and Yugo away at spear point.

Wigginus led Sam through the archway. Sam experienced a strong feeling of *deja vu*⁴⁵ as they stepped into a spacious dining room. This is my dining hall. Isn’t it just precious? Just look at all those things,” said Wigginus as he pranced along the wall and waved his hand at the heads of assorted animals displayed there. There was a stuffed dodo perched on a shelf and the head of a woolly mammoth, tusks and all, mounted in the corner.

Wigginus placed his little finger at the side of his nose said, “you have arrived on a rather special night, you know. It is the last night of the Saturnalia.”

“Wuzzat?” asked Sam.

Wigginus giggled. “Oh Sammus, my little Sammus. You really are not from around here, are you? The Saturnalia is only the hap hap happiest time of the year! The festival of good old Saturn. God of the harvest. Mark my words little Sammus, we will be feasting on that harvest tonight. And there will be songs and games and there will be presents. That is the best part. All the presents.”

He wrapped Sam tightly in his arms and spun him around. “Oh, we will make such merry together!”

“I can’t wait,” said Sam as he struggled to catch his breath.

⁴⁴ Falernian was a white wine with a relatively high alcohol content, so much so that it was said to “take light when flame was applied to it.” The original firewater, as it were.

⁴⁵ *Déjà vu* is a French expression that means ‘already seen.’ It is the sensation that one has lived through a present situation once before. Nobody has ever figured out why people occasionally experience this feeling. It is just a thing that happens sometimes.

The Saturnalia

A CORNU⁴⁶ BLEW AT SUNSET AND THE SATURNALIA BEGAN. The rest of the band joined in, four floppy haired young men strummed their lutes madly and sang a tune that sounded a bit like *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus* as performed by Twisted Sister.⁴⁷

The dining hall was decked in boughs of holly. Golden balls were laid about the room and even tacked to the end of each of the woolly mammoth's coiled tusks. The room was filled with fancy folk, dressed in togas, dining on peeled grapes and other delicacies.

The band finished their song. The drummer beat a rhythmic tattoo and all the slaves of House Wigginus, including Iggy and Yugo, were paraded into the hall, chained together in a row. Iggy's laurel wreath was gone, and his toga was soiled from his afternoon in the stables. Yugo's moustache, a source of great pride to him, was likewise soiled with bits from the stables. The nature of these bits will not be elaborated upon further.

Once the slaves were lined up against the wall. The band struck up a fanfare on cornu and lute and Wigginus, the master of the house, strolled into the room, dressed in a red and green leather toga trimmed with little silver bells. A holly leaf wreath rested on his ears. He winked to his guests as they applauded his entrance. "As you can see, I have donned my gay apparel!"

Then, he snapped his fingers and all the slaves, including Iggy and Yugo, were released from their chains.

The cornu sounded again and a procession of oiled up young men in very small togas entered the room bearing a golden sedan chair. Everyone clapped as they paraded around the room. Wigginus himself gave a low whistle as the team marched past him.

They carried their burden to the middle of the room where a golden throne had been placed on a small pedestal. They lowered the sedan chair and pulled back the curtain. Sam stepped out, dressed in his own red and green toga and stepped up to and then sat down on the golden chair.

⁴⁶ The cornu (Latin for 'horn') was a musical instrument used by the Roman army to communicate orders in battle. If you want to get the party started, you could do worse than blasting it out on a cornu.

⁴⁷ Twisted Sister included a version of *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus* on their album *A Twisted Christmas* in 2006.

“Io Saturnalia!” shouted Wigginus in Latin. “Behold, the king of the Saturnalia!”

Sam gave a long low bow and then returned to his seat and plucked a couple of peeled grapes from a small bowl on the armrest.

Iggy and Yugo rushed over to the throne. “Sam, what is going on?”

Sam raised a hand. “Bow to your king.”

Iggy shrugged and bowed. Yugo just grabbed Sam by the collar and said, “what is going on?”

“You are not going to believe this. Wigginus told me all about it in his dressing chamber.” Sam glared and raised a pointed finger before either of Iggy or Yugo could interrupt. “This Saturnalia business is the goofiest thing you’ve ever heard of. There are decorations and presents and gay apparel, just like Christmas. But it’s not Christmas.”

Yugo stroked his moustache and then looked at his fingers in disgust. “Santa Claus does not set up his operation for a few hundred years,” said Yugo. “The Saturnalia is what Christmas looked like before it was called Christmas. We still have some of these traditions. But a lot of them have been left behind. As I understand it, during the Saturnalia, masters wait on their servants and even a fool can be a king.”

“I have to say, I like it a lot,” said Sam from his throne.

“Why are you the king instead of Wigginus?” asked Iggy.

“Wigginus says the biggest fool is elected king for the night. And he says I’m the biggest fool he’s ever met,” said Sam proudly.

“So, what does the king do?” asked Yugo.

“Check this out,” said Sam. “Everybody has to do whatever I say. You there, juggle those spears,” commanded Sam. Second Centurion Hobbus promptly pulled three spears from a rack and lofted them into the air. The juggling began ambitiously but ended poorly. Still, everyone clapped in delight as Second Centurion Hobbus was stretchered out of the room.

“That was awful,” said Iggy.

“You can’t argue with tradition,” said Sam. Then he called Wigginus over. Wigginus, the master of the house, scampered over to the throne and prostrated himself with a low bow. “My friends here need some food,” commanded Sam.

“What do they desire, my king,” said Wigginus, still bent over in a bow.

Sam groaned. “Simple fare. Unbuttered toast and unsweetened water.” Since there was no wine list, he called for some unsweetened water for himself. “And

some more of these grapes. And make sure they are properly peeled this time,” he said as he rattled his empty bowl.

“At once my king,” said Wigginus and he skipped out to the kitchen.

Sam leaned back in his chair. “It’s good to be king.”

Wigginus returned a few moments later with three silver goblets and a plate of toast and peeled grapes.

“Who could have imagined someone named Wigginus serving elves in this house?” said Wigginus with a giggle as he presented Iggy, Yugo and Sam with their goblets.

Iggy and Yugo did a double take. “It happens more often than you think,” said Iggy.

The evening carried on in this fashion for several hours, with Sam issuing capricious commands (you there! Sing me a song! In your underpants!) and sending Wigginus back and forth to the kitchens for grapes.

Finally, Wigginus announced, “it is time for the presents!” He flitted around the room, passing out parcels to his guests. He reached the throne last and held out a small package. “This is for you Sammus.”

Sam snatched the package from Wigginus’ hand. He tore of the paper, revealing a large gold nugget.

“Isn’t it pretty?” said Wigginus. “Just like you.”

Sam smiled. “This is great. I used to have one just like it, but I lost it.” He gave Yugo a quick glare.

The sedan chair returned, and Sam was led down from the throne.

“I guess we will be on our way in the morning then,” said Iggy.

“Oh no, no, no,” said Wigginus. “When the sun rises you will all be slaves again. You will all be staying here forever. Even my beloved Sammus.” Wigginus winked at Sam. “But the Saturnalia is not over until sundown tomorrow. And there is one last event, the chariot race. It is a sight to see, all those strong young men in those fine chariots.”

“We cannot stay forever,” said Yugo. “We are on an important mission.”

“Very well,” said Wigginus. “It is the Saturnalia after all. Let me give you this one last gift. If you fellows can defeat my best charioteers and win my chariot race, I’ll set you free.”

“No problem,” said Sam. Iggy and Yugo stared at him wide eyed. But then, they were roughly thrown back into their chains and dragged out to the stables, while Sam retired to his private suite, where visions of chariot races danced in his head.

Death Race 46

CORNUS RANG OUT AT MIDDAY, TO ANNOUNCE THE BEGINNING of the grand chariot race which would end the celebrations of the Saturnalia. Great charioteers from throughout Britannia had travelled to the Circus Wigginus⁴⁸ for the event.

First Centurion Terwilligum was there, in a great golden chariot pulled by two enormous white chargers. Second Centurion Hobbus was unable to attend the event, due to a good number of spearpoint related injuries. But other great warriors and racers were there. Marvellus, the one they called the Marvelous Marvellus was there, with his team of two mighty black steeds towing his sleek black ride. Velocitus, the one they called Speedy Vic, waved as he drove his snorting team into circus. He was followed by the twins, Magnus and Magnesium; between them they had won every race in Londinium⁴⁹ in the last three years.

And then Iggy, Yugo and Sam entered the circus. They rode a dull grey chariot with a squeaky wheel towed by a single grey mare Iggy called Mabel. She was the only pony they could find in the stables that nobody else wanted. They steered their creaking chariot into the line beside Magnesium, who’s sleek silver chariot looked so fast that it might catch fire at any moment.

Wigginus rose from his private box in the middle of the circus. “My beautiful charioteers,” he said. “You are to race six circuits about my circus. There will be a feast for the winner and the loser will be thrown to the lions. May the best man, or elf, win!” Wigginus winked at Sam. Then he raised his arm and dropped

⁴⁸ Chariot races in Roman times were held at a “circus”, which is the Latin word for circle. In this case, the race was run at Wigginus’ track, the Circus Wigginus. The largest circus in the Roman Empire was the Circus Maximus, which held over 150,000 people and had a track that was more than a mile long. The Circus Wigginus was considerably more minimus than the Circus Maximus.

⁴⁹ Londinium was the capital of Roman Britain throughout Roman rule of England. It was a settlement at a key crossing of the River Thames and would eventually be known as London.

a lacy handkerchief. It floated slowly down and when at last it rested on his sandaled feet, a chorus of cornus rang out and the race was on.

Terwilligum claimed the early lead, seizing the rail as he entered the first turn. But Speedy Vic was not far behind. They rounded the bend and headed into the back stretch.

Then Marvelous Marvellus made his move. More rapid than eagles, his coursers they came, and as they pulled past Terwilligum, he whistled and shouted and called them by name. "On Twilight Sparkle, on Pinkie Pie, on to the next turn and turn once more, then dash away dash away, dash to the fore!"

Iggy, Yugo and Sam got off to a slow start. When the cornus sounded, Mabel was chewing on some dandelions at the edge of the track. She seemed content to keep on chewing as the other five chariots roared ahead.

Iggy finally coaxed her to lift her head and trot forward a few steps as Marvellus sped past them. He had already completed his first lap, with Velocitus, Terwilligum and the twins in close pursuit.

"I am sure that Wigginus was not serious about the lions," said Yugo.

"I am sure he was serious about the lions," said Sam. "We need to get a move on." Mabel did not, however, share Sam's sense of urgency.

Then the crowd roared as Magnus and Magnesium made their move, speeding down the straightaway on either side until they pulled in front together and then rode side by side to keep the others from passing.

There seemed to be no danger that they would be passed by Iggy, Yugo and Sam who had just rounded the first turn when they were lapped a second time by Magnus, Magnesium and the rest of the group. Marvellus blew a kiss as he dashed past them again.

"They have already completed two laps," said Iggy. "I fear we may be falling behind."

"It will be all right," said Yugo. "I have a plan."

"It might be a good time to get that plan started," said Sam. They slowly crept past Wigginus' box for the first time. Wigginus shook his head sadly as they passed.

Meanwhile, out at the front of the pack, Speedy Vic had manoeuvred his chariot between the twins and claimed the lead as the three frontrunners raced into the next turn.

Terwilligum slid in behind Velocitus and made his move. In this case, his move involved pulling a spear from the side of his chariot and stabbing it into the

spokes of Speedy Vic's wheels. The chariot flipped over, and tossed Velocitus into the crowd, where he landed safely in the arms of a group of adoring fans.

"Not so speedy now, eh Vic," laughed Terwilligum. He was still laughing when he overshot the next turn and crashed into the rail. Terwilligum fell from the ledge on the back of his chariot. He fell onto the dirt track but was tangled up in his reins and was dragged along behind by his stallions another lap, oblivious to Terwilligum's screams.

With Velocitus and Terwilligum out of the race, Marvelous Marvellus reclaimed the lead, and finished his third lap blowing kisses to the cheering crowd. He made a wide turn at the next corner to avoid Iggy, Yugo and Sam who were parked at the side of the track so Mabel could eat more dandelions. Magnus and Magnesium charged past a moment later.

Sam was thinking about lions. "The race is half over, and we have barely started."

"It is all good," said Yugo, as he snapped the reins to get Mabel back on track. Despite Yugo's efforts, Mabel seemed completely disinterested in the track.

It was a three-horse race at the other end of the track, where Marvellus held his lead as he steered his team through the turn. Magnus was close behind, with Magnesium even closer behind him. And that was where things stood as the pack stormed past Iggy, Yugo and Sam a third time.

Sam looked on in despair as the three leading chariots finished their fourth lap.

Yugo stepped off the back of their rusty chariot and walked up to Mabel. He whispered softly to her as three other chariots roared past, kicking up a great cloud of dirt, dust and mud. Mabel had a mouth full of dandelions and did not seem to mind. Yugo unclipped her harness and gave her a pat on the rump. Mabel galloped off into the infield, where there were dandelions aplenty.

On the other side of the track, Magnesium had claimed the lead. He held it through the far turn. As he shot past the elves again, they could hear the prancing and pawing of each little hoof of his team. And the team of Magnus, who was running a close second. Marvellus had faded a bit, but he still urged his team on as the roared past the elves.

"Just my luck," said Sam. "I bet my gold nugget on Marvellus."

"That was a foolish bet," said Yugo, as he climbed back on to the chariot.

“Oh really?” said Sam. “And who do you think I should have put my denarii⁵⁰ on?”

“Us, of course,” said Yugo. He pulled some goggles from his pocket and wrapped them over his eyes. “Now hold on.” Yugo reached out and pushed a flashing yellow button at the front of the chariot. There was a low rumble, followed by a louder rumble followed by an even bigger rumble. The chariot rocketed down the track.

Iggy screamed.

Sam screamed.

“Hold on!” said Yugo. The chariot rounded a corner then roared down the home stretch.

Iggy screamed.

Sam screamed.

Magnus, Magnesium and Marvellus were neck and neck and neck as they raced past Wigginus’ private box. “Hurrah!” called Wigginus. He raised a tiny silver bell and rang it gently.⁵¹ “One lap to go!” Three chariots rambled down the track. And then a fourth chariot shot past, moving faster than any chariot Wigginus had ever seen.

“What was that?” asked Wigginus, as he called for his servants to fan him.

“What was that?” asked Iggy as their chariot rocketed past the lead group and then headed down the back stretch.

“We were two days in the stables. More than enough time to make a few modifications,” said Yugo. He steered the chariot past the private box and around the first turn.

“What sort of modifications?” asked Sam. He gripped a railing on the side of the chariot with knuckles so white they could be used in toothpaste commercials.

“Oh, you know. The usual. Rocket engines.” They completed their second lap and then passed the three other racers in the back stretch.

⁵⁰ The denarius was the standard silver coin used throughout the Roman Empire. These coins spread throughout the Mediterranean region. There are no denarii anymore, but several Middle Eastern and African countries still use Dinars as the principal unit of their currency.

⁵¹ The final lap of a race is often referred to as the “bell lap,” and is typically signaled with the ringing of a bell as the leader begins the last lap. This tradition dates to approximately 46 A.D.

“They are still three laps ahead,” said Iggy.

Yugo guided their chariot around the far turn and then sped past the private box, completing their third lap. The other chariots were charging down the back stretch. They were only a half lap away from the finish line.

“Not a problem,” said Yugo. “But I mean it. Hold on.” He reached out and pushed a blue button on the front of the chariot. There was a tremendous boom and the chariot shot down the track even faster than before.

Iggy held on to Yugo’s belt, his legs straight out behind them as Yugo guided the chariot into the next turn and past the other drivers, who were led at this point by Magnesium.

Iggy screamed.

Sam screamed.

“After burners!” yelled Yugo. “I am pretty sure that we have just claimed the land speed record of 46 A.D.!” Neither Iggy nor Sam could reply, as they each gritted their teeth and hung onto the chariot for dear life.

Another sonic boom rang out as they finished their fourth lap and then caught up to the leaders as they entered their final turn. Marvellus was leading by a Roman nose.

“We need more power,” said Yugo. He punched a green button. Iggy and Sam both blacked out as the chariot lurched forward again, completed another loop and then fell in behind the leaders as they charged three abreast down the home stretch. These were G forces that would not be experienced for another 1900 years, when Chuck Yeager became the first man to fly faster than the speed of sound. He had no idea three elves had done it almost two millennia earlier.

Magnus had the pole position as they all raced toward the finish line. It was his race to lose, and he did, because he did not have a chariot outfitted with rocket engines.

Wigginus waved a lacy black and white checkered kerchief as Iggy, Yugo and Sam crossed the finish line ahead of all the others and with a time that would never be equalled at the Circus Wigginus. Yugo held his course and drove the chariot out of the circus and onto the straight cobblestone road that led out of Beddus Urbis.

As the elves shot out of his circus, Wigginus raised his checkered kerchief to blot away a tear from the corner of his eye and whispered. “Oh no. Not again. But then, a deal is a deal. Fare you well sweet Sammus.” He waved the kerchief at the departing elves.

“What are you doing?” said Iggy. The chariot left Beddus Urbis behind and rattled down the cobblestones at a decidedly unsafe speed.

“I am not stopping for anything,” said Yugo. “The snowmobile is only XVIII miles away!”

December 22, 1814

A HORN BLEW LONG AND LOW. Not a cornu this time, but a horn mounted on the mast of a steamship somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. It was the *SS Canada*,⁵² sailing from Liverpool to New York, with nearly a hundred passengers on board looking to make a new life in the New World. It was three days before Christmas, and the children expected Santa Claus to arrive soon. Surely, he would find them, even in the middle of the sea. That is what little John Wiggins told his younger sister, Abigail as they leaned on the ship’s railing and watched the sun set. John was a slight lad, ten years old with russet brown hair. Abigail was only six, with brown hair tied in pig tails.

That was when they first laid eyes on the black schooner that rose from the western horizon. It flew a black flag and bore down upon the friendly steamship. John and Abigail heard the boom of a cannon and a moment later an iron ball flew over their heads.

“I do not think that is Santa Claus,” said Abigail.

“Come on,” said John. “We need to get out of here.” He grabbed her wrist and pulled her behind him and ran down the deck. Crewmen scrambled around them, hollering and pulling on ropes. They yanked the jib and tugged on the mizzen. Then they jibbed the mizzen for good measure.

Another cannonball soared overhead as John and Abigail scrambled down the steps to their little cabin in steerage. They rushed through the door and clutched onto the skirts of their mother, Mabel.

Mabel Wiggins set aside her cup of dandelion wine. “What’s all this then?”

“We’re under attack,” said John.

“It’s not Santa Claus!” said Abigail.

⁵² The good ship *Canada* first launched at Montreal in 1811. She spent most of her career as a passenger ship sailing between England and North America, until she ran aground and sank near Yorkshire in 1836.

“I think it’s pirates!” said John.

“Pirates is it?” said Mabel. She picked up her glass of dandelion wine.

A low thud thundered through the ship as the black schooner pulled up alongside. This was followed by shouting and clamouring as the pirates climbed onto the upper deck. The shouting and clamouring soon reached the lower deck. Someone pounded on the door of the little cabin.

Mabel took a last gulp of her dandelion wine and took her children by the hands. “Guess we had better go see what that is all about then.” They stepped out into the narrow hall, where they were gruffly seized by gruff men. They were pirates, all right. There wore puffy shirts, red bandanas and the occasional eyepatch. The works. The pirates pushed and prodded them down the hall and up the stairs, waving their muskets dangerously all the while. The whole attack had only lasted a few minutes.

The passengers were paraded up onto the deck and then chained together in a row. The ship’s crew were likewise roped to the three masts.

Then the gruffest man of them all stepped up onto a wooden barrel. He had a big nose and small dark eyes. He had a stubbly black and grey beard. His head was covered in a dirty yellow bandanna and an enormous gold hoop hung from his ear. He was dressed in the puffiest shirt of all and a black coat with brass buttons and red trim. A yellow and black parrot perched on one shoulder and squawked loudly. He raised a pistol over his head and fired a single shot into the air.

“Greetings ye scurvy rats, greetings one and all. Yer ship be mine now. And I be yer new captain, Black Bob Terwilliger.” Black Bob gave a low bow and the barrel wobbled under his feet. Two of his pirate crew scrambled over to steady it. The parrot squawked again.

Black Bob held out some seeds and nuts in the palm of his grubby hand. “There there, Hobbs. Have a snack. That’s a good boy.” The parrot pecked greedily.

Black Bob turned to the row of anxious passengers. “We came here seeking treasure and booty. But we’ve scoured this rat-infested barge from tip to toe and there’s no booty to speak of, other than your miserable selves.” He sighed deeply. “So, yer all going to join me crew instead.”

He stepped off his barrel and walked along the line of passengers. He wagged his pistol at them as he spoke. “Not much of a crew,” he said. He stopped in front of Mabel. “This one can be my personal serving wench.” He looked down the barrel of his pistol at young John. “And this young lad looks he’d make a fine cabin boy. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, boy?” Black Bob said with a sneer. John turned his head away. Black Bob smelled of rum and parrot dung.

Mabel pulled her son closer. It had come to this then. This was how it was all going to end. Kidnapped by pirates.

It had already been a difficult year for Mabel Wiggins. After an argument over the family business, they had left their home in the little town of Beddleton, so her husband Herbert could take a job in the big city. They had barely settled into their house on New Street, next door to the Horse Shoe Brewery, when their new home, and Herbert, were washed away in the Great London Beer Flood.⁵³

It seems that there was an enormous wooden vat in the warehouse at the back of the Horse Shoe Brewery. It was the biggest ever built, over 22 feet high and filled to the top with nearly 350,000 gallons⁵⁴ of dark brown porter. The pressure of the fermenting brew inside the tank was incredible, and one Monday afternoon in October, it burst open. Nearly three million pints of beer smashed through the brick wall of the brewery and a fifteen-foot-high tsunami of foaming porter swept down New Street, clearing everything in its wake.

Herbert Wiggins was among the things cleared away in that wake. “It is how he would have wanted to go,” said Mabel at the time. Finding herself homeless and widowed with two young children, Mabel spent her small settlement from the Horse Shoe Brewery on three tickets to start over again, this time in America.

Mabel looked out over the empty ocean. She needed a miracle now. And after all it was nearly Christmas. Miracles are supposed to happen at Christmas time, aren't they?

A Christmas Miracle

WHAT OF IGGY, YUGO AND SAM, last seen speeding down a straight Roman road in a rocket powered chariot? They found the snowmobile where they left it, still parked by the sign at the road just before their rocket fuel ran out.

Two minutes later they were back in the snowmobile and then two minutes after that, they found themselves in another time and place entirely. This place happened to be two miles underwater.

⁵³ This is an actual thing that actually happened. It is not to be confused with the Great Boston Molasses Flood of 1919 or the Pepsi Fruit Juice Flood of 2017. Which are other actual things that actually happened.

⁵⁴ About 1,600,000 litres or, to use a more conventional measurement of beer volume, 2,800,000 pints.

Fortunately, the snowmobile was watertight, and the elves bobbed along in pressurized comfort. There was a frightening moment when a very large whale swam nearby looking for a meal, but Yugo leaned on the horn and scared it off.

Iggy watched in wonder as a small school of lanternfish wriggled past his window. “Do you think we might be lost?”

“We have just arrived a little ... lower than we should have.” Yugo adjusted the pressure in the onboard ballast tanks. The lanternfish scattered as the snowmobile bobbed upwards.

It broke the surface on clear morning. They were surrounded by bright blue water.

“Let me guess,” said Sam. “December 22nd?”

“Yes,” said Yugo. “December 22nd, 1814. We are two hundred miles from the North American coast.”

“Well, nothing to see here,” said Sam. “Let’s move on.”

“There is something to see.” Iggy pointed out his window. Two ships were silhouetted side by side in distance.

“That seems odd,” said Yugo. “I wonder if one of them is in trouble.”

“We should check it out,” said Iggy.

Sam just rolled his eyes. This was how the trouble always started, he thought, but for once he kept his thought to himself. If there was going to be some trouble this time, he was determined to deal with it upfront.

Yugo turned a yellow knob. Small propellers at the back of the snowmobile spun and the snowmobile scooted across the ocean surface, leaving a foaming trail in its wake. It was not only the fastest snowmobile in the world, but it was also its fastest watercraft.

The approach of the snowmobile did not go unnoticed on the pirate schooner. Sailors scrambled to load and fire their cannons. This was a complicated operation, which involved pouring powder down the shaft, followed by a wad of hay, then all of that was packed into place with a long pole. Then a twenty-four-pound ball was rolled in. The gunners rotated the cannon to point it at the oncoming snowmobile and lit the fuse.

Of course, by the time all of this happened, the snowmobile arrived at the side of the other ship and the cannon fired its shot too late and several hundred feet wide.

“That was just rude,” said Iggy as he watched the cannonball arc high over their heads.

“These fellows could benefit from a lesson in civility,” said Yugo.

Sam punched a fist into the palm of his other hand. “I’m the professor of civility and class is in session.”

“I just need a moment,” said Iggy. He squeezed into the back of the snowmobile where he kept his steamer trunk. He emerged a few minutes later, dressed in a smartly white short sleeved shirt and short pants, complete with gob hat.⁵⁵


Yugo flipped a green toggle switch and the snowmobile rose out of the water and level with the main deck of the black schooner. He pressed a blue button and the rear door slowly opened. “We should approach with caution,” said Yugo.

But Sam gave a loud shout and then leapt through the door and out onto the deck.

“Who is LeeRoy Jenkins?”⁵⁶ asked Iggy. Yugo just shrugged.

Sam charged headlong into a group of six pirates armed with muskets and cutlasses. Without slowing, Sam spun on his toe like a figure skater and reversed direction. He made a desperate dash back to the safety of the snowmobile, but even the swiftest of elves cannot hope to outrun six heavily armed men. And Sam, all three hundred and fifty pounds of him, was not the swiftest of elves. The pirates fell on him and then their fists fell on him, too.

“We have to do something!” Iggy yelled.

“I am on it,” said Yugo. He pressed a green button with his thumb. A percussive  resonated from the big subwoofers mounted on either side of the snowmobile. The pirates all fell to the deck, unconscious, blood running from their ears. Of course, the concussive wall of sound also rendered Sam completely unconscious, not to mention temporarily deaf.

“What was that?” asked Iggy.



⁵⁵ A gob hat is a cap that looks like this:

⁵⁶ LeeRoy Jenkins is the name of a character in the online game *World of Warcraft*, who earned internet fame in 2005 for a video recording of his ill-advised charge into enemy territory, which resulted in the swift and amusing demise of his entire company.

“Ultrasonic cannon,” said Yugo. “It sends out high powered sound waves that can render a man unconscious.”⁵⁷

“Or an elf,” said Iggy. Sam lay at the bottom of the heap. His eyes were closed, and a thin trail of blood dripped from each of his ears.

“We had better dig him out,” said Yugo. He pressed the green button a second time to mute the ultrasonic cannon. The two elves pulled the limp pirates off Sam and then, with no little difficulty, which is to say, some considerable difficulty, they dragged their friend back into the safety of the snowmobile.

Yugo waved some smelling salts under Sam’s nose. Sam stirred a little, then grabbed the smelling salts from Yugo’s hand and stuffed them into his mouth.⁵⁸

“A little sour, but otherwise pleasant,” said Sam as he sat up. “How did it go? Did I school those pirates?”

“You sure did,” said Iggy. He pointed out the window at the pile of unconscious pirates. Sam just smiled and burped happily.

Iggy stepped out on the deck. All was quiet. Yugo’s sonic boom had knocked out everyone on the ship. It had also knocked out a half a dozen seabirds and a few nearby fish, who were floating sleepily beside the boat.

Yugo joined Iggy on the deck. “Where is the rest of the crew? There must be more of them than this lot.”

“They must be on that other ship,” said Iggy. The *S.S. Canada* bobbed quietly beside them.

“Nice name for a ship,” said Yugo. “What do you suppose they are up to?”

“Looting and pillaging, I expect,” said Sam, who had sufficiently recovered to poke his head out of the snowmobile.

“We have to do something,” said Iggy.

“First things first,” said Yugo. He walked over to the mainmast and lowered the black flag with the skull on it and then raised a bright red and green flag with a wreath on it in its place.

Iggy saluted smartly at the North Pole Flag flapping in the winter breeze. “That is better.”

⁵⁷ In 2005, an experimental ultrasonic device was used by the crew of the cruise ship *Seabourn Spirit* to repel a pirate attack off the coast of Somalia.

⁵⁸ Do not try this at home. Smelling salts are extremely poisonous.

Iggy and Yugo gathered up the unconscious pirates and tied them to the rail. They did not have any rope, so they used garland instead.

“Do you think that will hold them?” asked Iggy.

“Oh, I should think so,” said Yugo. “I made it myself.”

The elves walked over to the starboard⁵⁹ side of the ship. A wooden plank stretched between the two ships.

“This must be how the pirates crossed over onto the other ship,” said Iggy. They stepped onto the plank and then walked carefully over to the next ship. They crept along the port rail and around the stern. Then they worked their way forward and came up behind Mabel Wiggins as she stared out to sea praying for a Christmas miracle.

“What is going on?” asked Iggy.

A very startled Mabel Wiggins turned and looked down on three elves, two dressed in red and green velvet and a third who wore a jaunty sailor’s suit. “Oh! I don’t believe it. It’s you. I prayed for a Christmas miracle, and here you are.”

Iggy took a small bow. “Here we are, ma’am.”

“I must confess that I expected my Christmas miracle to be a little taller. You don’t see many elves at sea.”

“You seem to be having some pirate trouble,” said Yugo.

“You might say that,” said Mabel. “They’ve seized the ship and kidnapped all the passengers. I’m to be a serving wench, now. My boy John is to be a cabin boy. And heaven only knows what will become of my little girl.”

Sam cracked his knuckles. “Don’t you worry. Pirates are our speciality.”

“What is the plan?” whispered Iggy.

“We should approach with caution,” said Yugo.

But Sam gave a great yell and led another headlong charge into the pirate crew. The resulting fight was short, brutal and the outcome pretty much as expected. Black Bob Terwilliger had seized the *SS Canada* with a team of forty pirates and they made short work of the elves, who were swiftly tied up and led at sword point to an audience with the pirate captain.

⁵⁹ “Starboard” is the right side of a ship. The left side is referred to as “port”. Why sailors do not just say ‘left’ or ‘right’ has been a source of confusion for passengers for centuries.

Black Bob spit an enormous hunk of brown chewing tobacco onto the deck and scowled. “Elves. What are elves doing on me ship?”

“It is not your ship!” protested Iggy.

Black Bob grinned. What teeth he had were stained brown. Hobbs the parrot squawked, “the plank! The plank!”

“That’s right, Hobbs. It’ll be the plank for you, me hearties.”

The pirate crew gave a great cheer. Two of them ran to fetch the long board laid between the two ships. They returned and tied one end of it to the starboard rail. The other end stretched out over the roiling dark blue ocean.

Three of the other pirates roughly grabbed each of Iggy, Yugo and Sam and led them to the end of the plank. Sam went first. He walked out onto the middle of the plank as the pirates cheered. Iggy and Yugo followed close behind him.

“Any last words before we send you to Davy Jones’ locker?” said Black Bob with a hearty pirate laugh.

“Just one thing,” said Iggy. “Merry Christmas.”

CHRISTMAS IN DAVY JONES LOCKER

SAM STRODE CONFIDENTLY TO THE END OF THE PLANK. It wobbled with each of his heavy steps. Iggy and Yugo followed closely behind, prodded along at sword point.

“What are you doing?” Iggy hissed.

“Don’t you worry your pointy little head, Iggy,” said Sam. “I’ve seen this a million times in the movies. By now Yugo has brought the snowmobile around by remote control and it is hovering just below the end of this plank. When I step off, I will land safely on the roof. Then it will rise slowly and dramatically, with me on top and I will say something clever like ‘plank this,’ and it will be all over for the pirates. You’ll see.”

With that, Sam stepped off the end of the plank. And fell fifty feet into the frigid Atlantic water below.

“That is a pretty good plan,” Yugo whispered to Iggy. “I wish I had thought of it.”

“I guess you do not watch the same movies as Sam,” said Iggy.

“Help!” hollered Sam from down below. Which was entirely unnecessary. Sam was a capable swimmer and even though the water was only a couple of degrees above freezing, Sam was in no real danger. A lifetime at the North Pole had made him indifferent to cold temperatures. A couple of degrees above freezing was how he usually poured his bath.

Mabel looked down on Sam floundering in the dark water and decided that sometimes you must make your own Christmas miracle. With all the pirates whooping and hollering over Sam’s plunge from the plank, she left her place in the row of passengers and searched frantically for a life preserver. Unfortunately, there was no life preserver to be found, they would not be in common use for another forty years.

She did however find the lone lifeboat on the ship, which was lashed to the starboard rail with a thick brown rope. There was no hope of untying the complicated sailors’ knots that bound it to the rail. There were half hitches and clove hitches and all sorts of other hitches. Mabel looked around and saw an axe hooked to the wall. She pulled it from its hooks and hacked away at the ropes that bound the lifeboat.

It fell away from the side of the ship and landed right on top of Sam with a dull thud.

“Oof,” said Sam. He worked his way out from underneath and then flopped into the boat.

The pirates cheered as Iggy slipped off the end of the plank. He landed safely in the lifeboat, right on top of Sam.

“Oof,” said Sam.

There was another cheer and then Yugo fell into the boat, right on top of Sam.

“Oof,” said Sam.

Forty pirates celebrated by shooting their pistols into the air. These were, of course, flintlock pistols which fired a single round and then took several minutes to reload. Mabel watched the celebration with a wry look on her face. It occurred to her in that moment that the pirates were effectively unarmed, and that she had an axe.

Things are about to get messy on deck of the *SS Canada*. Let us turn our attention instead to Iggy, Yugo and Sam, who were at that moment sitting in their little lifeboat in their soaking wet underpants and wringing out the rest of their clothes.

“We need to get back onto the boat and help out,” said Iggy.

“Aaar!” A pirate’s scream split the night. And then another. “Aaar! Aaar!!”

Yugo thumbed his remote control. "I will bring the snowmobile around."

More pirate screams rang out. "Aaar! Aaar!! Aaar!!!!"

"Mabel seems to be doing fine without us," said Sam. He pulled his damp red tunic over his head. "It sounds to me like it's the pirates who need rescuing."

The snowmobile rounded the back of the ship and pulled alongside the little lifeboat. The elves climbed inside. Yugo pulled back on a blue lever and the snowmobile rose into the air and then glided down onto the starboard deck.

The elves caught up with the axe wielding Mabel as she backed twenty-five pirates towards the plank, which still projected out over the side of the ship.

"You're just in time," said Mabel. "You can watch this pirate crew walk the plank."

"You can't do this!" shouted Black Bob Terwilliger. "You're just a girl. And those are just elves!"

"Elves!" squawked Hobbs the parrot.


Mabel swung the axe in a big sweeping arc over her head. Two of the pirates flung themselves off the plank in terror.

"She's got the axe!" squawked Hobbs.

Mabel took a determined step forward. The other passengers cheered as another terrified pirate leapt from the plank.

"Cursed woman," said Black Bob. "If you'd just fight fair and give me a proper chance to reload, then you'd get what's coming to you."

"What's coming for you" squawked Hobbs the parrot.

Mabel had heard enough. She raised her axe and ran at Black Bob and his crew. Iggy, Yugo and Sam ran along behind her. They did not have an axe to raise, but Yugo held up his remote control instead. The snowmobile hovered behind them, spitting laser beams with a .

The pirate crew backed up and then fell from the plank like crispy yellow oak leaves in fall. By the time Mabel reached the spot where the plank was lashed to the ship, there was only one pirate left; Black Bob Terwilliger himself slowly backed down the plank, out of reach of Mabel's axe and the laser fire from the snowmobile.

"It's hardly a fair fight, is it, my pretty. What with your elf helpers," said Black Bob. "How about we call it a draw?"

“Let’s call it even and go home,” squawked Hobbs the parrot.

“Tell Davy Jones merry Christmas,” said Mabel as she marched down the plank, swinging her axe from side to side.

Black Bob gulped, pinched his nose and jumped off the plank.

All the other passengers cheered and mobbed Mabel.

“We helped,” said Sam.

“Only a little,” said Yugo. He flipped a switch on his remote control and the **PEW** **PEW** stopped.

Iggy looked over the railing. Twenty-five pirates and Black Bob were crowded into a single tiny lifeboat. With all those pirates on board, the boat was barely afloat, and the frigid Atlantic water lapped at the gunwales.

Hobbs the parrot squawked and took to the air. He flapped about and then landed gently on Mabel’s shoulder. Parrots are clever birds and Hobbs was cleverer than most. He knew when it was time to change sides.

Mabel stroked Hobbs gently on his crown. “Pretty lady,” squawked Hobbs.

Having chased the pirates off, the passengers and crew of the *S.S. Canada* made their way back to their own ship, to finish their voyage to New York City. Iggy gently pulled Mabel’s skirt. She turned and he said, “excuse me, Mrs. Wiggins, but my friends and I were wondering if you and your family would prefer to finish your journey by express?”

“Excuse me?” said Mabel.

“What you talking about?” squawked Hobbs.

“There is a faster way to get to New York,” said Yugo. He pressed his remote control and the snowmobile responded with a friendly *pip*.

Mabel shook her head. “I don’t even know what that thing is. It looks very unsafe.”

“Very dangerous!” squawked Hobbs.

“I won’t lie to you, that thing is incredibly dangerous,” said Sam. “But it is the only way to fly.”

“Fly?” said Mabel.

“Flying is for parrots,” squawked Hobbs.

Yugo pressed another switch on his remote control and the snowmobile gently landed on the deck. He punched another button and the passenger doors opened smoothly.


Iggy bowed, “your carriage awaits.”

Mabel shrugged, lifted her skirts and led John and Abigail into the back row of the snowmobile’s well-appointed passenger cabin. It was a little tight in the back row once Sam crowded in. But none of the Wigginses seemed to mind in the least. They had never seen anything like the inside of the snowmobile. They had never sat on heated pleather seats or listened to Christmas carols played in in dodecaphonic sound.

The snowmobile lifted off and turned west as the sun rose in the east. Behind them, the *S.S. Canada* continued its trans Atlantic voyage. And behind that, the black pirate schooner was engulfed in flames and slowly sinking. It turned out that Black Bob’s hold was mostly filled with casks of rum which is very flammable. Any spark could set them ablaze. Or a stray laser beam. That might have done it.

Whatever the cause, the fire was only extinguished when the black schooner slipped beneath the ocean waves with a final puff of black smoke. It looked to be a long, cold journey for Black Bob Terwilliger and his crew in their overloaded lifeboat.

Roasted Nuts

 HE *S.S. CANADA* ARRIVED IN NEW YORK HARBOUR two days later. The snowmobile arrived in New York thirty minutes later, which here means forty-seven hours and thirty minutes ahead of the *S.S. Canada*. Time is relative like that.

It was a crisp Christmas Eve morning when Iggy, Yugo and Sam joined Mabel Wiggins and her family for a stroll up the Broad Way. Street vendors roasted chestnuts over an open fire and sold them wrapped in newspaper for two pennies a pack. Iggy bought six packets and passed them around. Mabel fed her chestnuts to Hobbs as they walked up the muddy street.

“Jack Frost nipping at your nose!” squawked Hobbs.

They crossed the remains of an old, crumbled wall that marked the edge of Wall Street and continued north.

“Broadway does not look like much of a place,” said Sam, munching on his chestnuts. “I was hoping to see a show, but I don’t see any theaters at all.”⁶⁰

“I saw some stables,” said Iggy.

“And a blacksmith,” said Yugo. “Where there are stables, you will always find a blacksmith.”

Iggy finished his chestnuts and then unrolled the oily newspaper wrapping. “look at this,” he said. “It says that a treaty is to be signed today in Ghent, Belgium which will end the War of 1812.⁶¹ I guess that means there will be another Christmas truce.”

“These sorts of things happen at Christmas,” said Yugo.

Iggy looked up at Mabel. “So, what is next for you?”

“I think we’ll head west. Maybe as far as California. I want to get as far away from pirates and beer floods as we can.”

“How will you get by?” asked Yugo.

“We’ll manage somehow, we always have,” said Mabel.

Sam rooted in the pocket of his jacket. He pulled out his gold nugget and passed it to Mabel. “You take this,” he said. “You might need it.”

Little John Wiggins looked in wonder at the shining gold nugget. “Wow!” he said, with a yellow gleam in his eye.

“I couldn’t possibly,” said Mabel.

“Think of it as a Christmas present,” said Sam. “I’m sure I’ll find another one along the way.”

“Well, thank you very much,” said Mabel.

⁶⁰ The first long running musical to play the Broadway stage was a show called *The Elves*, which debuted on March 16, 1857.

⁶¹ The *Treaty of Ghent* was signed on December 24, 1814 and brought an end to the War of 1812. This was a conflict between the United States and Great Britain, which then included Canada, and which culminated in a British/Canadian raid of Washington D.C. in August 1813 when the White House was burned to the ground. At about the same time, Fort McHenry in nearby Baltimore Harbour was attacked by British ships which bombarded the Fort with over 1500 cannonballs. An amateur poet named Francis Scott Keyes watched the battle through the night and was so moved by the sight of the oversized American flag that still flew above the ramparts of the fort the following morning that he wrote a patriotic poem. That poem was later set to music and is today called the *Star-Spangled Banner*. It is a famous song. Perhaps you have heard of it.

John said, “one day I’m gonna dig up an even bigger one. Lots and lots of them.”

“Lots and lots and lots of them!” squawked Hobbs.


“I’m sure you will,” said Sam.

They came to a stop beside the snowmobile. Yugo unlocked the doors. “It is time that we were on our way,” he said.

“Thank you for everything,” said Mabel.

Iggy climbed into the passenger seat and closed the door. A moment later, he rolled down the window. “We have a little time to spare,” he said. “Can we give you a lift to California?”

December 22, 1349

 HE SNOWMOBILE BUMPED AND TWISTED through the swirling and sparkling lights of the time vortex. Green clouds drifted past, lit up from within by indigo flashes. If there was a soundtrack in the time vortex, the sitar would be featured prominently, with a bass line played on the didgeridoo.

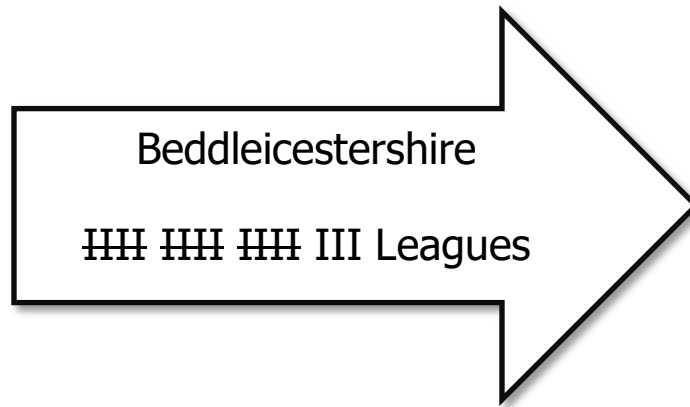
“I really think I have it fixed this time,” said Yugo as he steered the snowmobile around a throbbing pink borealis. “I went through all of the code, line by line, and I found a section with three semi colons in a row. That was an obvious mistake, so I deleted one of them.”

“Why not all of them?” asked Sam.

“You can never be too careful with semi colins,” said Yugo.

Iggy nodded. “It is the least understood form of punctuation.”

Then, with the strum of an oud,⁶² the snowmobile snapped out of the time vortex. It stopped on a green lawn at the side of a long dirt road. There was a sign at the side of the road that said:



"I do not believe it," said Iggy.

"I do," said Sam. "Where else would we be? If it is not the moon or the bottom of the ocean, it is good old Beddleton. We are still in the wrong time, aren't we?"

Yugo studied his control panel. "I suppose we had to arrive in this time eventually."

"Which time is that?" asked Iggy.

"1349," said Yugo. "We have encountered different kinds of diseases and epidemics everywhere we have gone and now we have landed right smack in the middle of the biggest one of all. The bubonic plague."

"It is not just any old day in 1349 is it, Yugo?" said Sam. "It is December 22nd, isn't it?"

Yugo gulped. "According to contemporary calendars, yes."⁶³

"Yes, I knew that," said Sam. "It was completely unnecessary for me to have posed the question in the first place."

"What do we do now?" said Iggy.

"We have been here before," said Yugo. "We should head into town and see what we can do to help."

⁶² The oud is a pear-shaped stringed instrument with eleven strings that was in vogue in the dark ages. It originated in the far east and was one of many instruments that evolved into the lute.

⁶³ See, *supra*, the discussion of calendars at footnote 43.

“I need to change,” said Iggy. He climbed into the back of the snowmobile and dug through his steamer trunk. “I have no idea how to dress. What did people wear in 1349?”

“Rags and filth, mostly,” said Sam. Yugo just nodded.

“Rags and filth, it is then,” said Iggy. He returned dressed in a dirty tattered burlap shirt, short pants and matching socks. The whole ensemble looked extremely uncomfortable, the socks particularly so.

“You will fit right in,” said Yugo.

Iggy and Yugo stepped out of the snowmobile and started walking.

Sam coughed. “What are you two doing?”

“Walking into town,” said Iggy.

“Where else would we be going?” asked Yugo.

Sam coughed again. “Just this once, could we drive the snowmobile into town instead of walking 18 miles?”

Iggy and Yugo exchanged a long look. “I guess that makes sense,” said Yugo, as he walked back to the snowmobile.

Ten minutes late they found themselves in front of a familiar, but somewhat run-down stone building with a sign above the door that said:



“It hasn’t changed a bit,” said Sam. “Let’s have a look around and also let’s have a pint.”

“It has changed a little bit,” said Iggy. “The last time we were here it was a villa made of marble.”

“Details, details,” said Sam. “I feel like I’ve come home.” He marched confidently through the front door and bumped directly into a plump tired looking woman dressed from top to bottom in rags and filth. “You must be Mrs. Wiggins,” said Sam.

“Mistress Wiggins, if you please,” said the plump and tired looking woman.

“Mistress – Mrs, potato - tomato,” said Sam with a wave of his hand. “I’ll just show myself to my usual table.” Sam walked over to a plain wood table near the window.

“You will do no such thing, boy,” said Mistress Wiggins. “I’ve no idea where you’re from or where you’ve been. You might be even be from Dorset.”

Sam acted outraged. “Madam, you do me a grave disservice. I’ve never been in Dorset in my life. I’m from the North Pole, but California most lately.”

“Never heard of them. Wherever you’re from, you’re not from around here,” said Mistress Wiggins. “We hardly ever get elves hereabouts. And you’re not sitting at your usual table until you’ve finished your quarantine. And that goes for your little elf friends lurking in the doorway, too. Don’t think I can’t see you two out there lurking.”

Iggy and Yugo stepped out of the doorway where they had, indeed, been lurking.

Mistress Wiggins bent over and waggled her finger in front of the elves. Mistress Wiggins took her finger waggling seriously and this was a most prodigious finger waggling, indeed. “You are three naughty little boys. Don’t you know there is plague out there? Especially in Dorset. You can’t just come marching into my place when you might be filled with the plague.”

Iggy bowed his head and shuffled his feet. “Sorry, Mistress Wiggins,” he whispered.

“I’ll say you should be sorry,” the finger waggling continued. Now the three of you, upstairs. You’re going into the quarantine. You can quarantine in our guest room. And don’t be touching anything on your way up.” Mistress Wiggins shoed the elves along with a straw broom. She swept them into a small room at the top of the stairs and slammed the door shut.

Sam immediately lay back on the single straw bed and said, “how long is quarantine, anyway? Do I need to dress for dinner?”

“Quarantine is forty days and forty nights,” shouted Mistress Wiggins. She slammed the door shut and turned the bolt. “Just like in the Bible.⁶⁴ I’ll let you out when you’re done.”

Christmas in Quarantine

AT THE END OF THEIR FIRST HOUR IN QUARANTINE, Sam checked his phone. Again. He groaned. “I can’t connect to the Wi-Fi.”

“There is no Wi-Fi in 1349,” said Yugo.

Sam buried his face in the single straw filled pillow in the room. “What am I supposed to do for the next forty days?”

“You could read a book?” suggested Iggy helpfully.

“I think not,” said Yugo. “The printing press will not be invented for almost a hundred years. There are no books. Well, there are a few handwritten copies of the Bible, but aside from that, there is nothing to read.”

“I have a few books,” said Iggy. He pulled out well thumbed copies of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, *Murder for Christmas* by Agatha Christie and *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. “Mistress Wiggins also left us one of those handwritten copies of the Bible. It has some Christmassy bits.”

Sam wrapped the thin pillow around his ears and kicked his feet. Once he finished his tantrum, he said, “maybe I will try one of those books. Do you have one with a detective who solves an horrific murder?” Iggy passed him the Christie.

Day 1: In the morning, a raven crowed and a little bit later, Mistress Wiggins slid back the latch on the door, opened it a crack and kicked three steaming

⁶⁴ The word "quarantine" comes from the Italian word *quarantena*, which means 'forty days'. This was the usual length of isolation imposed on travellers in Europe during the plague years of the mid fourteenth century. It proved to be an effective way to curb the spread of the disease and is still practiced today though typically for a shorter time than forty days. It is likely this forty day period derives from the Bible, where a period of forty days and forty nights is a recurring motif: During Noah’s flood, the rain fell for forty days and nights (Genesis 7:12), Moses fasted for forty days and nights on Mount Sinai before he brought down the tablets containing the Ten Commandments (see, generally, Deuteronomy chapters 2 through 6) and Jesus fasted for forty days and nights while resisting the temptations of Satan (Luke 4:1-13, Matthew 4:1-11 and Mark 1: 12-13).

bowls of frumenty into the room. Then she threw the bolt and went back down the stairs to deal with her uninfected customers.

Day 2: Much the same as Day 1. Raven. Throw the latch. Collect yesterday's bowls and kick in another three bowls of fresh frumenty. Back downstairs to work the room.

Sam had finished the Christie, the Dickens and the Doyle twice over. He decided to start in on the handwritten bible book.

He liked the early bits the best. Those bits had rains of frogs, plagues of locusts and rivers of blood. After that, there was a lot of stuff about forgiveness and loving thy neighbour that just made Sam yawn. He was still unable to connect to the Wi-Fi. "What am I going to do with myself? This is the worst Christmas ever."

Day 3: Christmas morning. Iggy was the first one awake; he always was. He was delighted, though not really surprised, to see that Santa Claus had come and gone while they were all asleep. Three little packages were stacked in a tidy pile in the corner of the room.

Yugo and Sam woke up with the raven. "I knew he would come," said Yugo.

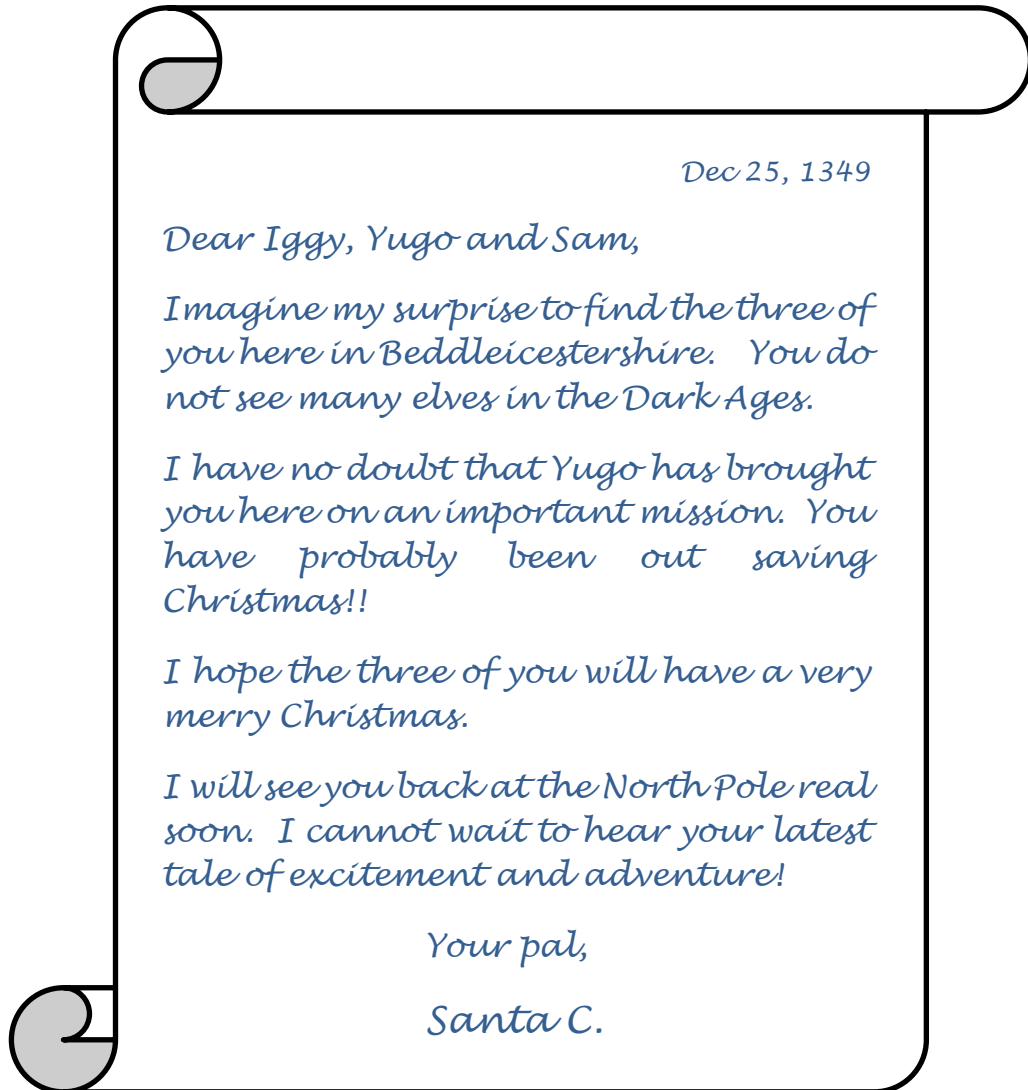
"I hope he brought us the key to the door," said Sam.

He did not bring the key to the door, but, as always, Santa Claus' gifts were perfect. He brought Iggy a signed wood cutting of the *Canterbury Tales*, portions of which were very risqué indeed. He gave Yugo a screwdriver with over fifty different attachments, some of which could even fit into the unusual hardware of the 14th century. And Sam got an entire turkey dinner, carefully sealed in a clay pot.

Their socks, even Iggy's burlap socks, were stuffed with candy, nuts and candied nuts.

Yugo used his new screwdriver to help Sam break the seal on his ceramic jar. "No frumenty for breakfast this morning," said Sam, as he scooped a big helping of turkey, mashed potatoes and nudded candy into his mouth.

Santa Claus also left them a note:



“Well, that’s inspiring,” said Sam.

“It is, is it not,” said Iggy.

“It surely is,” said Yugo.

Sam just shook his head. Sarcasm was a foreign language to Iggy and Yugo.

Day 4: The day after Christmas was much the same as the day before Christmas. Ravens. Latch. Frumenty. Back downstairs to work the room. Sam had read Iggy’s copy of *A Christmas Carol* three times now and slammed it down onto the nightstand. “What sort of Christmas story has ghosts in it?” he grumbled. Then he picked it up and started reading it again from the beginning.

Day 5: Raven. Latch. Frumenty. A complete absence of Wi-Fi. And Yugo was up early, mixing things in a little laboratory he had made in the corner, stocked with goblets, jars and bowls that he had kept from their daily rations of frumenty.

“What are you doing?” asked Iggy.

Yugo poured a thin dribble of green stuff from one goblet into another and then it set it over a candle to warm it. “Bubonic plague is caused by bacteria. You cannot treat it with leeches or burning people. But, just like Private Wiggins’ infected leg, the plague can be treated with antibiotics. The root ingredient in most antibiotics is mold and goodness knows there is plenty of that around.”

“You’re telling me,” said Sam. He looked at the corners of the room which were covered in a film of green gunk. “These are not the dark ages, they are the moldy ages.”

Yugo scraped some of the green gunk into a clay bowl. “Exactly. We can cultivate this stuff, refine it and in a few days we will have a treatment for the plague.”

“You can cure the plague?” said Iggy.

“I wish,” said Yugo. “The plague is too widespread to be cured. But we can create a medicine that will help some people. In a few days, I should have something.”

Day 6: The usual business with the raven and following. Then Iggy had an idea.

“What is your idea?” said Yugo.

“We could play Bazingo!”

“That is a good idea,” said Yugo. By the end of quarantine, the elves had played nearly ten thousand matches of Bazingo. Iggy had won more than 4000, Yugo had won more than 5000 of them and Sam had yet to win a single game (except, perhaps, one close match which ended in a table flip and the exchange of many angry words). Happily, their differences over Bazingo were soon forgotten. When you are in quarantine in a 120 square foot room for forty days, forgive and forget is an essential survival skill.

Day 9: Ravens and such. Iggy decides to start writing down the story of their latest adventure.⁶⁵

Day 10: Once the raven business was out of the way, Yugo said, “I think I have it.” He held up a goblet with green foam dribbling over the brim. “Plague medicine.”

⁶⁵ In time he finished that story. You are reading it right now.

“Let me try it,” said Sam. He was sick of frumenty and mead. He took a big gulp and then spit it a green blob against the wall. “Oh, that is nasty.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. The latch was thrown, and three bowls of frumenty skidded into the room.

Sam raced to the door before it could slam shut. He passed the goblet to Mistress Wiggins. “Try this,” he said. “It cures plague.”

Mistress Wiggins looked askance at Sam, but then shrugged. “Why not,” she said. She took a careful sip and then spat a green mass against the wall herself. “Oh, that’s nasty.”

“That’s what I said,” said Sam.

“Nobody is going to drink that, even if it does set the plague to rights,” said Mistress Wiggins. “Maybe you should try fermenting it.”

Day 11: Ravens and frumenty. Yugo decides to try fermenting his plague medicine to make it more agreeable to a 14th century palate and also to Sam’s 21st century one.

Day 12: Later in the day, after the ravens and such, Sam began scratching the count of their days in quarantine on the wall. Once he reached IIII IIII II, he asked Yugo, “How much is IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII minus IIII IIII II?”

“IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII,” said Yugo as he pattered with his jars of chemicals.

Sam fell back on the single bed which had claimed for his own. “IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII days to go? I’m never going to make it.”

Day IIII IIII III: Contrary to his expectations, Sam made it that far.

Day 14: There were ravens and more frumenty. Sam scratched another line on the wall. IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII I days to go.

The Moose and Pickle

DAYS 15 – 27: THE DAYS GREW LONGER AS WINTER started its long slow march to spring. Each morning there were ravens and still more frumenty. Yugo pattered, Iggy studied the Bazingo board, seeking insight into new Bazingo strategies and Sam scratched lines on the wall.

Day 28: Sam drew a grid of squares on the wall and attempted to set up a Zoom meeting there with some of his North Pole friends, but his efforts were frustrated because neither Zoom nor Wi-Fi had been invented. And, perhaps more importantly, because he was just talking to hand drawn squares on the wall.

Day 29: The ravens had finished their business, and the daily rations of frumenty had been laid out. Mistress Wiggins was about to slam the door shut for the day when Iggy called out. "Wait!"

Mistress Wiggins waited. "What am I waiting for then.?"

Iggy coughed. "It is just that my friend and I were thinking," he nodded in the direction of Yugo. "That maybe *The Mouse and Pickle* might not be a good name for a tavern."

"Why not?" snapped Mistress Wiggins. "This place has been *The Mouse and Pickle* for a hundred years or more.

"Or more," said Sam.

Yugo glared at Sam. "It is just that the plague comes from fleas. Fleas that live on rats. And mice."

"Quarantine is pretty useless, really," said Iggy. "What you really need to do is to quarantine the rats."

"And the mice," said Yugo.

"You seem like some smart fellows. For elves," said Mistress Wiggins. "Do mice really carry the plague?"

"Absolutely," said Yugo, the smartest of the fellows.

"So, we should change the name of the place then?"

"Indeed," said Iggy.

"What about the Vole and Pickle?" said Mistress Wiggins.

"You really need to steer away from vermin entirely," said Yugo

"Think bigger," said Iggy.

"What about a badger? Those are big. And mean. Lots of sharp and nasty teeth on badgers."

"Even bigger, I think," said Yugo.

"Right then. What's the biggest critter there is?"

"A moose?" suggested Sam.

“Never heard of a moose before,” said Mistress Wiggins. “Does it have horns and nasty teeth?”

“Horns, anyway,” said Iggy. “I expect the teeth are pretty big and nasty up close.”

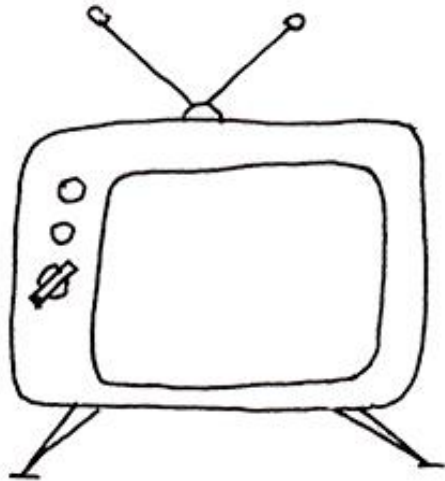
“*The Moose and Pickle* it is then,” said Mistress Wiggins. “And you better be right about this. I don’t want any plague in my place.”

Day 30: Once the ravens had finished their morning ablutions, Sam scratched a large square on the wall and stared at it.

“What are you doing?” asked Iggy.

“Shhhh,” said Sam. “My show is on.”

Iggy and Yugo stared at the blank square Sam had drawn on the wall. Yugo shrugged. Only ten more days to go.



Day 31: “It is ready,” said Yugo, after the ravens had finished their business. He lifted a goblet filled with foaming brown liquid.

“That still looks nasty,” said Iggy.

“Let me give it a try,” said Sam. He took the goblet from Yugo, took a careful sip and then drained the cup. “That’s good stuff. Do you have any more?”

Day 32: When Mistress Wiggins delivered their daily frumenty, Yugo offered to let her try a cup of his new potion. She took a careful sip and then drained her cup, too. “That is good. What do you call that then?”

Sam butted in before Yugo could answer.⁶⁶ “We call it Elfmeäde,” he said. “It’s an old family recipe.”

“Elfmeäde? I like the sound of that,” said Mistress Wiggins. “And it’s good for the plague, you say?”

“It will not make it worse, anyway,” said Yugo.

“Have you got any more of it then?” asked Mistress Wiggins.

Yugo nodded and then headed back to his little still, where he was already brewing up another batch of Elfmeäde. “Give me a couple of days.”

Day 33: There were ravens, as usual, along with three heaping bowls of frumenty. Iggy was surprised to find Sam doing push-ups when he woke up. “What is going on?” he asked.

“There’s nothing on TV,” said Sam.

Iggy nodded. Quarantine does strange things to people, even elves.

Day 34: Ravens, etc. Yugo bottled up another batch of Elfmeäde for Mistress Wiggins. As he passed the bottles over, he said, “Do not leave it bottled up for too long. There could be side effects.”

Day 35: More ravens. More frumenty. More sitting about a little room with nothing to do but twiddle thumbs and brew Elfmeäde. After five weeks in quarantine, Iggy had taught himself to twiddle his toes as well as his thumbs. It was an appalling sight.

Day 38: The end was in sight and Sam scarcely noticed the ravens anymore. He would have preferred that they slept a little later, but he had come to welcome their call because then he could scrape another | on the wall. He was up to ### ### ### ### ### ### ### now. Only || more to go.

Day 39: Iggy had always been pretty good at knitting. During quarantine, he had knit a scarf for Yugo and Sam. They were each about thirteen feet long. He was knitting one for himself, but now that he had mastered toe twiddling, he was knitting this one with his feet. Quarantine does strange things to people, even elves.

Day 40: Sam crowed along with the ravens. “What is it?” said Iggy, rubbing his eyes.

“We made it! Let’s get out of here!” shouted Sam. He ran for the door and reached it just as Mistress Wiggins threw the latch to deliver the daily frumenty

⁶⁶ Yugo called it blended distillate of doxycycline and fluoroquinolone ciprofloxacin. Elfmeäde does roll off the tongue a little easier.

rations. Sam tried to slip past her, but she blocked his way. Between the two of them, they were wide enough to fill three doorways.

“And just where do you think you’re going, young man?”

“That’s it. ### ## ## ## ## ## ## ## ## days. Quarantine is over. I’m out of here. It’s been a blast. I’ll smell you later, Mistress Wiggins.”

Mistress Wiggins stepped back, slammed the door in Sam’s face and threw the latch. “Quarantine is forty days *and forty nights*. Just like in the Bible. I’ll see the three of you in the morning.”

Day 41: Iggy, Yugo and Sam were up before the ravens. Mistress Wiggins however, was not. There was considerable thumb and toe twiddling to pass the time before she finally arrived to open the latch and release the elves from the quarantine.

“That’s it then, It looks like you don’t have the plague,” said Mistress Wiggins.

The elves charged around her and into the landing at the top of the stairs. It was the farthest any of them had gone in nearly six weeks.

Iggy took a deep breath. “Do you know what that smells like?’ he asked.

Yugo did likewise. “It smells like freedom to me.”

“It smells like overdone frumenty to me,” said Sam. “I’ll race you downstairs.” His charge down the stairs was again blocked by Mistress Wiggins’ substantial girth. She could move quickly when she had a mind to.

She coughed. “Before you three dash out of here, there is the small matter of the bill.” She presented them with a parchment roll, with an itemised list of their food and lodging costs for the preceding forty days (and nights). The total came to five pounds, eight shillings and sixpence.

“How much is that?” whispered Iggy.

“A little under ten dollars,” said Yugo.

“Do you think they take dollars?” asked Iggy. “I do not have any pounds or shillings.”

“Is there a problem, then?” asked Mistress Wiggins.

“No problem, ma’am,” said Iggy.

“Just counting up our sixpences,” said Sam.

“Well, get on with it, I don’t have all day,” said Mistress Wiggins.

“What are we going to do?” asked Iggy.

Yugo pointed to the still he had built in the corner of their little room. “Would you take a machine for brewing Elfmeäde in trade?”

Mistress Wiggins said, “Why yes, yes I would. Your Elfmeäde is our biggest seller. Everyone wants it for their plague.”

“That is settled then,” said Iggy. Sam pushed past Mistress Wiggins and rushed down the stairs.

Iggy and Yugo followed him out over the worn marble steps of the newly renamed *Moose and Pickle*. The snowmobile was still parked in front, where they had left it. However, after forty days (and nights), it was covered in graffiti. **GERFG**

4ever! was written across the hood in black paint. **BEWARE OF KILLER RABBITS!!** adorned the driver’s door. **SARD OFF!** appeared in several places.⁶⁷

“Oh, sard it,” said Yugo. “This is going to take forever to clean up.” Then he shook his head and slipped in behind the wheel. “Time to go.”

But to what time? Neither Iggy nor Sam wanted to ask the question. As they slipped into the time vortex, none of the elves realized that Iggy had left his well thumbed copy of *A Christmas Carol* on the bedside table.

December 22, 1922

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT.⁶⁸ Rain pelted down on the windows of the old house on the hill. A flash of lightning and crash of thunder framed the old house in an eerie silhouette.

There was another flash of light, but instead of an accompanying smash of thunder, there was a gentle **POP!**, like the sound of a cork leaving a bottle of

⁶⁷ “Sard” was a common curse word in medieval times. It was the S word of its day.

⁶⁸ “It was a dark and stormy night” is the first line of the 1830 novel *Paul Clifford* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton. It is widely regarded as the worst opening line of any novel. Each year the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest is held at San Jose University and entrants are invited to submit their atrocious opening sentences to hypothetical bad novels. The Grand Prize winner of the 2020 competition is as follows: “Her Dear John missive flapped unambiguously in the windy breeze, hanging like a pizza menu on the doorknob of my mind.” Further details can be found at <https://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>

Elfmeäde. It was the sound of a little snowmobile popping out of the time vortex, and into a dark and stormy night indeed.

“It is raining cats and dogs,”⁶⁹ said Iggy.

Lightning crackled nearby and all the lights on the snowmobile went out. Sam squealed.

“It will be okay,” said Yugo.

“Then turn the lights back on,” said Sam. There was a peal of thunder that sounded as though the Earth was opening about them.

“I cannot do that right now,” said Yugo. “The batteries of the snowmobile were drained from being parked for over forty days. We used all the power left getting in and out of the time vortex just now.”

“Do you mean we are stuck here?” said Sam. “It’s raining old women out there!”

“Only for a little while,” said Yugo. “The reactor is back online, and the batteries are recharging.”

“How long will that take?” asked Iggy.

“Only a day or two,” said Yugo.

“A day or two!” cried Sam.

“That is right,” said Yugo. “We will be back up and running in no time at all.”

“Speaking of time,” said Iggy. “What time have we arrived in? Are we at the right place?”

Yugo pointed at his dark monitor and shrugged. “I do not know. It could be anytime and anyplace at all.”

“It’s December 22nd, though, isn’t it?” said Sam.

“I really could not say,” said Yugo. “But in light of recent events I have to say that is a distinct probability.”

“A distinct certainty, you mean,” said Sam.

⁶⁹ It is not clear where the expression “raining cats and dogs” originated. Neither cats nor dogs typically fall from the sky, even in the heaviest rainstorms. Interestingly, other cultures have adopted similar idioms. In Brazil, one might remark that it is “raining snakes and lizards.” In Spain, it might rain “toads and snakes.” It will come as no surprise that the rain in Norway falls like “trolls”. In Belgium, it rains “old women” and in France it rains “like a peeing cow.” Best to avoid France in rainy season.

“What can we do while the batteries recharge?” asked Iggy.

“We cannot stay here,” said Yugo. “The snowmobile has shut down for the time being. We could see if they have any room in that old house on the hill.” With that, there was another flash of lightning that lit up the house. The window on the top floor was broken and tattered curtains flapped through the opening.

“You want to go knock on the door of that spooky old house in the middle of the night and in the middle of a lightning storm?” said Sam.

“Why not? I am sure that they are perfectly friendly,” said Iggy, ever the optimist.

“Let us see,” said Yugo.


“Just a moment,” said Iggy. He dug into his steamer trunk in the back of the snowmobile. Then he slid back into his seat dressed in a yellow rain slicker with a big floppy yellow hat. “I am ready.”

Iggy and Yugo stepped outside into the rain. Yugo still had a page from the 1812 newspaper that held his roasted chestnuts, which he held over his head to shield him from the rain.

Sam sat in the dark in back seat of the snowmobile with his arms crossed. “They’ll be back,” he said. “If they don’t get eaten by wild dogs first.”

There was another tremendous crash of thunder. Sam sprung out of his seat and ran after Iggy and Yugo. “Wait up! Wait up!” he called.

The Old Wiggins Place

 HE DOORBELL TOLLED AN OMINOUS “GONG!” when Yugo pressed the button. It reverberated about the big house. As the last echo faded, Yugo reached to press the bell a second time.

Suddenly, the door swung open. A slight man with round gold rimmed glasses stood in the doorway. He was balding, but his thin blond hair grew long at the sides and back of his head. He looked at the elves for a long while before speaking. “You’re wet.”

“Yes,” said Iggy.

“It is raining,” said Yugo.

“I think that perhaps you three had better come inside.” The balding man stepped aside so the elves could walk through the door. He ushered them into a large high-ceilinged room. Dark oak panels covered the walls. A stuffed grizzly bear stood in a menacing crouch in a corner.

“My name is Jack. Jack Wiggins. Let’s get you out of those wet clothes.”

He left and returned a few minutes later with a neatly folded stack of clothes in his arms. “This is the best I could do. My clothes are too big for you fellows, but my nephews left some of their things behind the last time they were here.”

The elves climbed out of their soaked red and green velvet attire and into the clothes Jack Wiggins had brought them. Soon they were dressed in knee length britches with suspenders, white linen shirts, bow ties and matching newsbies.⁷⁰

“I feel like I should be shining shoes,” said Sam.

“This might seem like an odd question, but what day is it?” asked Iggy.

“December 22nd, of course,” said Jack.

“Of course,” said Sam.

“But what year is it?” asked Yugo.

Jack looked confused. “You fellows must not be from around here. You are in San Francisco in the year of our Lord 1922. Of course.”

“Of course,” said Sam. He leaned over and whispered to Yugo, “we’re getting closer. You only missed it by a hundred years or so this time.” Yugo pretended not to hear him.

“Now that you are all dried out, let me show you around,” said Jack Wiggins. He led them across the vast foyer, past the surly grizzly bear and up a wide staircase. “My great-grandfather built this house over seventy years ago. His name was John, just like mine.”

“I thought your name was Jack,” said Iggy.

“Jack is short for John,” said Jack Wiggins.

“Jack is exactly as long as John,” said Yugo.

⁷⁰ A newsbie or newsboy hat is a hat that looks like this:



Jack shrugged and continued. “Old John Wiggins was an innkeeper in the city a long time ago. Before the cable cars, even. Old fashioned sort of place, with a saloon on the main floor.”

They reached the top of the stairs. Jack turned a key in a small box on wall of the landing and the lights along the hall sparked to life. “We are wired for Mr. Edison’s new electric light⁷¹ here, but it is a bit spotty sometimes. Especially during storms.” Thunder boomed outside. The hallway darkened for a moment and then the lights flickered back on.

They walked slowly down a long hall with a worn carpet. There was a row on portraits hung along the wall. Jack stopped in front of the third one. It depicted a fierce looking old man seated with a walking stick in his hand. He had a thick grey moustache and deep frown on his face. “This is my great-grandfather here,” said Jack Wiggins. “He was a John Wiggins, too.”

Iggy stared at the portrait. “He looks familiar,”

“Yes,” said Yugo. “What do you think, Sam?”

Sam glanced quickly at the painting. “I don’t know. I’ve seen so many Wigginses in the last few weeks they all look the same to me.”

Jack walked a little further down the hall. He stopped and turned the knob of a thick oak door. It opened into a large room with three four poster beds lined up in a row. “This is your room; I hope it will suffice. The water closet is just down the hall.”

Sam took one quick step and then leapt onto the nearest bed. He spread out his arms and snuggled down into the soft feather mattress. “A proper bed? Running water? Yes, this will do quite nicely.”

“I am sorry about the window,” said Jack. He pointed to a broken window with tattered drapes. “The place has become really run down over the last few years. The carpets are worn and there are draughts everywhere. This house used to be filled with family, but they’ve all moved away. Now that I am the only Wiggins left, I can’t afford to keep it up. They say old John Wiggins made a lot of money in the gold rush, but if he did, nobody has ever seen it. I could sure use some of it now, though.”

⁷¹ Thomas Edison (1847 – 1931) was an American inventor and entrepreneur. He is credited with inventing the light bulb, which he may or may not have done, but more importantly, he made electricity widely available to the public through his company, the Edison Electric Light Company, which you might know by its current (ha!) name, General Electric. By 1922, the electric light was commonly found in American homes.

Jack sighed. “But enough about my little troubles. I hope that you will be quite comfortable tonight. I will be making breakfast around eight o’clock tomorrow. I would be pleased if you would join me.”

He gave a little bow, turned the key on the wall by the door to shut off the lights and then backed out of the room.

“He seems nice,” said Iggy.

“He surely is,” said Yugo.

There was a soft rap at the door and then Jack poked his head back into the room. “Oh, and don’t mind the ghost. He’s harmless.”

He’s Harmless

IT DID NOT GET WEIRD UNTIL AFTER MIDNIGHT. And then it got really weird.

Suddenly there came a tapping, like someone gently rapping, rapping at their bedroom door.

“Who is there?” Iggy asked.

There was no answer, so Yugo slipped out of bed and opened the door widely. There was only darkness on the other side, and nothing more. Yugo peered into that darkness, but all was still and silent. He closed the door and returned to bed.

Soon there came another tapping, louder this time. Sam sat straight up in his four-poster bed. “It’s coming from the window this time.” He went to the broken window with the tattered curtain and threw open the sash. He stared out through the cracked pane.

“Just the wind, and nothing more,” he said. He turned away just as an enormous yellow and black parrot, the size of a California condor,⁷² flew in through the broken glass and circled the room erratically, squawking and howling all the while.

⁷² The California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) is a species of large vulture with a wingspan of over 3 metres. California condors were close to extinction in the 1980s and remain very rare. Even in 1922 they were seldom seen.

Iggy covered his head. "My hair!" he shouted in terror.

The big parrot ignored him and flapped its way to alight on the Winchester repeating rifle which hung above the door.

The three elves had climbed into the bed furthest from the parrot, who just tipped his head and looked at them.⁷³ Then it clearly spoke a single word before flying back out the broken window: "Yellowstone."

Only that, and nothing more.

After that, things got even stranger. There was laughter. Just a giggle at first, but then it grew in a chorus of cackles, the sort of manic cackle that a clown might make after getting a day pass from the insane asylum. The laughter turned to shrieks that rattled the broken glass window. Then the shrieking faded away to the sound of a baby's cry. Which went on for quite a while. Crying babies are like that.

From time to time the cries of the squalling baby relented, but in their place came the jingle of a tambourine and the gong of a bell.

Then it was back to the crying for a while.

At around three o'clock in the morning, Mr. Edison's electric lights started acting up. They flashed and flickered and then emitted an ominous green glow. There was even a green glow in one corner of the room where there were none of Mr. Edison's electric lights at all.

"That's it. I'm outta here," said Sam. He jumped off his bed and tried to walk to the door. It was no use. The floor shifted beneath his feet so that he stayed rooted to the same spot with every step he took. He turned to go back but still stayed in the same place. No matter which direction Sam turned, or how fast he ran or walked he stayed fixed to the same spot.

"Help! It's the Devil's treadmill, and I can't get off!" cried Sam. Iggy and Yugo grabbed his arms and pulled him back onto the bed.

At least the baby had stopped crying. In its place came the drone of a swarm of bees. The sound grew until it seemed that the whole room must be filled with bees. And then it was. A squirming mass of bees appeared as if from nowhere. The elves huddled together and covered their ears as the bees swirled around their heads and crawled along their arms and shoulders.

Iggy wanted to cry out but was afraid that the bees would fill his mouth if he did. Finally, he could bear it no longer, but when he opened his mouth the bees were

⁷³ Contrary to popular opinion, bats are not blind, and they see perfectly well in the dark. What this bat saw were three frightened elves.

gone. He opened his eyes, but there was nothing there, only a cackle in the air, such as a cackle of hyenas⁷⁴ might make.

A hazy blue figure walked through the door. Which is to say, the figure did not open the door, it simply walked through it. The figure was vaguely translucent and flat, like a cardboard cut-out. It was the form of a grizzled man, with a thick moustache and a pickaxe in one hand.

“That looks like Yellowstone Wiggins,” said Iggy.

“Only flatter,” said Yugo.

The old prospector waved his pickaxe and then pointed at the broken window. The elves turned to look, but there was nothing there. All was calm, all was bright.

They turned back to the ghostly prospector. He pointed more urgently and then dissolved into blue glowing spiders that skittered around the room. The spiders disappeared between the floorboards.

Yellowstone Wiggins did not manifest again, though the noises continued throughout the night. There was a banging of pots and pans, a clash of breaking glass and a trumpet which was badly out of tune and which played the same military march over and over.

By the time the sun rose on that bleak December morning, three emotionally shattered elves huddled in the corner of the room, shivering. The sound of a large dog snoring slowly faded away.

There was a knock at the door. Sam screamed.

The door slowly opened, and Jack Wiggins poked his head through. “I’m sorry,” said Jack. “I did not mean to disturb you. I wondered if you wanted to have some breakfast. I’m making eggs.”

Sam’s heart was pounding, but it pounded even harder at the thought of breakfast. “Eggs, you say?” He stood up from their little huddled heap and dusted off his pants. “I’m in.”

Iggy and Yugo were still huddled together, shaking.

“Are you guys coming?” asked Sam as he followed Jack out the door.

⁷⁴ A group of hyenas is appropriately called a “cackle”. Much like a pride of lions, a shrewdness of apes, a crash of rhinoceroses or a bloat of hippopotami.

Yugo Investigates

MORE EGGS?" ASKED JACK AS HE LIFTED ANOTHER RASHER⁷⁵ OF BACON onto Sam's plate. They were all seated at the large dining room table on the main floor of the house. They were crowded around one end of the table; ten empty chairs were lined along each side. Three large candleholders were spaced down the middle of the table.

Iggy shook his head. "Maybe a little more unsweetened fruit juice," he said. Jack nodded and fetched Iggy a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice.

"I trust you fellows slept well last night," said Jack. "I slept like a baby."

"How could you sleep with all of that noise?" asked Yugo.

"What noise?" said Jack. "I didn't hear a thing."

"What do you mean? There were trumpets and crying babies and howling hyenas," said Sam. "Nobody could sleep through that."

"Cackling hyenas," Iggy corrected him.

"Oh, that's just the ghost," said Jack. "Don't mind him. He's harmless."

"He may be harmless, but he's very noisy," said Sam.

"Yes, that's him," said Jack. "Always a lot of tubas and such when he's around."

"We saw him last night," said Iggy.

"You did?" said Jack. "How lucky. He hardly ever shows himself anymore."

"Blue fellow? Flat like a pancake?" asked Sam. "Looks like an old prospector?"

Jack nodded. "The very same."

"We know who he is," said Yugo. "It's Yellowstone Wiggins."

"Never heard of him," said Jack.

"Do not be so sure," said Yugo. "You have a painting of him on your wall. He looked familiar to me, but it is just because he was much older in the painting than the Yellowstone Wiggins we knew."

"The ghost is great-grandfather?" asked John.

⁷⁵ A "rasher" is a serving of three or four slices of bacon.

“The very same,” said Yugo. “Now we just have to figure out what he is doing here.”

“I’ve already hired professionals to look into it,” said Jack. “I even had Mr. Houdini⁷⁶ himself over. He said there was no ghost here at all.”

“He would,” said Yugo.

“There is definitely a ghost,” said Iggy. “We all saw him.”

“And heard him,” said Sam.

“I think he was trying to tell us something,” said Yugo. “Before he vanished, he pointed out the window.”

“Is there anything out there?” asked Iggy.

“Just an old oak tree,” said Jack. “And some squirrels.”

“Maybe he wants some acorns,” Sam suggested.

“There is something he wants,” said Yugo. “It is said that ghosts appear because they have left some unfinished business behind.”

“We should help him finish that business,” said Iggy.

“I knew you were going to say that,” said Sam.

Yugo blotted his chin with his napkin and said, “time to get to work.” He led the way up the stairs, past the scowling portrait of old Yellowstone Wiggins, and into their bedroom. It looked much the same as the day before since no one had actually slept in any of the three beds.

Yugo walked carefully around the room, recounting the events of the night before as he did. “First there was the tapping, then the parrot,” he muttered to himself. “Then laughing and crying and then a vision of Yellowstone Wiggins himself came through the door and he stood just there.”

“And he pointed out that window,” added Iggy.

“That is right,” said Yugo. He walked over and looked through the broken window. The rain had stopped. It was a sunny Saturday morning, with a low mist swirling in the distance. Out in the yard stood an old oak tree. A squirrel scampered along one of the branches.

Yugo turned back to the room and continued his survey, muttering all the while. “And then there were spiders. And they ran over here and over there and ... yes.”

⁷⁶ Harry Houdini (1874-1926) was a magician famed for elaborate escape tricks. In his later years, he took to investigating and debunking spiritualists and other mediums.

Yugo crouched down and carefully examined the floorboards. “Just as I thought.” He pulled out a putty knife from his tool belt and carefully scraped at the thin layer of blue goo he had found on the floor.

“What is that stuff?” asked Iggy.

“Ectoplasm,” said Yugo. “It is a by-product of the ethereal energy that spirits use to manifest themselves on this plane. When ghosts appear, even if it is only to ring a bell or shake a tambourine, they leave a little of this behind.”

“That’s just gross,” said Sam.

“It is not gross,” said Yugo. “It is what we are going to use to talk to Yellowstone Wiggins from beyond the grave. To the snowmobile!”

The batteries of the snowmobile were fully charged, and Yugo was able to open the cabinets under the passenger seat to retrieve the scientific equipment he kept there. Before long, he had put together a fully functioning laboratory at the side of the snowmobile. Beakers bubbled atop Bunsen burners and at one end of the table, small electric arcs ran up and down a pair of metal rods.

“What is that for?” asked Iggy.

“Nothing really,” said Yugo. “It just looks cool.” He swirled a green mixture in a Florence flask.⁷⁷ He poured the green mixture into a beaker with bubbling blue liquid in it. He stirred the beaker with a glass rod and a little puff of green smoke came out the top.

“That looked cool. Was that important?” asked Sam.

“Not really,” said Yugo. “This is the important part.” He poured a thin stream of black fluid into the smoking beaker. The mixture bubbled thickly and then

exploded with a tremendous.



⁷⁷ A Florence flask is a flask that looks like this →



“Eureka!”⁷⁸ shouted Yugo as the smoke cleared. His face was covered in black soot. Iggy and Sam slowly picked themselves off of the ground. They were also covered in black soot and Sam’s newsbie cap was nowhere to be found.

Yugo held up a glass beaker with an inch of yellow-green solution swirling at the bottom. “This is it!” he said proudly.

“What is it?” asked Iggy.

“Ectoplasmic paint,” said Yugo. “This is what we will use to talk to Yellowstone Wiggins.”

“How are we going to do that?” asked Sam.

“You will see. Later tonight. Just around midnight.”

“I can’t wait,” said Sam. “Now, where’s my hat?”

The Treasure of Yellowstone Wiggins

MIDNIGHT AT THE OLD WIGGINS PLACE. Jack Wiggins and the elves had dined on roast pheasant and sweet potato pie. After dinner, Jack served a round of Tom and Jerry.⁷⁹ Iggy and Yugo both politely declined, so Sam drank their servings.

The sun set and then they played a few matches of bazingo while they waited for the big clock in the foyer to toll the midnight hour. When the clock chimed eleven times, Yugo carried his jar of ectoplasmic paint up to the room with the three four poster beds. He found a bare wall and carefully spread the chartreuse concoction onto it with a brush.

⁷⁸ The word ‘eureka’ derives from the Greek word, ‘eureka’, which means ‘I have found it.’ The exclamation Eureka! Is attributed to the Greek philosopher Archimedes who gained insight into a means of measuring the volume of irregularly shaped objects when he noted the rise in the level of the bathwater when he lowered his own irregularly shaped mass into the bathtub. He was apparently so keen to share this insight that he leapt out of his bathtub and ran naked down the street exclaiming ‘Eureka!’ Eureka is also the motto of the state of California and relates to the discovery of gold there in 1848.

⁷⁹ A Tom and Jerry is a traditional Christmastime cocktail which was popular in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. It is a variant of eggnog made with egg whites beaten stiff and served hot in a mug with plenty of brandy and rum. It was a favourite of President Warren G. Harding, who held the office from 1921 to 1923. Tom and Jerry is also the name of a cat and mouse duo who featured in a series of short animated films that were popular in the 1940s, 50s and 60s.

“Chartreuse is the wrong colour for this room,” said Jack. “It clashes with the drapes.”

“Chartreuse is the wrong colour for any room,” said Sam.

“The colour is not the important thing,” said Yugo. “The ectoplasm is. If I am right, and I always am, this paint will channel the ectenic force and give us a means to communicate with the ghost.”

Yugo finished his work and took a step back. The four of them stared at the wall. It was exactly as interesting as watching paint dry.

“Now what?” asked Iggy.

“It is simple, really,” said Yugo. “The ectoplasmic paint is a sort of membrane between this plane of existence and the ethereal spirit plane where Yellowstone Wiggins is. We should be able to use it to send messages.”

“How are we going to do that?” asked Sam.

“It is exceedingly simple,” said Yugo. He pulled a Sharpie™ from his pocket and wrote on the freshly painted wall:

Hello. May we please speak with Mr. Yellowstone Wiggins.

The letters faded into the wall.

“It is working,” said Yugo. “Our message has been transmitted to the other side.”

Before long, another message slowly came into view, inscribed in deep red blood dripped letters that formed on the chartreuse wall:

**WHO IS THAT THEN? IS IT ELVES? THERE ARE
NOT MANY ELVES HERE.**

“That’s just frightening,” said Sam. “Couldn’t he use friendlier looking letters?”

I am sorry. Is this better?

Yugo pulled out his Sharpie™ and wrote out another message on top of the fading letters.

Yes, that is much friendlier.

As those letters faded into the ether, he wrote:

Is there anything you need to tell us? Any unfinished business? We want to help.

The words dissolved into the wall. Several moments passed before another message emerged:

BUSINESS! MANKIND WAS MY BUSINESS. THE COMMON WELFARE WAS MY BUSINESS; CHARITY, MERCY, FORBEARANCE, AND BENEVOLENCE, WERE, ALL, MY BUSINESS. THE DEALINGS OF MY TRADE WERE BUT A DROP OF WATER IN THE COMPREHENSIVE OCEAN OF MY BUSINESS!"

The elves exchanged a puzzled glance before another message appeared:

Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

Wrong Christmas ghost just there. Old Marley grabbed my quill. He is always banging on about his business.

But, since you mention it, I do have some business of my own that I need to get settled.

"Now we are getting somewhere," said Iggy.

"Just give it to us then," said Sam. "This whole thing is creeping me out."

Yugo wrote on the wall:

Please give us the business

"Now that just sounds dirty," said Sam.

Iggy glared at him.

When I was a younger man ... a living man ... I found the mother lode. Enough gold to last me a lifetime and then some. I built a saloon and a magnificent house.

It lasted me my lifetime.

I buried the rest to keep it safe.

“Keep it safe from what?” Iggy said aloud.

Safe from them Calabashes. Awful folk. Claim
jumpers the lot of them.

“Did he say Calabash?” asked Iggy as the words faded from view. “We’ve been looking for a man named Calabash.”

Another message scrawled across the wall:

I put all me gold in a box and I buried it. And then I
put an acorn on top of it so that I could always find
the spot where I planted it.

I have watched that oak tree grow in that very spot
these last 50 years or more. And I never could tell no
one what was buried there. Being dead and all.

I sent parrots and spiders and all them nasty things
I could, but no one never paid me no mind.

He’s harmless, they said.

Jack blushed. Iggy poked Yugo in the shoulder. “Ask him about the Calabashes. We need to find a man named Calabash.”

Yugo raised his pen, but before he could write anything, another message appeared.

My business is done now. I can finally lay down my quill.

My treasure is all yours, young Jack. Use it well.

The sun slowly rose and lit up the room. But none of Yugo’s questions about Calabashes or other existential matters of what awaited us all beyond this mortal plane were answered. Yellowstone Wiggins was gone. He had finished his business.

The grounds behind the house were lit by the dawn’s early light when Iggy, Yugo and Sam joined Jack in the morning shadows of the old oak tree. Jack held an

old pickaxe he had found in the basement with the letters YW scratched into the handle. Sam held a plate of eggs.

Jack swung the old pickaxe at the side of the tree. Sam watched and ate his eggs. Jack swung. Sam watched.

Jack swung.

Sam watched.

Suddenly, the pickaxe struck wood. But it was just a root. So, Jack kept on swinging.

Sam kept on watching.

The next time Jack struck wood Sam set down his empty plate. He joined Iggy and Yugo in the hole and scraped away the dirt that covered an old case. The elves yanked and pulled the box out of the ground and set it aside the oak tree. Jack Wiggins lifted the lid and was blinded for a moment by the glare of the morning sun reflecting off all that gold.

“I don’t believe it,” said Jack. “This is more gold than I have ever seen.” He dug into the box and pulled out a large nugget. He tossed it to in the direction of the elves. Sam snatched it out of the air and stuffed it into his pocket. He had found gold nuggets easy to come by, but difficult to hold on to.

“You must all stay for Christmas,” said Jack. “All of my nieces and nephews and the little ones will be here. They will all share in this treasure. This will be the best Christmas ever!”

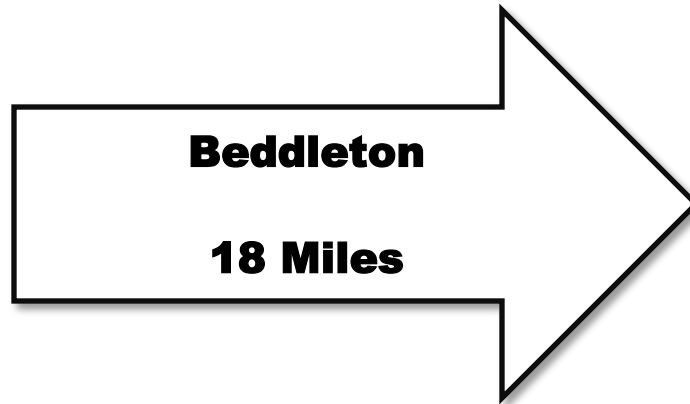
And so, it was. Every niece and nephew and little one found a package under the tree which held a rock of gleaming gold. Yellowstone Wiggins lived on through the treasure he had left behind.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam had left by then, embarking on another spin through the time vortex. But on their way down the hall, Iggy was certain that the portrait of old John Wiggins, also known as Yellowstone Wiggins, the scowling old man with the thick grey moustache, was smiling now. He was also sure that the grizzled old face on that painting winked as they walked past.

December 22, 1940

“WE SHOULD HAVE STAYED,” SAID SAM. “I bet we could have got our hands on even more of that treasure. Not to mention a few more Tom and Jerrys”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam spun through the time vortex. Now that the snowmobile was fully recharged, Yugo had assured the others they would be able to properly carry on their mission. What Yugo did not say, and what he was not himself sure of, was where that mission would take them to next. Which, as it turned out, was at the side of a familiar road on another December 22nd. This time in 1940. The familiar sign at the side of the familiar road said:



Once the windows of the snowmobile had defrosted from this latest trip through the time vortex, Sam looked through the tempered glass and said, “you have got to be joking.”

“Oh Sam,” said Iggy. “It has been years since we have been to Beddleton.” Indeed, it was. Almost 700 years. Or forty years. Or one hundred and forty years. Or it might have only been a few days. It all depended on which way one looked at it. Summer always ends too soon, and winter seems to drag on forever. Time is funny like that.

Yugo drove the snowmobile down the road to Beddleton. There were craters beside the road in places. Once they had to carefully drive around one that was inconveniently right in the middle of the road.

“The highway maintenance has really slipped since the last time we were here,” said Sam.

“Those are from bombs,” said Yugo. “December 1940 was the middle of the Blitz.”

“What was that?” asked Iggy.

“During the Second World War the Luftwaffe, that’s the German Air Force, made bombing runs all over England. Those craters are from the bombs they have been dropping every night.”

“That is terrible,” said Iggy.

“It really was,” said Yugo.

The damage from the bombings was even more obvious as they reached Beddleton. There were buildings, and entire city blocks, which had been reduced to rubble. Where there had once been tidy little homes and busy little shops, there were just heaps of dusty bricks.

“No, no, no, no,” muttered Sam, who was squirming in the back seat.

Yugo turned slowly into the square in the centre of town. A fish and chips shop on the corner had been blasted to splinters. However, the building next door was intact.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes!” shouted Sam. He jumped out of his seat and ran up the old stone stairs of the *Moose and Pickle*. He dashed past a tall, silver haired woman and then pulled up a chair at his usual table.

The silver haired woman turned towards him. “You must be yet another Mrs. Wiggins,” said Sam. “I’ll have two of your finest Elfmeådes, please.”

“Sorry, luv,” said yet another Mrs. Wiggins. “Only one to a customer. On account of the rationing.”⁸⁰

Sam pointed at Iggy and Yugo who had just walked into the room. “Make it three Elfmeådes. One for each of us.”

“Will you be having supper, then?” asked yet another Mrs. Wiggins when she returned with three foaming pints of Elfmeåde. “We have spam and beans on toast. And that’s all we have. On account of the rationing.”

“I’ll just have toast, please,” said Iggy.

“Me too,” said Yugo.

“I’ll have their spam and beans,” said Sam.

⁸⁰ During the Second World war, and at other times in its history, the British government imposed restrictions, or rationed, how much certain items, like gasoline or certain foodstuffs, a person could buy. This was done to prevent shortages of critical supplies and to ensure that everyone in the country could get their own fair share of fuel, butter, sugar and Elfmeåde. It was never really necessary to ration spam. Then as now, nobody has ever wanted for spam.

As the sun set, yet another Mrs. Wiggins walked around the room and pulled blinds down over all of the windows. Then she brought around three modest helpings of spam and beans on toast. Sam gobbled down all of the spam and beans and cast his eyes about the room to see if anyone else had some rations to spare.

“Why do you suppose she pulled the blinds down now that the sun has gone down?” asked Iggy.

“It is to keep the lights from shining through the windows,” said Yugo. “So, the Luftwaffe cannot see us if they fly this way tonight.”

“Oh,” said Iggy.

Suddenly a siren wailed. All the other patrons of the Moose and Pickle set down their forks and walked quickly to a door at the back of the room. Yet another Mrs. Wiggins walked quickly over to the elves’ table. “Come on then,” she said. “You’ve got to come downstairs. Right now.”

Iggy and Yugo followed, while Sam scraped a final mouthful of spam and beans off his plate before he left his seat. They followed yet another Mrs. Wiggins down a flight of stairs and into the basement of the *Moose and Pickle*.

There were some loud thumps from above that the elves heard even over the ongoing wail of the siren. “Have a seat, we’ll probably be here a while,” said yet another Mrs. Wiggins.

Iggy looked around. They were in a large room with arched stone ceilings and hallways that branched off in all directions.

“It’s something, isn’t it?” said yet another Mrs. Wiggins. “Not everyplace in Beddleton has a basement. But the *Moose* has been here forever. They say that these old caves go all the way back to Roman times. Can you imagine that?”

Yugo nodded. He could very easily imagine that.

The thumping from above went on for hours. The elves tried to sleep on one of the benches, but between wailing sirens and the occasional thump thump, it was just too loud. It was not until well after midnight that the percussive thumps stopped and a different siren rang out.

The door at the top of the stairs opened and a portly fellow with a robust russet brown moustache and a limp made his way down the stairs. He wore an olive-green jacket with a half dozen medals pinned to his chest.

“That’s the all-clear, everyone,” he said. “That’s enough excitement for one night. You can all go home now.”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam made their way to the stairs. The portly man stepped in front of them. “What’s all this then.”

“Oh Alistair,” said yet another Mrs. Wiggins. “These are our guests.”

The portly man gave a brisk salute. “I thought as much. General Alistair Wiggins, at your service. You don’t see too many elves in this bomb shelter.”

“Have we met?” asked Iggy.

“Only once,” said General Wiggins. He lowered his saluting arm. “As I recall, you helped me out with a spot of bother with my leg some years ago.”

“Private Wiggins?” asked Yugo.

“It’s General Wiggins, now,” said yet another Mrs. Wiggins. “Our Alistair is in charge of the civil defence in Beddleton.”

Yugo saluted smartly. “It is a pleasure to see you again, General. If there is anything my colleagues and I can do to help.”

“At ease,” said General Wiggins. Yugo lowered his own salute. The General rubbed his chin and then said, “perhaps you can provide some assistance. Let’s speak more in the morning. Do you still have that peculiar snowmobile contraption?”

The Battle of Beddleton

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM FOUND THEMSELVES IN A FAMILIAR ROOM at the top of the stairs of the *Moose and Pickle*. They had spent forty days and nights there 600 years before, though it felt like only a week before.

It turned out that yet another Mrs. Wiggins was actually Mrs. General Wiggins and that they had another little Wiggins of their own, young Alistair, who was all of eight years old. All of this was explained over a late-night supper of cottage pie and a wee dram of Elfmeäde. Just a wee dram, mind you. On account of the rationing.

The elves got to bed late, but General Wiggins woke them at dawn with a lengthy reveille he played with great gusto on his bugle. And when that did not rouse Sam from his slumber, he honked out another few choruses.

Iggy was the first one out the door. He wanted to see what had happened overnight with his own eyes. The *Moose and Pickle* had escaped the bombing, but the homes and businesses only a block away had not been so lucky. The newsstand they had passed the day before on their way into town had been completely obliterated. Newspapers and magazines were scattered throughout the rubble. A particularly colourful issue caught Iggy's eye. He picked it up from where it lay, completely undamaged, on a pile of splintered bricks.

It was a copy of *Captain America Comics*, which had only been released a few days earlier. Iggy flipped through the first few pages and then tucked it, very carefully, into his pocket. This looks like it might be worth something someday, he thought.⁸¹ He left a shilling on the spot where he had found the comic in case the owner returned.



While Iggy was doing his walkabout, Yugo met up with General Wiggins. “Look at this mess, Yugo,” said General Wiggins. “Most every night, it’s the same thing. Once the sun sets, the bombers fly in and smash everything what is still standing. And then every morning we walk about the town like we’re doing right now and it’s the same thing. Buildings flattened. Families left homeless. And there is nothing I can do about it. There’s no proper air defence in Beddleton. All the planes and the big anti-aircraft guns are in the big city.”

“And look at me, Yugo. A decorated general. Served with distinction in the Great War. You know what I mean. You were there. Worked my way up the ladder since then, but because of this damnable limp of mine, I’ve been assigned to civil defence. What use am I here? What we need to do is to take the fight to the Hun. Meet them in the sky. That’s what I’ve been telling them. But no one will listen.”

⁸¹ Even though it has a cover date of “March”, the first issue of *Captain America Comics* appeared in shops on December 20, 1940. A mint copy of that issue, like the one Iggy just now held in his hand, is today worth more than \$1,000,000.00.

“Maybe I can help,” said Yugo. “I am handy.”

“I’ve seen some of the things that big red snowmobile of yours can do, said General Wiggins. “We could use your contraption as a sort of early warning system. We put it in the middle of town to sound the alert and blow its horns and flash its lights and all the other stuff a new-fangled contraption can get up to.”

“We could do that,” said Yugo. “But maybe we could do something more. Have you got anything we can use to take the fight to them, as you say?”

General Wiggins sighed and led Yugo to a barn not far from the town square. Inside, there was a big machine covered by a grey tarpaulin. General Wiggins pulled the tarp aside to reveal a dusty old biplane. “This is the air defence we have here in Beddleton,” said the General. “I call her ‘Old Snoopy’. They say it’s the very plane that shot down the Red Baron in the last Great War.”⁸²

“Now this is definitely something,” said Yugo. “We can work with this. Tell me General, if I can get it airworthy, can you still fly Old Snoopy?”

“I’d bet my shiny buttons on it,” said General Wiggins.

“Yes, this should work out fine,” said Yugo. “Meet me back here at sundown. Bring your goggles. I’ll have Old Snoopy ready to fly.”

General Wiggins snapped his heels together and gave a crisp salute. “Sundown it is. Then we’ll take this fight to the Hun!”

Sam slept through reveille and reached the dining room of the *Moose and Pickle* a little before noon. He ordered three plates of eggs, including two for Iggy and Yugo, and then he ate them all. After all, they were smaller than his usual plate of eggs at home. On account of the rationing.

Unfortunately, that meant that there were no eggs for Iggy when he returned later that morning. On account of the rationing.

Fortunately, Iggy did not have to live with his grumbling stomach for long, since Mrs. Wiggins served up another helping of eggs for elevenses followed by a cold plate of spam for lunch. Around the time another platter of spam was served for afternoon tea, it occurred to Iggy that the rationing might be more effective if it

⁸² The Red Baron was indeed shot down by a brave soldier piloting a Sopwith Camel. The Sopwith Camel is a single seater biplane that was widely used by the British and Canadian Air Forces in the First World War. It was equipped with twin synchronized machine guns that shot bullets through its spinning propeller. The man flying the Sopwith Camel that took down the Red Baron was Roy Brown, a Canadian pilot serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

were the number of mealtimes that were rationed instead of the size of the meals themselves.

Just before sundown, Mrs. Wiggins served a plate of spam and beans on toast. Despite the rationing, Sam had spent the whole day in his chair in the dining room, eating.

“Have you seen Yugo?” asked Iggy.

“No sign of him,” said Sam between mouthfuls of spam and beans.

“What do you suppose he is up to?” asked Iggy.

“Dunno. Probably fixing something,” said Sam. “But it just means there is more spam for us!”

Indeed, Yugo had been fixing something. He had spent the whole day working on Old Snoopy. He had cleaned the old rotary engine and then decided to upgrade it instead with something more modern. More green. More nuclear. The machine guns had seen better days, and anyway, laser cannons were much more precise.

He was polishing the propeller, which he had kept for purely decorative reasons, when General Wiggins arrived, precisely at sundown. He wore a bomber jacket and a fur trimmed aviators’ helmet with goggles perched on his forehead. The General gave a quick salute and then walked over to Old Snoopy.

“I dare say, Yugo, you’ve done quite a number on Old Snoopy. She looks brand new!”

“Better than brand new, I reckon,” said Yugo.

Just then, the air raid sirens began ringing. “Time to go,” said General Wiggins. He slowly climbed up into Old Snoopy, with an assist from Yugo.

“Godspeed, General,” said Yugo and he gave a sharp salute of his own. Then he tapped his ear. “I’ll be following you on the short wave.”

General Wiggins nodded and then fired up Old Snoopy. The engines growled in a way he had never heard before. He grinned broadly as Old Snoopy rumbled out of the barn and took to the air.

When the sirens started squealing, yet another Mrs. Wiggins led everyone at the *Moose and Pickle* down the stairs and into the underground catacombs. Iggy and Sam were joined by little Herbert Wiggins, who just wanted someone his own size to talk to. Iggy read his new Captain America comic to him and when

Herbert became drowsy, he sang him to sleep with an old Beatles song.⁸³ He thought Herbert might like that.

Things were not nearly so peaceful in the skies above Beddleton, where General Wiggins had taken the flight to the Hun. Once he reached altitude, he quickly encountered a pair of Me 109s.⁸⁴ He trained his twin machine guns on them and fired. Much to his surprise, parallel laser beams blasted from his guns and tore the wings off the German planes. The pilots ejected as their planes spun to the ground.

“Great shot General!” said Yugo over the short wave. Unbeknownst to the General, Yugo was following close behind him in the snowmobile. In fact, it was the snowmobile’s lasers which had downed the two German fighters. Yugo watched as the pilots safely parachuted to the ground.

By then, four more Me 109s had appeared, guiding a much bigger airplane. This was an He 111, with its hold full of the bombs it was readying to drop on Beddleton.

“I think Old Snoopy is overmatched,” said General Wiggins over the shortwave.

“Nonsense,” said Yugo. “Just go left to right and then get that bomber.” As he said that, Yugo sprayed laser fire from the snowmobile from left to right, taking out all of the Me 109s.

“Jolly good!” barked general Wiggins. Old Snoopy bore down on the now defenseless bomber and blasted it out of the sky. The big plane and all its bombs crashed harmlessly in the woods at the edge of Beddleton.

Yugo watched a half dozen parachutes slowly descend into the woods. It was good to see that all of the trees he had once chopped down had grown back and then some.

“There’s another bombing fleet at 2 o’clock,” said Yugo. General Wiggins turned Old Snoopy to confront another bomber surrounded by Me 109s. He pressed his thumbs down on his guns. Laser beams sprayed wildly at the advancing squadron. At the same time, Yugo sent a more precisely targeted burst of laser fire that sent all of the German planes to the ground.

“Another great shot, General,” said Yugo. “But you need to turn back, some of those fighters have got behind us. I mean you. Behind you.”

⁸³ Iggy sang *If I Fell*.

⁸⁴ The Messerschmidt Bf 109 was the primary fighter aircraft used by the Luftwaffe in World War II. It was a single winged fighter plane with a propeller and guns mounted on each wing and was considered the premier air fighter of its day.

Old Snoopy made a long, looping turn and headed back towards Beddleton. The snowmobile was much more mobile. It could turn on a shilling and Yugo was already in pursuit of the next German squadron. He waited until Old Snoopy was right above him before he took out all six airplanes in front of him with six precise shots.

The rest of the German bombing fleet was in disarray by this point. A few planes had turned in retreat. Yugo and the General made short work of those that stayed in the fight. It might be more clearly stated that Yugo and the General made short work of those that stayed in the fight, for Yugo did most of the short working, while the General gamely piloted Old Snoopy in and out of the dogfight, firing his lasers in all directions.

“We’ve done it Yugo!” the General shouted through the short wave. “The Hun are on the run now!”

And so, they were. All the German planes which were still airborne had turned and headed back to base. No bombs would fall on Beddleton this night.

General Wiggins guided Old Snoopy to a safe landing just as the all clear siren blared. Yugo silently dropped the snowmobile to the ground nearby. He met the General in the pasture near the old barn.

“We took the fight to the Hun tonight, Yugo! That’s a licking they won’t soon forget!”

“You surely did, sir,” said Yugo.

General Wiggins patted Old Snoopy on the fuselage. “I knew she still had it in her.”

“Indeed,” said Yugo. They walked together to the *Moose and Pickle* where everyone had left the basement. The General greeted yet another Mrs. Wiggins with a warm hug. “We sent them running, Abigail. They won’t be coming back this way anytime soon.”

“You’re a hero, General,” someone shouted.

“They ought to build a statue!” someone else shouted. That someone else was Sam.

“Rations be damned,” said yet another Mrs. Wiggins. “Let’s have a proper Christmas feast!”

And so, they did. There was all the spam, beans and Elfmeäde a man, or an elf, could want. And to be frank, Sam wanted rather a lot of it.


The next night, Christmas Eve, there was no siren. After all of the lasers, the Luftwaffe had no interest in returning to Beddleton and left it alone for the rest of the war.

“It’s another Christmas truce, of a sort,” said Iggy as they stood outside the *Moose and Pickle* and looked up into the clear star filled night. One star looked bigger than the rest, but that is usually how it works on Christmas Eve,

“It is a silent night in Beddleton,” said Yugo.

“Calm and bright,” said Sam. “Now, let’s get out of here.”

December 22, 1947

 ON DECEMBER 22, 1947, AN UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT was seen in the twilight sky not far from the town of Roswell, New Mexico. It was the second time that year that a peculiar flying craft was seen in the area. It shot across the sky and disappeared over the western horizon. But, this time, the flying object held elves and not aliens.

Yugo turned on the radio. *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* by Gene Autry was playing.

“Not this oldie,” said Sam.

“It is not an oldie,” said Yugo. “It is the number one song on the radio right now.”

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose and said, “and which December 22nd is it this time?”

Yugo clicked a few buttons on his console and peered at his dashboard monitor. “We are approaching Groom Lake, Nevada in the United States,” he said. “In 1947. And yes, on December 22nd.”

Yugo brought the snowmobile in for a landing near a chain link fence topped with razor wire. On the other side of the fence was a sign that said:



None of Iggy, Yugo or Sam noticed the sign. Being surrounded by a chain link fence topped with razor wire gave them a sense of safety.

“What is this place?” asked Iggy.

“Judging by the razor wire, I would guess that we are in a prison,” said Yugo. “Either that, or a secret government research facility. It could go either way.”

Iggy was already digging through his steamer trunk. “What do you think I should wear then, jumpsuit or lab coat?” In his left hand he held a set of bright orange coveralls, in his right a crisply pressed white laboratory coat.

Two men in white laboratory coats and carrying clipboards approached the snowmobile.

“Lab coat it is then” said Iggy.

The two men stood a few feet back. The larger of the two, who stood about 6 foot one and tipped the scales at around 250, raised his clipboard and wrote down notes as he spoke. “Unidentified object. Red, with silver trim.”

The smaller fellow, who had red hair, freckles and might have weighed 140, but even then, only after seconds at Christmas dinner said, “Twenty-two feet long. About eight feet wide. Two skis attached near the front. Hypothesis: the unidentified object may be designed to travel on snow or ice.”

The first one lowered his clipboard. “Seriously Hobbs. Snow and ice? We are in the middle of the desert. Do you see any snow and ice around here?”

“I am sorry, Agent Terwilliger, I am just recording my observations, as we were instructed to do in Directive 625-47(B)” said Hobbs.

“Agent Hobbs, Directive 625-47(B) does not require you or any anyone else at this facility to record ridiculous observations, and let me make it clear, for the record, and here,” Agent Terwilliger tapped his clipboard with his pencil, “is the record.”

Agent Terwilliger went on to make his own note, “Agent Hobbs has made the ridiculous observation that the vestigial skis at the front of the alien craft may have been designed for ice and snow. Agent Hobbs’ observation is noted here, for the record, to be ridiculous.”

Agent Hobbs gasped. “You said ‘alien’.”

“No, I never,” said Agent Terwilliger.

“Oh yes you did so,” said Agent Hobbs, and he said as he scribbled on his clipboard, “Let the record fully reflect that Agent Terwilliger has used the expression “alien craft” out loud, and within earshot of the occupants of the alien

craft, and has, accordingly, violated Special Directive K which prohibits anyone within these premises from speaking the word “alien” aloud.”

And now it was on. Agent Terwilliger scribbled on his clipboard as he wrote, “and let the record further reflect that Agent Hobbs has himself used the expression “alien,” not once, not twice but thrice, in treble violation of Special Directive K.”

“And also let the record reflect,” said Agent Hobbs as he wrote on his own clipboard, “that Agent Terwilliger has himself just now used the expression ‘alien’ four times altogether in quadruple violation of Special Directive K. Also, let the record further reflect that the observation that the skis attached at the anterior aspect of the alien craft could very well be useful in guiding the alien craft through icy or snowy terrain is a sensible and not a ridiculous observation.”

Agent Terwilliger was having none of it. He continued, writing down each of his words as he spoke, “The record will further reflect that Agent Hobbs has in the last few minutes said the proscribed word ‘alien’ out loud, no fewer than five times in respect of the alien craft which has appeared by some alien means within the security fence of this complex. This amounts to a ... ,” and here, Agent Terwilliger counted it off on his fingers, “quintuple violation of Special Directive K.”

Agent Hobbs likewise spoke as he wrote, “by my reckoning, Agent Terwilliger has himself, in the very immediate past, uttered the word ‘alien’ aloud, not less than seven times, placing him in septuple violation of Special Directive K, which forbids the utterance of the forbidden term ‘alien’ out loud.”

It quickly devolved into a counting exercise. Agent Terwilliger wrote up Agent Hobbs (for the record) for violating Special Directive K eight times and then Agent Hobbs upped that by recording, again for the record, that Agent Terwilliger was himself a nonuple violator of Special Directive K.

And then, as he wrote up Agent Hobbs, Agent Terwilliger himself uttered the word ‘alien’, which made him a decuple offender, which Agent Hobbs duly recorded, though as he himself said the word ‘alien’ aloud another time, Agent Terwilliger in turn noted that Agent Hobbs had violated Special Directive K thirteen times by saying the word ‘alien’ aloud, which was, of course, further cause for Agent Hobbs to let the record show that Agent Terwilliger was a serial offender of Special Directive K, having spoken the word ‘alien’ aloud, no less than sixteen times.

This went on for rather a long while. Agents Terwilliger and Hobbs had written each other up over a hundred times each for repeated violations of Special Directive K and were running out of paper on their respective clipboards when Iggy stepped out of the snowmobile, dressed in a crisply pressed white laboratory coat and said, “I get the feeling that you fellows are really sensitive about the word ‘alien’.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Agent Terwilliger.

“There are no aliens here,” said Agent Hobbs. He placed his left hand over his clipboard.

“Absolutely no aliens, whatsoever,” said Agent Terwilliger. He raised his own clipboard. “May I have your name please? For the record.”

“Iggy. The name is Iggy.”

“And how do you spell that?” asked Agent Hobbs.

Iggy rolled his eyes so hard he actually saw the inside of his own head. Finally, he said, “with an ‘I.’”

Agent Terwilliger nodded and made a note on his clipboard.

“You two had better take those reports directly to your superiors,” said Iggy. “I expect a full formal investigation of the ... ” and here Iggy paused to make air quotes with his fingers, “ ... alien craft is in order.”

“The elf makes a good point,” said Agent Terwilliger.

“We need to write up a full report,” said Agent Hobbs.

“In triplicate,” said Agent Terwilliger. They each tucked their clipboards under their arms and marched swiftly back into the low cinderblock building they had come from in the first place.

Iggy shook his head as Yugo and Sam joined him at the side of the snowmobile.

“I thought that they would never leave.” Yugo said.

“We’ve come all this way, we might as well have a look around,” said Sam. “I’ve got a feeling these chaps are hiding something.”

“If we are going in there,” said Iggy, “I am going to need a clipboard.”

Little Green Men

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM APPROACHED THE DOOR to the low cinderblock building cautiously. To their surprise, there was no lock on the door.

“Some top-secret base,” said Iggy.

“I suppose once you are past the perimeter, there is no need to put a lock on these doors,” said Yugo.

“Let’s go inside them” said Sam. He opened the door and then gestured to the others to enter.

The three elves walked through the door and into a long narrow hallway which was illuminated with Mr. Edison’s fluorescent light. The elves turned left and then right. Then they continued along what seemed like the same corridor until it ended at a T intersection. After a short argument,⁸⁵ the party agreed to make another left turn.

And then walked right into a steel door with a sign on it that said:



“Oh, this should be good,” said Sam and he reached for the doorknob.

“Sam you must not,” said Iggy.

“It is not only top secret,” said Yugo. “It is super top secret.”

“Are we going to put this to another vote?” asked Sam. “Because I vote we open the door.”

“Me too,” said Yugo.

“And me as well,” said Iggy. “It is not every day that you can open a door that is super top secret.”

⁸⁵ Sam lost the argument after it was put to a formal vote, which he lost 2-1.

And so, they did. Even though there was a sign on the door labelling the room Super Top Secret, there was no card reader on the door frame. It was 1947 after all.⁸⁶ Sam turned the knob and then the three elves stepped inside.

They stepped into a spacious room with a navy-blue floor which was waxed to a mirror finish. “These secret labs always have a shiny navy-blue floor,” said Iggy.

The perimeter of the room was made up of glass walled rooms. “These secret labs always have glass walled rooms,” said Yugo.

“What is it with the glass walled rooms?” asked Sam. “The only place you ever see a glass walled room is in a secret lab.”

“But what is that in the glass walled rooms?” asked Iggy, pointing at the nearest one. A small pale green figure, the colour of a Granny Smith apple,⁸⁷ sat at a miniature piano, which was the only furniture in the glass walled room. It was about the size of an elf, with an oversized head, long thin legs and four long thin arms. Its four hands each had six fingers and two opposable thumbs. Twenty-four fingers and thumbs danced up and down the keyboard and played a version of *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* that was both joyful and symphonic.

It paused when it noticed Iggy, Yugo and Sam walk into the room. It stood up, blinked its large black eyes and walked up to the glass wall that separated it from the elves. It was dressed only in a snug beige thong.

“Who are you?” asked Iggy.

“I might ask the same thing,” said the little green figure.

“You speak English?” asked Yugo.

“Of course, I speak English. Look at me,” the green fellow pointed at its head. “My brain is the size of a pumpkin. Learning your pathetic language was exceedingly simple.”

“What are you?” asked Sam. Iggy shot him a hard glare.

“I am Captain Bogglin Mews, commander of a fleet of exploration vehicles from Warden Ridge, a planet in orbit around the star you call Arcturus. We call it ‘the sun’. Our ship crashed here almost six of your months ago. My crew were captured and then taken here and placed in these compartments.”

⁸⁶ The first magnetic stripe card reader was not developed until 1960.

⁸⁷ The Granny Smith apple is named for Maria Ann Smith who first cultivated it in Australia in 1868. Maria was 69 years old at the time and was, indeed, a granny. The Granny Smith apple also appears on the label of **BEATLES** records issued by the Apple Records Corp.

“Whatever for?” asked Iggy.

“Observation and study, it seems. Last month I was given this piano, to see if I could deduce how it worked. I taught myself how to play it in a half hour,” said Bogglin Mews. “Fortunately, your kind has not discovered the scientific value of a thorough probing.”

“I am sure they will figure it out soon enough,” said Yugo. “We need to get you out of there.”

“That would be very kind,” said Bogglin Mews. Yugo began fiddling with the door lock.

“So, are you a he or a she or what?” asked Sam. Iggy shot him an even harder glare.

“I am neither a he nor a she nor a what. There are no hes or shes on Warden Ridge, only wes,” said Bogglin Mews. “We have six different gender aspects and can assume whichever we like as we fancy.”

Sam looked at Bogglin Mews’ little brown thong. “You have all that going on in those little underpants?”

“We do indeed, friend elf,” said Bogglin Mews. “It is much more sophisticated than your pitiful biology. I could even choose the aspect of an elf if I so wished.” Bogglin scrunched his big black eyes as his body shimmered and a moment later looked every bit the form of an elf. A pale green elf with four arms and dressed in a brown thong.

“Got it,” said Yugo. He stepped back and the glass door popped open. Bogglin Mews stepped out and bowed his bulbous head.

A throat cleared behind them. “Just what do you think you are doing?”

The elves spun around and found themselves face to face with a tall, russet haired man in a white laboratory coat. Agents Terwilliger and Hobbs stood on either side of him. “We do not see many elves here,” he said.

“Elves are not permitted in this facility,” said Agent Terwilliger.

“How specieist of you,” said Sam.

“I’ll made a note of that,” said Agent Hobbs. He raised his clipboard and made a note of that.

The tall man in the middle stepped forward. “I am Agent John Jack Wiggins. I oversee this facility and you are all trespassing.”


“Your name is John Jack?” asked Iggy.

“The Jack is short for John,” said Agent Wiggins.

“Your parents named you John John?” asked Yugo.

“Enough,” said Agent Wiggins. “Terwilliger, Hobbs, arrest these intruders.” He turned to Bogglin Mews. “You know better than this, Bogglin. There is no escape for you or your crew. Now get back into your room. You are never leaving Area 51. And neither are these elves.”

Christmas in Area 51

 THAT WAS HOW IGGY, YUGO AND SAM FOUND THEMSELVES inside a little glass room in a super top-secret government facility on Christmas morning, 1947. There were no stockings hung by the chimney with care in the glass cell. There was no trimming, no bunting nor sprigs of mistletoe. Nothing but three elves staring out into a large room with a shiny navy-blue floor.

“Another Christmas locked in a room,” said Iggy.

“You should be happy to be locked in a room,” said Bogglin Mews. He was in the glass walled cell next to them and they could hear him easily. “Usually, people caught sneaking into this room are executed.”

“That seems harsh,” said Yugo.

“They do not want anyone knowing about us,” said Bogglin Mews.

“If they haven’t executed us, they are probably going to do experiments instead,” said Sam. He gripped Iggy by the lapels of his white laboratory coat. “I don’t want to be probed, Iggy. I can’t be probed. I just can’t.”

Iggy pushed Sam’s hands away. “Nobody is going to be probed, Sam.”

Just then, Agent John Jack Wiggins walked into the room with a probe in his hand.

Sam screamed.

Agent Wiggins looked at the object in his hands. “Oh relax. It’s a thermometer. For the turkey. We are making Christmas dinner for the team.” Still, he looked down thoughtfully at the thermometer.

Sam spoke up before Agent Wiggins could get any ideas. “You should let us go. It’s almost Christmas. We won’t tell anyone about your secret lab. We are good at keeping secrets. We work in a secret toy shop, you know.”

“If it is a secret toy shop, you should not have told me about it,” said Agent Wiggins. “It seems that you are not so good at keeping secrets after all.”

“We really do need to go,” said Iggy. “We are on an important mission.”

“What kind of a mission,” asked Agent Wiggins.

“We have to save Christmas,” said Yugo.

Agent Wiggins held up his thermometer. “In case you have not heard, this is for the Christmas turkey. Christmas does not need any saving this year.”

“We have to save Christmas in the future,” said Sam.

“From a man named Calabash,” said Iggy.

Agent Wiggins snorted. “Well, maybe you will get out of here in fifty years or so. In time to save Christmas of the future. From a Calabash.” Agent Wiggins turned shook his head and turned away.

“Do you know anyone named Calabash?” asked Yugo.

Agent Wiggins turned back. “I’d stay away from them if I were you. Awful people. Cheats and scoundrels the lot of them. Would never want my daughter to marry a Calabash, that’s for sure. Or my granddaughter. Or my great granddaughter 50 times removed.” He laughed and tossed the thermometer up into the air. “Merry Christmas elves. The first of many, I am sure.” Then he walked out of the room.

“There will be no more Christmases for me, I am afraid,” said Bogglin Mews after Agent Wiggins had closed the door behind him.

“What do you mean,” asked Sam. “It sounds like we are going to spend the next hundred Christmases together. In a glass room. With shiny navy-blue floors.”

“Not for us. Your Earthly air is filled with germs and pathogens. And while our immune systems are vastly superior to your own, it is only a matter of time before we are overwhelmed,” said Bogglin Mews. He pointed to a blemish at the side of his nose. “I mean look at this! A pimple! A pimple on the perfect pale green complexion of Bogglin Mews! I am doomed! We are all doomed!!”

“Nobody ever died of pimples,” said Sam.

“It is just the beginning,” said Bogglin Mews. “Soon there will be more pimples. Maybe even a rash. And then all bets are off. We are most definitely doomed.”

“We have to do something,” said Iggy.

“What do you think I have been doing? This is something.” Yugo was perched at the door, tinkering with the lock from the inside, as he had done for the better

part of the previous two days. "I am almost there. But this is a magnetic lock. I have been trying every workaround I can think of, but nothing has worked. If I only had a magnet, that would make all the difference."

Sam dug around in his pocket and then passed a flat square object to Yugo. "Will this help?"

Yugo turned it over in his hand. It was a fridge magnet that said "Star Club 1962" with a picture of the **BEATLES** on it. "Yes, this will do nicely," said Yugo. "You might have mentioned you had this yesterday."

"It's a collector's item," said Sam. "I didn't want to part with it."

Yugo shook his head and placed the refrigerator magnet against the back of the door lock. He carefully pressed the side of the lock with a thin tool and the door swung open. Yugo tossed the magnet back to Sam. "Good as new," he said.

"I sure hope so," said Sam. He gave it a quick lookover before he stuffed it back into his pocket. "I'm gonna sell this on ElfBay for a pile of dough."

Yugo strode over to the door to Bogglin Mews' cell. He tinkered with the lock briefly and it clicked open. "Much easier from the outside." Bogglin Mews stepped back out onto the shining navy-blue floor. "Now let us get the rest of your crew," said Yugo.

It only took a few minutes for Yugo to walk around the room and open each glass walled room in turn.

"For a super top-secret government facility, the security here sure is lax," said Sam.

"It is almost Christmas," said Iggy.

Five other little green figures gathered around Bogglin Mews. They all had long slender arms and legs and large heads, the shape of oversized eggplants. They looked much the same to the elves, except for their eyes. Where Bogglin Mews had dark black eyes, the others were different shades of grey. One of them wore thick black spectacles.

Bogglin Mews bowed to Yugo. "I cannot thank you enough. You have reunited me with my life mates. He introduced them to the elves, this is Bogglin Crump, Bogglin Dervish, Bogglin Grooper, Bogglin Percy and that little fellow over there is Bogglin Jinks." It pointed three fingers at the one with the thick black spectacles.

"You are all named Bogglin?" asked Yugo.

"We are all Bogglin," the six Bogglin said together. They pressed their long fingers together and bowed.

“That’s just great,” said Sam. “Now, let’s get out of here. I have no plans to spend the rest of Christmas in Area 51.”

A Christmas Stuffing

“**W**E NEED TO FIND OUR SHIP,” said Bogglin Mews. “Can you help us?”

“I was hoping that you could help us find our ship,” said Iggy. They ran out of the room with the shiny navy-blue floor and into another room with an even shinier navy-blue floor.

“They are probably kept in a hangar somewhere,” said Yugo. “Do you know where we might find a hangar?”

Bogglin Mews pointed several fingers at a sign that hung on the opposite door. It said:



“There are not many secrets in this super top-secret facility,” said Sam.

The elves and Bogglinns took their direction from the sign on the wall and turned right. They walked down a short hall, with shiny navy-blue floors, and into a vast room with a high arched roof. There was a row of lifts along the far wall. Atop one of them rested the snowmobile. On the one beside it, there was a large silver disc. It was dented on one side and there was a pile of curious looking parts stacked beneath it.

“My snowmobile!” shouted Yugo.

“Our interstellar exploration vehicle!” shouted the Bogglinns in unison.

At the opposite side of the room, three men in white laboratory coats sat around a long table. The table was festooned with an enormous turkey, together with all the usual seasonal victuals: heaps of mashed potatoes, steaming bowls of vegetables soaked in butter, mince pie, apple pie, pumpkin pie, pudding, pots of cranberry sauce and a trencher of gravy.

Sam's stomach growled loudly, and Agent Wiggins looked up, a slice of turkey breast dripping gravy on his fork. "What is the meaning of this? Can't you see we are having our Christmas dinner?"

"It does not seem like much of a Christmas dinner," said Iggy.

"There are only three of you," said Yugo.

"We are the only three agents with super top-secret clearance," said Agent Wiggins.

"So, we are the only three who get to have Christmas dinner," said Agent Terwilliger.

"No elves or Boggilns allowed," said Agent Hobbs.

"We should report this," said Agent Terwilliger.

"After dinner, perhaps," said Agent Hobbs. "Please pass the ham."

"You are not allowed here," said Agent Wiggins. "Please return to your cells and let us finish our dinner in peace. More yams, Hobbs?"

Yugo looked at the Boggilns and shrugged. "Let's see what we can do about repairing this spaceship of yours." He walked over to the lift and lowered the spaceship to eye level.

Agent Terwilliger, a napkin tied around his neck, stood up and pointed. "No tampering with that alien craft, elf!"

"You can't say 'alien'," Agent Hobbs hissed.

Agent Wiggins pulled his napkin from his neck and stood up as well. At that moment, the six Boggilns raised their twenty four hands palms forward and said in one voice "Sit. Eat."

Agents Wiggins, Terwilliger and Hobbs sat. And ate. And kept on eating.

"What did you do?" asked Iggy.

"An hypnotic suggestion," said Boggilns Mews.

"Human minds are very weak," said Bogglin Crump.

"And our brains are very large," said Bogglin Dervish.

"Much larger than these pitiful human crania," said Bogglin Grooper.

"If your brains are so gigantic, why didn't you do that when you were locked up?" asked Sam.

“Bogglin minds work best together,” said Bogglin Mews.

“Together,” the other Boggilns said, and bowed their heads.

“Also, the glass was a formidable barrier,” said Bogglin Mews.

“There is no glass on Warden Ridge,” said Bogglin Percy.

“Pass the carrots,” said Agent Wiggins. His cheeks were filled with Christmas supper. Gravy streamed down the front of his crisp white laboratory coat. Agent Terwilliger passed over a half empty bowl of carrots. His own laboratory coat was stained with cranberry sauce.

“I’m feeling hungry, too,” said Sam.

“I do not think that is the Boggilns’ doing,” said Iggy.

“I think I have it,” said Yugo. “Your framminstater valve was stuck. I adjusted the regulator. There are a few dents, but this spaceship should be good to go.”

The Boggilns clapped in joy. It was a thunderous clap considering all of the hands involved.

“We shall be home in time for Bogglin Crimmins Day!” said Bogglin Mews.

“What is Bogglin Crimmins Day?” asked Iggy.

Bogglin Mews shook his big head slowly. “Oh, you poor, wretched Earth dwellers. There is so little you know of the universe.”

“Bogglin Crimmins Day is the happiest day of the year,” said Bogglin Crump.

“A day when all Boggilns gather in celebration,” said Bogglin Dervish.

“There is singing and feasting,” said Bogglin Grooper.

Bogglin Percy bent down and extended all four of his arms. “And the most magical thing of all is that when all of the Boggilns are sleeping, Bogglin Crimmins himself leaves presents for all the good little Boggilns under the Crimmins tree.”

“Bogglin Crimmins,” the Boggilns said together in a soft whisper and then bowed their heads.

“I think my brain might be big enough to understand this Crimmins Day of yours,” said Sam.

“Bogglin Crimmins Day,” said Bogglin Mews.

Bogglin Crump laughed. “Your brains are much too small to even imagine jolly old Bogglin Crimmins.”

“With his beard of white and thong of red,” said Bogglin Dervish.

“And his jolly laugh,” said Bogglin Grooper.

“Ho Ho Ho,” said all the Boggilins together.

“We must make haste, or we shall miss it,” said Bogglin Mews. The Boggilins crawled into their spaceship. Only Bogglin Mews and Bogglin Jinks remained.

Bogglin Mews turned to Iggy. “There is one last favour you could do for us.”

“What is that?” asked Iggy.

“It is Bogglin Jinks, here.” Bogglin Mews gestured to the bespectacled Bogglin at his side. “Bogglin Jinks has asked if he can join you on your adventures. For a little time. You see, it identifies as an elf now.”

Bogglin Jinks smiled and, with a shimmer, took on the aspect of a pale green elf with four arms.

“But what about the pathogens?” asked Yugo.

“Won’t it be doomed if it stays?” said Sam.

Bogglin Mews shook its big head. “Oh, you sad imbecilic creatures. No Bogglin ever died of pimples.” And with that, Bogglin Mews slipped behind the controls of the Bogglin spacecraft. The engines came to life with a soft whirr.

“We will return for Bogglin Jinks in time for next Bogglin Crimmins Day.”

“When will that be?” asked Iggy over the increasingly loud whirr of the engines.

“About fifty of your Earthly years,” said Bogglin Mews. “We will be back before you know it.”

And then, the spaceship was gone in a flash.

Agent Wiggins looked up from his Christmas feast. His chin was covered in grease and stuffing. A button popped off his laboratory coat and spun across the room. The spell the Boggilins had cast on him had passed. He opened his mouth to speak and a bit of underdone potato fell out. He rose from his chair and then fell on the ground, fifteen pounds heavier and dazed from all the turkey he had eaten. Agents Terwilliger and Hobbs snored in their chairs.

Bogglin Jinks looked at the elves and smiled. “We had better find you something to wear,” said Iggy. “I think I have just the thing.” He opened the back of the snowmobile and rooted around in his steamer trunk. He pulled out a green velvet jacket and pants.

“We will need to make some alterations. On account of the arms,” he said. “But it goes nicely with your skin tone.”

Boggin Jinks happily pulled on the jacket. He had two arms in each sleeve. He buttoned up his coat and grinned a wide Boggin grin. “My Boggin Crimmins Day wish has come true. I am a real elf now.”

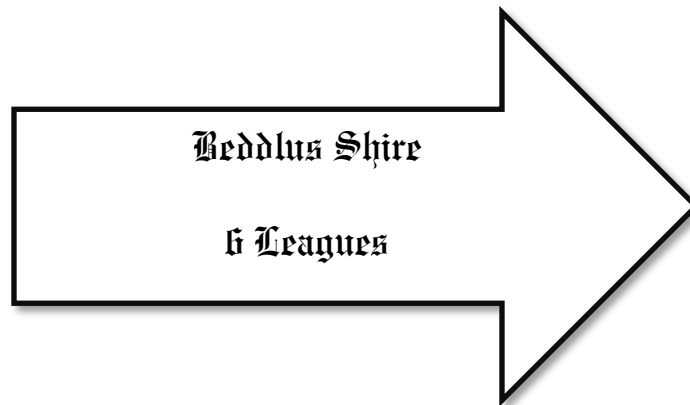
“You sure are, Jinks,” said Sam. “Now let’s get out of here before those three wake up.”

December 22, 594

BOGGLIN JINKS LOOKED IN WONDER through the window of the snowmobile as it dipped and turned through the magenta-indigo-chartreuse swirls of the time vortex.

“I have a good feeling it is going to work this time,” said Iggy. “We have been getting closer and closer the last few stops.”

“Hang on,” said Yugo. He gripped the steering wheel tightly as the snowmobile shook and jumped. The coloured swirls gave way to a clear blue sky as the snowmobile drifted to a gentle stop at the side of a straight cobblestone road with weeds showing between the bricks. There was a sign nearby that said:



“Of course,” said Sam. “Where else could it be?”

“What is this Beddlus Shire?” asked Boggin Jinks.

“We keep coming back here,” said Iggy.

“Why would you do that? It looks like a dump,” said Boggin Jinks.

“You’ve got that right,” said Sam. “But there is a pub in the middle of town I like. To the *Moose and Pickle*. And be quick about it, Yugo.”

“Would you like to know when we are?”

“I already know,” said Sam. “December 22nd sometime. You can fill us in on the way.”

Yugo shook his head and slipped the snowmobile into gear. It clattered down the bumpy cobblestones. “It is December 22, 594. It is the beginning of the dark ages.”

“Seems pretty sunny for a dark age,” said Iggy.

“The Roman Empire has retreated from England,” said Yugo. The snowmobile lurched over a bump in the cobblestones. “Which may explain the quality of this road. The historical record for this period is a bit spotty. Hence the name ‘dark ages’.”

“They could have called it the spotty ages then,” said Iggy. “Dark ages sounds downright dismal.”

A few minutes later, Yugo came to a stop in front of a wooden building with marble columns around the door. The sign above the door read:



“This is the spot,” said Sam.

“It looks like it has seen better days,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“And it will again,” said Sam. He jumped out of the snowmobile and ran up the stone steps.

The dining hall was filled with a single large round table. A pair of knights sat at one side. Sam pulled up a chair on the opposite side and snapped his fingers. Bogglin Jinks sat in the next chair and snapped its fingers as well. Eight fingers and thumbs snapping at once rang out like a crack of thunder. A slim serving girl with long tangled brown hair dashed over.

“Ah, you must be Mrs. Wiggins,” said Sam.

The serving girl blinked rapidly. “That I am, but you can call me Jenny. Everyone else does.”

“That’s a nice name,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“Thanks,” she said. “It’s short for Guinevere. But that’s such a posh name that everyone calls me Jenny.”

“Very well Jenny, two horns of your finest Elfmeäde,” said Sam.

Jenny Wiggins looked at him blankly.

Sam clapped his hand against his forehead. “Silly me. You won’t have Elfmeäde for another 800 years or so. I know that it’s a long time to wait, but it will be worth it. What else have you got?”

“Oh, we have all the things,” she said. “Ale, grog, mead, lager ...”

“Perfect,” said Sam. “We will have one of each.” Iggy and Yugo joined them at the rim of the big circular table. They both ordered a plain water.

The knight at the other side of the table walked around and joined them. “Hale ye fellows and well met,” he said. The elves and Jinks just nodded. He extended a chain mailed hand. Iggy gripped it carefully.

The knight grinned and shook Iggy’s hand heartily. “We seldom see elves hereabout. Welcome to my place. It’s been in the family forever. I’m Arthur. Arthur Wiggins.”

“I am Iggy. These are my friends. Yugo, Sam and Jinks.”

Arthur whispered to Iggy. “Is your friend all right? He looks a little green.”

“He is not from around here,” said Iggy.

“He’s from Mars,” said Sam. Arthur nodded knowingly.

“Always good to have travellers from foreign lands here in Beddus Shire,” said Arthur. He held out his arms. “Think of me as the man in charge. Of this inn and this town and all the surrounding forest. I run the whole lot. This is my kingdom.”

The serving girl returned and laid an array of foaming goblets in front of Sam and Jinks.

“Drink up men!” said Arthur and raised a mug of his own. He slammed the empty mug on the table and called for another. “This is the good stuff. It came from a monastery. You know what they say about monks.”

“I do not know,” said Iggy. “What do they say?”

Arthur Wiggins looked at his empty goblet and said, “they make the best wine. Very holy, monks. And very clean feet. For crushing the grapes.” He raised his glass in a toast. Sam raised his glass as well. Bogglin Jinks raised four glasses.

After another round had come around, Arthur Wiggins put his arm around Iggy. “Would you lads be interested in helping me out with a sort of a quest?”

“What sort of a sort of a quest?” asked Yugo.

Arthur glanced over at the other knight sitting across from them. “I’ve lost my sword and I need to find it.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said Sam. He drained one of the goblets in front of him and reached for another. “Finding swords is what we do best. And saving Christmas. Finding swords and saving Christmas. That’s us.”

“I knew I’d found the right men,” said Arthur.

“What kind of a sword are we looking for?” asked Iggy.

“Oh, it is a fine sword. The finest sword that has ever been smithed. The sharpest sword in all of England, they say. Sir Terwilliger over there,” Arthur motioned to the knight opposite, “Merlyn Terwilliger. He’s my best pal. He says it’s a magic sword. But that’s Merlyn Terwilliger all over. Always banging on about magic, like he is some sort of a wizard.”

“Is he?” asked Yugo.

“He knows a lot of card tricks, our Merlyn,” said Arthur. “Thinks he can see the future.”

“Where should we start?” asked Iggy.

“That’s easy,” said Arthur. “There’s this lake just outside of town. More of a slough than a lake, really. That’s where you will find it.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Yugo.

“Because last night I was out with my mate Galahad. Herbert Galahad. He runs the kingdom just up the road. And we had had a few and we were standing on the beach and I bet him twenty gold solidus⁸⁸ that I could throw my sword further out into the lake than he could.”

“Why would you make such a wager?” asked Yugo. “It seems a certain way to lose a sword.”

Arthur glared at him. “As I was saying, we had had a few and Herb said it’s a bet and I gave it the mightiest of heaves and it fairly flew above the water until it landed with barely a splash and then sank. And then that jerk Galahad fell down

⁸⁸ The solidus was a golden coin used in the late Roman Empire and was still in use as currency in Britain until it was replaced with the pound/shilling/penny system by Pepin the Short in 755 AD. By that time, the pronunciation of the word ‘solidus’ had evolved to sound like ‘shilling’.

on the ground and rolled around laughing and he said 'you win,' and he paid me my twenty solids and staggered back to his crummy little kingdom laughing the whole way."

"It occurs to me," said Yugo, "that this was a foolish wager."

"Just don't tell Merlyn. He'll kill me if he finds out I've lost the sword again," said Arthur.

"Again?" asked Sam.

Arthur blushed. "Last Christmas my pal Bedevere bet me 50 golden solids that my sword was not sharp enough to cut through stone. So, I got Burly, the burly blacksmith's boy to hammer it into this big stone in front of the church. Sure enough, Burly pounded it two feet deep into the stone. Then Bedevere paid me my fifty solids and then he paid Burly another fifty and they both laughed their way back to Bedevere's place on the other side of the moors. It took me a month to pull my sword out of that stone. Merlyn was furious."

"You seem to be a little reckless with this fancy sword of yours," said Sam.

Arthur shook his head. "That is entirely beside the point. The point is, that it is a fine sword and when I saw you roll up in that shiny red contraption of yours, I said to myself, these look like the sort of elves who can fish a sword out of a lake without anyone being any the wiser, if you know what I mean and I think you do." Arthur gave an exaggerated wink.

"What's in it for us?" asked Sam.

"You want to bargain when you have been given a king's quest?" said Arthur. He attempted to show a little umbrage.

"We do indeed," interjected Bogglin Jinks. "This sword of yours is plainly worth much more than the twenty solids you wagered upon it. We will require one thousand solids for its safe return."

Iggy jabbed Bogglin Jinks in the region where he thought there might be ribs. Bogglin Jinks gave a reassuring 'oof' before Iggy whispered, "what are you doing?"

"One thousand solids it is," said Arthur. "And a knighthood for each of you. I would knight you now, but I need a sword for that and, well, here we are."

"All right," said Sam. "You have yourself a deal. You get your sword, we get a thousand solids, we all get knighted and you get the next round." He waved for Jenny Wiggins to come back. Bogglin Jinks held up twenty-four fingers.

The Bogglin of the Lake

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, THE ELVES WERE OUT IN THE SNOWMOBILE, adrift on the surface of the slough that Arthur called a lake while Yugo worked the sonar and looked for a particularly sharp sword, perhaps magical, that lay in the waters beneath them.

Iggy was dressed in a chain mail shirt he had retrieved from his steamer trunk. He wore a white sleeveless tunic with a red cross over top of it.

“I can’t believe that you packed chain mail for this trip,” said Sam.

“Always pack for a quest, I say,” said Iggy.

“Ping.” The snowmobile pinged.

“Is that it?” asked Sam. “Have you found it?”

“Not yet,” said Yugo. “The sonar just pings all of the time.”

“What is the point of this sonar, then?” asked Bogglin Jinks. It spread out its four arms and furrowed its brow in concentration. A moment later it said, “it is there,” and pointed three different fingers.

“How can you be so sure?” asked Iggy.

“It is the simplest of maths,” said Bogglin Jinks. “Arthur is a man who weighs some 17 jibblings, and assuming this sword weighs no more than a jibbling, that he threw it at an angle of thirty degrees and adjusting for gravity, the sword must be just there.”

“You figured that out in your head?” asked Sam.

“That was but a trifle. A Bogglin brain is so much bigger and smarter than an Earthling brain,” said Jinks. “It is a wonder your kind can remember to wake up in the morning with your miniscule brains.”

“I don’t know if I can put up with another fifty years of this,” said Sam.

Yugo directed the sonar to the area Bogglin Jinks had identified. “He is right. There is something down there. Prepare to dive.”

The snowmobile dipped below the surface of the slough. The water was clouded with algae. “I cannot see a thing,” said Iggy.

“You do not need to,” said Yugo. “We have the sonar.” As he spoke, the pings of the sonar became even more sonorous.

“We are near,” said Bogglin Jinks. Yugo pressed a yellow knob on his control panel and a shining metal reticular arm extended out of the front of the snowmobile. It felt around the soft mud at the bottom of the slough until it rapped against something solid. Then it wrapped four mechanical fingers and two mechanical thumbs around the object.

“The design of your mechanical arm is both elegant and obvious,” said Bogglin Jinks. Yugo said nothing. He was concentrating on the joystick that he operated with his eight biological fingers and two biological thumbs.

“Eureka!”⁸⁹ said Yugo. The mechanical arm lifted the gleaming silver sword out of the muck at the bottom of the slough.

“Ka-ching,” said Sam.

“We need to get it to the surface,” said Iggy. Yugo adjusted the ballast tanks⁹⁰ of the snowmobile and it bobbed slowly upwards.

The gleaming silver mechanical arm, with the sword in its grip, broke through the surface of the water.

Arthur Wiggins stood on the shore, with Merlyn Terwilliger at his side. To his other side was his friend Herb Galahad and beside him stood Robby Lancelot, who had his own little kingdom to the east. “It is as I have prophesied,” said Merlyn Terwilliger. “A gleaming silver arm shall rise up from the lake to present you the sword of kings.”

Herb and Robby nodded and knelt on one knee. Arthur punched Merlyn in the arm with his mailed fist. “I knew those little guys had it in them!”

Merlyn rubbed his shoulder tenderly. “Try not to throw it away this time.”

The snowmobile ground its way up onto the beach, sword in mechanical hand. Arthur ran up to collect it. The mechanical hand held firm.

Sam stepped out of the back seat. He coughed. “Before we can deliver this fine sword, I believe there is the matter of a thousand solids and some knighthoods?”

“Quite right, quite right,” said Arthur Wiggins. “Merlyn, please pay the elf.”

⁸⁹ See footnote 74.

⁹⁰ A ballast tank is a compartment in a submersible vehicle that holds and releases water as required to allow the craft to rise or sink. The humble blowfish uses the same process. One of the earliest patents of the ballast tank was registered by one Abraham Lincoln, who was then a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois and who would later go on to greater things.

Merlyn Terwilliger dug into his coin purse with a sigh. It was clear he was going to have to invent the practice of accountancy⁹¹ to keep track of his debits and credits with Arthur. He was certain that the debits overwhelmed the credits by a good deal. Nonetheless, Merlyn passed over a bag of solids to Sam. He counted them out and then nodded.

The elves and Bogglin Jinks joined Sam on the beach. Arthur Wiggins tapped each in turn on the shoulder with his extremely sharp sword.

“Arise Ser Iggy. Arise Ser Yugo and Ser Sam” He tapped Bogglin Jinks on each of its four shoulders and then said, “arise, say what are you anyway?”

“My pronouns are E and Er,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“Very well,” said Arthur. “Arise Er Jinks.”

Arthur wrapped his arm around Bogglin Jinks and said, “now my new knights, join me at my round table. We shall celebrate the Yule this night!”

Christmas at the Round Table

ARTHUR’S LARGE ROUND TABLE WAS FILLED WITH KNIGHTS THAT EVENING. There was Ser Galahad and Lancelot, and also Ser Bedevere and his squire Burly, Ser Percival from the little kingdom to the north, Ser Bors, Ser Gawain, Ser Kay and of course, Sers Iggy, Yugo and Sam and Er Jinks. All told and retold the tale of how Arthur’s magnificent sword had risen from the depths of the lake.

“Borne out of the bottom of the lake by an arm it was.”

“A shining silver arm, they say.”

“Pure shimmering samite, surely.”⁹²

“’Twere a lady down there I reckon, if ’twere clad in shimmerin’ samite.”

⁹¹ There have been various systems for counting money for as long as there has been money. The modern bookkeeping system of double entry accounting was not popularized until Benedetto Cotrugli published his seminal work, *Della Mercatura e del Mercante Perfetto (Of Commerce and the Perfect Merchant)* in 1458. This was far too late to assist Merlyn Terwilliger in tracking his accounts with Arthur Wiggins.

⁹² Samite is a luxurious heavy silk fabric worn in the middle ages and often woven with gold or silver thread

“A blessed lady in the lake gave Arthur that sword.”

“He must be a right proper king then.”

Arthur stood and raised his gleaming sword. His guests stopped their chattering. “Welcome one and welcome all!” said Arthur. “And now, let us celebrate the Yule!”

Arthur bowed his head. All of the other knights did as well. They softly muttered.

“What is going on?” asked Iggy.

“They are saying Grace before the celebration,” said Yugo.

Iggy nodded. The prayers continued in this manner for several minutes. Then Arthur took his seat. He turned to his right. “Ser Galahad, have you anything to say on this Yule?”

“I do indeed,” said Galahad. “He stood and gave a lengthy invocation entirely in Latin. He was followed in turn by Sers Gawain and Percival, each of whom offered progressively lengthier sermons, also in Latin.

Sam’s stomach growled loudly. “When is the food coming?” he whispered loudly to Iggy.

Arthur clapped Sam on the back with a chain mailed hand and said, “the Yule is a pious celebration, Ser Sam. We honour our Lord with prayers and a fast.”

“Oh good,” said Sam. At least there is a feast after all the praying,” said Sam.

Arthur laughed. “I fear you have misheard me, Ser Sam. There will be a fast.”

“You said feast,” said Sam.

“I said fast,” said Arthur.

“Feast,” said Sam

“Fast,” said Arthur.

“A feast.”

“A fast.”

“Feast.”

“Fast.”

“Well, where I come from,” said Sam. “In the North. We have a grand feast to celebrate the Yule.”

“A feast you say?” said Arthur.

“I say,” said Sam.

Arthur rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “There is something to be said for this northern custom of yours. And I do enjoy a good feast.”

Arthur clapped his armoured hands together and shouted to the room, “as a tribute to our northern guests, on this Yule we shall honour our Lord with a feast!”

The assembled knights looked around the room in confusion and then burst into applause.

“I dare say, Ser Sam, your northern custom has carried the day. It shall be a feast in this kingdom from now on!”

“Will there still be all of the prayers?” asked Ser Lancelot.

Arthur looked around at the long-faced knights. He held his finger and his thumb closely together. Just a little one. Before the feast.”

The knights gave another thunderous round of applause and then the feast began. And what a feast it was, with roasted swan stuffed with apples and onions, a boar’s head on a platter and the rest of the boar on a much bigger platter. There was venison and goose and fresh rabbit, great bowls of fruit and sweetmeats and then plum pudding, mincemeat pie and bean cake⁹³ For dessert. And monk’s wine. A great deal of it.

The knights made rather merry that evening. Bogglin Jinks had just plucked a bean from a slice of cake when a shadow filled the doorway. The knights paused their merriment as the shadow stepped into the room.

It was an enormous knight, dressed entirely in black plate. He wore a dark red tunic with a great stag on the front, its antlers engulfed in flames. He stood nearly seven feet tall from his toes to the top of his helm and had to turn sideways to walk through the door. The spaulders⁹⁴ on either side of his armour were nearly six feet apart. His arms were as thick as oak branches and his legs were like stone columns. The black armour about his thighs scraped and clanked as we walked boldly into the room.

He pulled his helmet from his head to reveal a wide scarred face crowned with a heap of tangled red hair, as fiery as the flames of Hell itself.

⁹³ A bean cake or king cake was a customary Christmastime desert in medieval times. It was baked with a bean inside, and the lucky diner who found the bean on his plate was declared the king for the night.

⁹⁴ A spaulder is the piece of curved armour that covers and protects a knight’s shoulders.

“Arthur Wiggins,” the black knight said, his voice a rumble of thunder. “The heralds tell me that you claim the title of king.” He pulled one of the dark metal gauntlets from his hand and flung it onto the middle of the table.

Arthur picked up the gauntlet. “Mordred. I knew you would turn up sooner or later.”

“I challenge thee, Arthur,” said Mordred. He stabbed his long finger into Arthur’s chest. “If king you be, you will meet me on the jousting field tomorrow. Then we will see who is truly worthy.” He snapped his armoured heels together, turned sharply and strode out of the room.

“I’ll be there,” shouted Arthur. He threw the black gauntlet at Mordred’s departing bulk. It bounced off the side of his head. Mordred did not flinch. He just bent down and gathered up his glove without breaking his stride.

Arthur returned to his seat. “Pass the mashed yams, Bedevere,” he said. “Tomorrow we joust, but tonight we celebrate the Yule!”

And celebrate they did.

As the first light of dawn flickered in the east, Ser Sam was the last knight left at the table working his way through the final slice of bean cake. Jenny Wiggins walked up to him with a long scroll in her hand.

“What is that,” asked Sam.

“May I present the bill,” she said. The scroll unfurled across the table, each victual of the feast carefully itemised. It was a ponderous tab.

Sam winced. “How much?”

“Including tip, it comes up to one thousand solids.”

Sam set his leather pouch of golden solids on the table. “Oh well. Easy come easy go. I can never seem to hold on to gold for very long anymore,” said Sam.

His Name is More Dread

“OOK AT THAT SUNRISE,” SAID IGGY.

“Can you keep it down?” asked Sam. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

The morning after the Yule celebration dawned bright and cool. Iggy and Sam were in a familiar room on the second floor of the *Mouse and Pickle*. Sam had only just tucked into bed after the previous night's revelry.

The door opened with a squeak. Yugo and Bogglin Jinks stepped in.

"Where have you two been?" asked Iggy.

"Yugo explained to me the rules of this jousting," said Bogglin Jinks. "It is plain as the grink on a ponding's nose that Arthur stands no chance of prevailing against this Mordred."

"Can you believe that guy?" said Sam. "His parents named him Mordred. Sounds just like More Dread. He never had a chance with a name like that. He was never going to be one of the good guys".

"Clearly not," said Yugo. "So, Jinks and I went down to the jousting field to have a look around. See if there was anything we could do to help."

Iggy smiled. "What have you done?"

"With our manipulations," said Bogglin Jinks, "we have improved Arthur's chances of victory exponentially. By my calculations, he now has an eleven percent chance of survival and a three percent chance of walking come the morrow."

"I thought you improved things exponentially," said Sam.

"That is a great improvement," said Bogglin Jinks. "Previously his chance of certain death was, well, certain."

"Three percent is pretty good then," said Iggy.

They went down for breakfast and found Arthur Wiggins seated with his face down on the surface of his round table.

"Looks like somebody had a little too much monk's wine last night," said Sam.

"This man is in no condition to joust," said Iggy.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," said Arthur. He did not raise his head and a thin stream of drool flowed onto the table.

"I may need to revise my calculations," said Bogglin Jinks.

Just then, Jenny Wiggins came into the room. She had a large platter in her hand. She lifted up a small wriggling object with a fork and dangled it over his head.

"Open up Arthur. You lads, help me get his mouth open."

Boggin Jinks twisted Arthur's head around with two hands and then with the other two, pried open his mouth. Jenny dropped two of the wiggling things down Arthur's throat. He swallowed them with a loud gulp.

"What was that?" asked Iggy.

"Raw eels," said Jenny. "That should fix him up right proper."⁹⁵

Arthur lay limp as a raw eel for another minute or two and then sat straight up. "Let's joust!"

Arthur led the elves and Boggin Jinks out the door and down the cobblestone street to the jousting field. They were joined along the way by other knights; Ser Bedevere and Galahad. Ser Lancelot and Gawain. Ser Kay. Arthur and all of his knights entered the jousting field and walked to one end, where Merlyn Terwilliger stood beside an old gray horse with knock knees.

"Well met, Merlyn," said Arthur. "I see you have Old Hobbs saddled up and ready for the big day."

"This is your horse?" said Sam.

"I am once again revising my calculations," said Boggin Jinks. "Downward."

"This is Old Hobbs, I've had him since I was just a little wart," said Arthur.

"Have you thought of trying a younger model?" asked Iggy hopefully.

"I could never do that to Old Hobbs," said Arthur. "Besides, Old Hobbs is the only horse I've got."

While Arthur pulled on his armour, another knight appeared at the far end of the jousting field. He was dressed all in black, with a flaming red plume at the top of his helmet. He rode an enormous black charger, over twenty hands⁹⁶ tall, with a fiery red mane. Mordred's shield was black with the head of a stag in the center, its horns ablaze with red fire.

"Recalculating," said Boggin Jinks.

Arthur pulled himself up onto Old Hobbs. He wore shining silver armour, with dull patches on the breastplate. His shield was indigo, with a yellow diagonal stripe going from the lower left to upper right corner. A golden crown was at the

⁹⁵ A serving of raw eels was a common hangover cure in the dark ages.

⁹⁶ A 'hand' is the standard unit for measuring the height of horses. It is a length of four inches and is based on the width of a human (not Boggin) hand. The biggest horse that ever lived was Sampson, of Toddingham Mills, who stood 21 hands 2 inches tall.

top, and beneath that a brown mouse rampant beside a curved green pickle. He wore an apron around his waist.

“What is that?” asked Yugo, pointing at the apron.

“That’s from Jenny,” said Arthur. “A true knight always wears his lady’s favour into a joust.”

“Recalculating further,” said Bogglin Jinks.

Arthur gave Old Hobbs a gentle pat on the withers and it marched slowly out onto the jousting field. Mordred spurred his mighty steed which raced to the middle of the field at a full gallop.

The two knights met in the middle and tapped their lances together.

“Now we see which of us is worthy,” said Mordred.

“Are you sure you don’t want to play a game of dice instead?” asked Arthur.

“We joust!” shouted Mordred.

“Bazingo?” asked Arthur.

“Prepare to die!” Mordred turned and charged down to the far end of the field.

Arthur slowly led Old Hobbs back to his end. He struggled to get his lance into position and then nodded. Merlyn blew a single note on an old cornu and the joust was on.

Mordred lowered his lance as his stallion leapt forward, his hooves chewing up the soft ground with each mighty stride. Arthur nudged Old Hobbs on, and the old grey horse trotted down the course. Mordred leaned forward; his lance aimed directly at Arthur’s helmet.

Arthur ducked as Mordred rode past, his lance passing scarcely an inch above Arthur’s head.


Mordred reached the end of the rail and turned. “Coward! Joust like a man or yield!”

“We have to stop this,” said Iggy.

“I have a plan,” said Yugo. He pulled a small black remote control from his pocket as the two knights started another run at each other.

Mordred bore down on Arthur, his lance pointed at Arthur’s belly. There was no chance that he could duck from this attack.

Yugo pressed a button on the remote control.

The two knights collided with a percussive . Mordred flipped off his mighty black steed and spun in the air and landed on his face in the dirt with a great thud. Arthur rode slowly past, looking at his lance in surprise and wonder.

“What did you do?” asked Iggy.

“Arthur looked like he needed a little help to even up the odds,” said Yugo. “Jinks and I installed the ultrasonic cannon into his lance,” said Yugo. “I gave it a small burst when Mordred got close. The sonic shock wave took care of the rest.”

Arthur came around, dismounted and helped the shaken Mordred to his feet. Mordred pulled away. “A truce for the Yule it shall be. You’ve won this day, but you have not seen the last of me, Arthur king. I’ll be back and it will be different next time, you’ll see. You’ll all see.”

Then Mordred hung his head and led his big black charger off the field.

The knights all shouted “Huzzah!” Sam cheered the loudest of all. He had made his thousand solids back betting with Galahad and Bedevere.

Mordred turned at the gate and shouted, “You will all see! It will be different next time!”

“Huzzah!” the knights gave another cheer as Mordred disappeared out of the gate.

Arthur bent over and picked up the broken pieces of Mordred’s lance and shield. “We should burn all this stuff,” he said. “In fact we should have a great fire this very evening in the center of town. A fire big enough to light up this winter’s night. Mayhaps we can make it an annual custom, like Ser Sam’s northern feast!”

“Huzzah!” cheered the other knights.

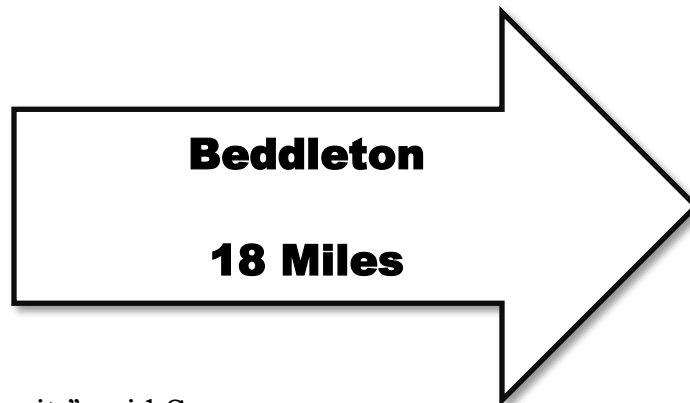
Thus, was borne the legend of King Arthur Wiggins, of the *Mouse and Pickle*, or as the old Anglo-Saxon historians who first wrote it down in their own tongue called it, *Cam en Ludd*. He ruled all the lands surrounding *Beddlus Shire* with justice and wisdom for the rest of his days. Mordred still came around from time to time, usually at the Yule, to lay down a challenge or, more commonly, to lay down a holly berry pie for the Yule feast.

And it was always said of Arthur Wiggins, that he knew how to keep the Yule well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. Each year he gathered all of his knights to his round table for a fine feast in the northern style, as he put it, followed by a great fire in the town square, big and bright enough to light up a winter's night.

December 22, 1815

VWUMPH. THAT IS THE SOUND THE SNOWMOBILE MAKES when it comes out of the time vortex. Vwumph. It sounds exactly as it is spelled. Vwumph. Rhymes with 'triumph.' And 'Humph.' Which is about all it rhymes with.

Vwumph. The snowmobile had arrived. But where Yugo hoped. It had arrived at the side of a weed ridden brick road. There was a road sign outside the window that said:



"I don't believe it," said Sam.

"We have arrived in 1815," said Yugo.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," said Sam. "My guess is that today is December 22nd, 1815."

"That would be an accurate guess," said Yugo.

"This is the same place we just left," said Bogglin Jinks. "That was a dump. And it was damp. And it smelled funny."

"Jinks is right," said Sam. "We can't stay here. Let's go."

"The time-interface needs a couple of hours to recharge," said Yugo.

“What are we going to do?” asked Iggy.

“If we have to stick it out for a while, I know a place where we can wait it out,” said Sam. He pointed out the front window. “To the *Moose and Pickle*.”

Yugo nodded and tapped his dashboard screen. The snowmobile knew the way by this time. He put his arms behind his head as the autopilot directed them to the front of *Moose and Pickle*. Sam was already in his usual spot by the time Yugo finished parking the snowmobile. He was tapping his fingers on the table when Iggy, Yugo and Boggin Jinks joined him.

“Where is your elfmeäde, Sam?” asked Iggy.

“You have been here five minutes already,” said Yugo.

“Tell me about it,” said Sam. “This current Mrs. Wiggins is terribly slow.”

There was a soft cough. A small man, with round spectacles and a thin moustache stood at Sam’s elbow, notepad in hand. “I have been standing here, notepad in hand, for five minutes,” he said.

“You’re not Mrs. Wiggins,” said Sam.

“There is no Mrs. Wiggins,” said the little man. “I am Mr. Wiggins. Mr. Alistair Wiggins, at your service.”

“No Mrs. Wiggins?” asked Sam.

“There used to be a Mrs. Wiggins,” said Alistair Wiggins. “My brother Herbert’s wife. We used to run this place together, me and Herb. His Mrs. Wiggins waited on the tables. She was very good. Everyone loved her. But there was a schism.”

“A schism?” asked Iggy.

“A schism,” said Alistair Wiggins.

“What sort of a schism?” asked Yugo.

“Herb was drinking up all of the inventory. I had to run him off,” said Alistair. “He moved the family up to the big city. London. Then he drowned in a beer flood.”

“That is awful,” said Iggy.

Alistair Wiggins shrugged. “It’s how he would have wanted to go. I heard the rest of the family moved to America.”

Iggy and Yugo exchanged a look.

“So, there is no Mrs. Wiggins in this establishment,” said Mr. Wiggins.

“Three elfmeädes,” said Sam.

“Very well,” said Alistair Wiggins. “Anything else?”

“You might ask these other guys what they want,” said Sam.

Alistair Wiggins raised an eyebrow and then he raised his notepad. “What will, it be then, gents. We don’t get many elves around here. I am afraid I am unfamiliar with your, urm, appetites.”

Iggy and Yugo ordered their usual unsweetened waters. Bogglin Jinks pointed to a novelty drink on the menu, the ‘Gin Austen’⁹⁷ “I will have one of those. Make it a double.” Alistair nodded and dashed off into the kitchen.

“He seems nice,” said Iggy.

“I don’t know,” said Sam. “It’s hard to trust a man with a moustache.”

Yugo gave him a hard glare, but before he could say anything, Mr. Wiggins returned with a tray of drinks in his hand. He set three foaming pints of elfmeäde before Sam, two waters in front of each of Iggy and Yugo and a gin Austen by Bogglin Jinks. The gin Austen was a slushy pale purple mixture served in a hurricane glass⁹⁸ with slices of fruit around the rim, a cherry in the middle and a little paper parasol floating on the top speared through two bright orange cumquats.

Bogglin Jinks looked down at the gin Austen in wonder. “This looks marvellous.”

“Drink up,” said Mr. Wiggins.

“Such a concoction is meant to be savoured,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“Cheers,” said Sam. He raised one of his elfmeädes.

Bogglin Jinks tipped the gin Austen in Sam’s direction before taking a sip.

“You really do have to drink up,” said Mr. Wiggins.

“What’s the hurry, Al?” asked Sam.

⁹⁷ Jane Austen was a popular novelist in the early 1800’s. Her celebrated novel, *Emma*, was published on December 23, 1815. The gin Austen is a drink made with mostly gin and a little lavender. After a couple of gin Austens, even the sturdiest elf would lose most of his sense and sensibility.

⁹⁸ A hurricane glass is a glass that looks like this: →



Alistair Wiggins shuffled his feet and looked down at the floor. “I have sent a boy to fetch the constables,” he said. “On account of your deranged friend, here.”

“Sam is not so bad,” said Iggy.

“Once you get to know him,” said Yugo.

“Not your elf friend,” said Mr. Wiggins. “Your other friend. The green one.”

“Jinks?” said Sam. “Jinks is not so bad. Once you get to know it.”

“Your Jinks is clearly a lunatic,” said Mr. Wiggins. “Just look at it. Green skin. Four arms. Only a lunatic would think it had four arms.”⁹⁹

“But Jinks does have four arms,” said Iggy.

“You can count them for yourself,” said Yugo.

“You are only fostering its delusions,” said Mr. Wiggins. “Nobody has four arms. And what sort of a name is Jinks anyway? With a name like that it was bound to end up mad or criminally evil. No. There is only one place for a lunatic and that is a lunatic asylum. So, drink up, the lot of you. The constables will be here soon.”

Alistair Wiggins’ prediction of the timing of the constables’ arrival was a grotesque understatement, for the moment he uttered those words there came a knock at the door and then the moment after that the door itself was kicked down by a large and stiff brown hobnailed boot.

The constables had arrived.

Two husky men with thick brown moustaches and dressed in navy blue jackets with matching custodian helmets¹⁰⁰ strode into the room. The first man pulled out his notepad and said, “Constable Amos Terwilliger at your service. This is my partner, Constable Amos Hobbs. We have received a report that there is a lunatic on the premises?”

⁹⁹ A great many things were considered lunacy in the 19th century. Among the reasons given for admission to the asylum in the early 1800’s were ‘novel reading,’ ‘mental excitement,’ ‘laziness,’ and ‘female disease.’



¹⁰⁰ A custodian helmet is a hat that looks like this: →

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Constable Terwilliger,” said Mr. Wiggins. “The lunatic is right this way.” He led the two constables to the table where Iggy, Yugo, Sam and Bogglin Jinks were seated.

“Which one is the lunatic then?” asked Constable Hobbs.

“That one there.” Mr. Wiggins pointed at Bogglin Jinks. “The green one. The one with all the arms.” Bogglin Jinks took a long noisy slurp of the gin Austen.

“He certainly looks mad,” said Constable Terwilliger.

“You were right to summon us,” said Constable Hobbs,

“We’ll take it from here,” said Constable Terwilliger. He grabbed Bogglin Jinks by the collar. “Right then. You’re coming with us.”

“I most certainly am not,” said Bogglin Jinks, pulling away from Constable Terwilliger’s grip.

“There, there,” said Constable Hobbs. “Be a good little lunatic and come along nicely.”

“I will do nothing of the kind,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“That’s right,” said Sam. He rolled up his sleeves. “If you want Jinks, you’ll have to go through us.”

Constable Terwilliger shrugged. He pulled out a two-foot long truncheon made of solid hickory. “Suits me fine.” He swung the truncheon as he approached the table.

Neither Constable Terwilliger nor Hobbs had ever been in a fight with a Bogglin before, and they soon learned that an opponent with four fists has a distinct advantage. Bogglin Jinks ducked under the truncheon and then delivered a right uppercut, followed by a right hook, a left jab and a left hook. Constable Terwilliger took a step back. Constable Hobbs stepped forward and was met with a flurry of left and right punches that brought him to his knees.

He turned to Constable Terwilliger and, fighting for air, said, “I think we are going to need some reinforcements.

Constable Terwilliger nodded and pulled out his regulation police whistle. He gave three short blasts and a moment later six more moustachioed constables charged into the room, clubs raised.

Even with four fists, Bogglin Jinks was no match for six club wielding constables. Three of them held Iggy, Yugo and Sam at bay while the other three lit into the poor Bogglin with vigorous and excessive force. Two more constables arrived and struggled to put the battered Bogglin into a straight jacket. In the end, they needed two straightjackets to wrap up all of Bogglin Jinks’ arms.

Then they lifted Bogglin Jinks up onto their shoulders and carried it out of the *Moose and Pickle*. A crowd of people had gathered, holding torches and pitchforks. Bogglin Jinks was loaded into the back of a blue wagon hitched to a team of two heavy horses.

Iggy struggled to get past the constables guarding the door. “Where are they taking Bogglin Jinks?”

“Where all of the lunatics go,” said Mr. Wiggins.

“Your friend is off to Bedlam,” said Constable Terwilliger. His right eye sported a blooming purple bruise.


“And good riddance,” said Constable Hobbs, who tenderly touched a matching shiner of his own.

“Bedlam?” said Iggy.

“Where’s Bedlam?” asked Yugo.

“What’s Bedlam?” asked Sam.

The Bethlehem Job

 The St. Mary Bethlehem Royal Hospital had recently moved into a new four-story building on Lambeth Road, south of the Thames River in central London. The word ‘bedlam,’ which means a ‘scene of mad confusion,’ derives from the local pronunciation of Bethlehem, and the hospital was widely referred as ‘Bedlam.’

It took the rest of that night and most of the next day for the little horse drawn cart to reach the front gate. Once it stopped, Bogglin Jinks, double wrapped in straightjackets, was pulled outside and roughly dragged through the front door.

The place was packed with dirty men and women, clothed in rags with shaved bald. Many of them shuffled about aimlessly, others shouted and banged their fists on the walls. It was a scene of mad confusion, or, in a word, bedlam.

The constables marched Bogglin Jinks through the maddening crowd and into a small room with a wooden platform for a bed and a wooden bowl for other personal needs. They tossed Bogglin Jinks onto the bed and slammed the heavy door shut behind them. The little green alien sat up and then shook itself free of the straightjackets. “Simplicity itself,” thought Bogglin Jinks. Now it just had to figure out the rest of its escape.

The heavy door opened. A large, heavy set matron in a nurse's uniform looked in. "Oh good," I see they have removed your shackles. "It is time for your bath."

"I do not need a bath, madam," said Bogglin Jinks. "A Bogglin is always immaculately clean."

"It will help you come to your senses," said the matron. She pulled Bogglin Jinks down the chaotic corridor until they reached a small room with a large metal tub inside. Small chunks of ice floated on the surface. The matron lifted up Bogglin Jinks and dropped it into the tub.¹⁰¹

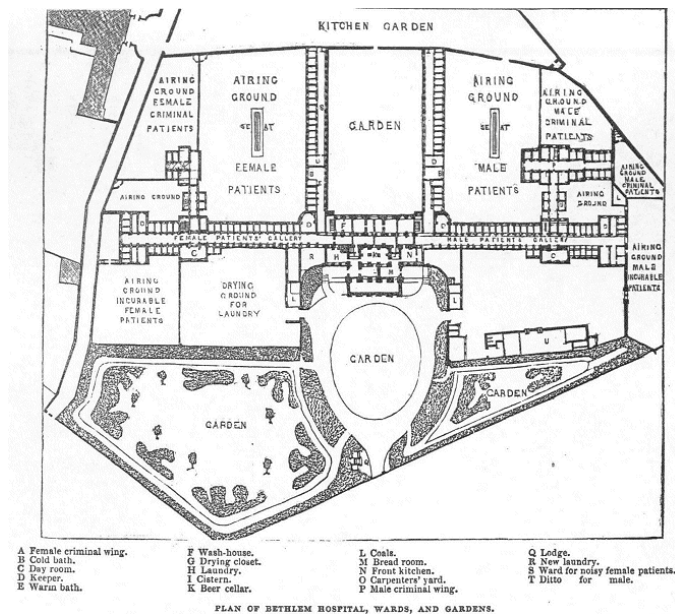
Bogglin Jinks screamed, and all thoughts of escape were dashed from its mind by the freezing cold water.

Fifty miles away, in Beddleton, Yugo unrolled a large blueprint on the front of the snowmobile. "This is a plan of the St Mary Bethlehem Royal Hospital in London. This is where they are keeping Bogglin Jinks."

"Wow," said Sam. You have a plan."

"I always have a plan," said Yugo.

"Yes, but this time you literally have a plan."



¹⁰¹ The *bain de surprise* or 'bath of surprise' was a treatment once used for the mentally ill in which the patient was dropped into a bath of cold water without warning. The sudden shock of the cold water was thought to be a good treatment for patients suffering from manic-depressive psychoses, and indeed, it was effective to slow blood flow to the brain and decrease mental and physical activity. These are also signs of hypothermia. Many professional athletes still use cold water baths to treat muscle soreness and fatigue.

Yugo shook his head and turned to his blueprint. "As you can see, the women are housed on the left side, and the men on the right."

"Where do you suppose they are keeping Bogglin Jinks?" asked Iggy.

"Hard to say," said Yugo. "But there are areas on either side for what are called 'incurable patients.' I will bet that Jinks is in one of those."

"What is an incurable patient?" asked Iggy.

"I do not know," said Yugo. "But I do not think there is a cure for being a Bogglin."

"Do we really need to rescue Jinks?" asked Sam. "Jinks can be pretty insufferable, you know."

"We know," said Iggy.

"But we cannot leave Jinks in a 19th century insane asylum," said Yugo.

"Not even for a little while?" said Sam.

"Not even for a little while," said Iggy.

"We will start here," said Yugo. He pointed to the far-left area of the plan, where the incurable patients were housed. "If we do not find Jinks, we will move down the patient gallery and check each room."

"What about the guards?" said Sam. "There must be guards."

"We will go in at night," said Yugo. "There will just be a skeleton staff then. If we run into any guards, we will just take them out."

"Take them out?" asked Iggy.

"With this," said Yugo. He held up a two-foot-long hickory club. "I picked this up after all of the excitement last night."

Iggy shuddered.

"I'll hang on to that," said Sam, and pulled the truncheon from Yugo's hand.

Yugo rolled up his blueprint. "We will leave at midnight."

"Great," said Sam. "That leaves plenty of time for a pint and a bowl of frumenty."

Iggy, Yugo and Sam departed Beddleton at precisely midnight. The trip to London was much quicker in the snowmobile than a horse drawn police wagon.

They had reached the edge of the city, which was dimly lit with gas lamps on every street. Yet, the winter sky above them was filled with stars. Iggy pointed out the front window. “Look at that!”

A single star above the centre of the city glowed bigger and brighter than all the rest.¹⁰² It shone high above like a second moon and seemed to lead them straight to the St. Mary Bethlehem Royal Hospital.

“Will you look at that,” said Sam. “Three smart fellows like us on the road to Bethlehem with a big, beautiful star to show us the way. And on Christmas Eve no less. I bet nothing like that has ever happened before.”

“Maybe once before,” said Iggy softly.

Yugo pulled up beside an ornate metal fence. The road in front of the gate was lit as bright as day by the gleaming star above. Sam gripped his billy club and said, “let’s go get Jinks.”

Yugo powered down the snowmobile. “Yes, let us go.” The three elves walked up to the gate. It was unlocked and swung inward when Iggy pushed on it. Yugo led them through an oval park in front of the gloomy gothic building. It was surrounded by trees that cast long shadows across their path.

“Who would have thought that an insane asylum could be so creepy?” said Iggy.

Yugo raised his hand, and the others came to a stop. They heard a rustling in the bushes to the left of them. “There is someone up ahead.”

The elves walked slowly towards the noise. Sam raised his truncheon.

“Do you hear a rattling sound?” asked Iggy.

“Yes,” said Yugo. “Something is shaking in there.”

“If a squirrel jumps out of there, I might lose it,” said Sam. “I’m afraid of squirrels.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² There were a few astronomical phenomena that occurred in 1815. A comet with the enchanting name 13P/Olbers appeared in March (and will return in June 2024). In October, the Cassigny meteorite fell in France. On December 4, the planets of Venus and Jupiter were in conjunction. Any of these events would have produced the effect of a bright star in the night sky, particularly in areas which were only dimly lit at night. None of these explain the bright star that Iggy, Yugo and Sam observed in the early morning hours of December 24, 1815. Bright stars have been known to appear above Bethlehem from time to time, however.

¹⁰³ The fear of squirrels is known as sciurophobia.

“There,” said Iggy. He pointed into the woods at the edge of the park. “Right there.”

Sam stepped up and swung the truncheon as hard as he could. There was a



tremendous and a shivering blue figure tumbled out of the brush.

“Bogglin Jinks? Is that you?” asked Iggy.

The Bogglin lifted itself up and gently touched its scalp, where a deep purple bruise was swelling.

“Yes, it is I, Bogglin Jinks. Did you not recognize me?”

“Oh, I recognized you,” said Sam. “I just couldn’t help myself.”

“How did you get out here?” asked Iggy.

Bogglin Jink sneered. “Your Earthly prisons cannot hold Bogglin Jinks for long. I solve quadratic equations with my brainstem. I easily escaped my fetters and eluded the guards and matrons. I determined to wait for you here, certain as I was that you would come to the rescue of Bogglin Jinks. Though it took much longer than I expected.”

“Why are you blue?” asked Yugo.

“There is a reason this place is called a lunatic asylum and that is because it is run by lunatics,” said Bogglin Jinks. “Every time I got ready to make my move, I was seized by some muscular orderly and, surprise, I was flung into an ice-cold bath. I had a dozen such baths while I awaited your arrival. Rather than endure yet another freezing drenching, I decided I would wait for you out here in the safety of this garden. I did not expect to be assaulted upon your eventual arrival.”

“We came as fast as we could,” said Iggy.

“I rather expect you could have come three or even four surprise ice baths sooner,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“Let us get you warmed up,” said Yugo. “There is hot cocoa in the snowmobile and the seats have their own internal heaters.”

“That would be most commodious of you,” said Bogglin Jinks.

And so, it was that a little before dawn, the snowmobile flew out over the city and then disappeared into the time vortex with a flash of light. The bewildered Londoners who were awake at such an early hour saw what appeared to be two bright stars over Bethlehem.

And that was something that had never happened before.

December 22, 151,403,272 BCE

BEHOLD THE MIGHTY APATOSAURUS. She is the largest creature on the planet. Nothing in the history of the world can compare with her silent majesty. She weighs over thirty tons and stamps her own path through the Jurassic marsh, feasting on the long grasses of the swamp.

“Was that an apatosaurus?” asked Iggy.

“I believe so,” said Yugo as he guided the snowmobile between her thick legs. The apatosaurus paid it no mind and returned to her lunch. A flock of archaeopteryges¹⁰⁴ flew overhead.

“It had feathers on it,” said Iggy.

“A lot of dinosaurs had feathers,” said Yugo. The snowmobile dropped down to avoid colliding with a pair of gigantic dragonflies that would have made a mess of its windshield otherwise. It hovered a few inches above the mossy ground.

“Please,” snorted Sam. “Are you telling me that the mighty apatosaurus was really just a gigantic chicken?”

“Yes, that is the prevailing wisdom. We should take some photographs,” said Yugo. He tapped on the keyboard on the control console and the front of the snowmobile began flashing.

“Can you imagine the feast,” said Sam, wiping the drool from his chin. “Apatosaurus with apple and onion stuffing. Think of the drumsticks. A feast big enough for a hundred Christmases. I bet the dark meat is delicious, especially with cranberry sauce.”

“We are surely in the wrong time, this time,” said Iggy.

“We surely are,” said Sam. He turned to Boggin Jinks. “You said that you could reprogram the time interface. You said that you had a giant brain. You said it would be exceedingly simple.”

¹⁰⁴ Archaeopteryges is the plural form of archaeopteryx.

“The coding of the software of your time travel device is very primitive,” said Bogglin Jinks. “It is like the droolings of infants. I am not used to working with such juvenile programming.”

“We must leave at once,” said Yugo.

“What’s your hurry, we just got here,” said Sam. “I would like to see the dinosaurs.” Just then, a small herd¹⁰⁵ of feathered *compsognathuss*¹⁰⁶ skittered past, followed by a shuffling stegosaurus, the plates on its back rising through bright red plumage.

“Anything we do this far back in time will send ripples throughout history,” said Yugo. “If one of us were to step on a butterfly it could change the world we know. A TV host could become the president of the United States.¹⁰⁷ Or even worse. There might be no Christmas. Or no Bogglins.”

Sam glanced over at Bogglin Jinks. “No Bogglins, you say?”

“Or worse,” said Yugo.

“Hard to think of anything worse than no Christmas,” said Iggy, who could never think of anything worse. “But if we can do absolutely nothing and still save every Christmas ever by getting out of here, we should hit the road.”

Yugo nodded and punched the red button on the dashboard and the snowmobile hit the road.

¹⁰⁵ The collective noun for *compsognathus* is a matter of some dispute. It has been suggested that, given their size, they should be given the same treatment as turkeys, which gather in a rafter, or geese, which get together in a gaggle. Since the science is, on this point, unsettled, please feel free to think of the group of *compsognathus* that just skittered past as either a rafter or a gaggle.

¹⁰⁶ It seems that the plural of *compsognathus* is *compsognathuss*. Just add an “s”. For such a fancy word, it has a much simpler plural form than other mundane things like foot, or goose, or mouse.

¹⁰⁷ This is the basic plot of the very fine 1951 Ray Bradbury story [*A Sound of Thunder*](#), in which a group of dinosaur hunters travel back in time. One of them crushes a butterfly with his boot and when they return to their own time, the result of a recent presidential election has changed, and a tyrant has been elected. There are some who say this has already happened. This story also gave rise to the expression the ‘butterfly effect’, where even a trivial event in the past can have a dramatic effect years later.

December 22, 1967

MILLIONS OF YEARS PASS IN MOMENTS INSIDE THE TIME VORTEX. The snowmobile spun clear and into a rough landing on a grassy hill.

“A most successful venture,” said Yugo with some delight. “We secured some most significant photographs without the tiniest interference in prehistory. We did not even bend a single blade of swamp grass.”

“We need to be sure,” said Iggy. As soon as the snowmobile stopped, he jumped out and ran up to the first person he saw. It was a young man with shaggy hair and a scruffy beard, walking an exceptionally large dog. He wore a green T-shirt and baggy brown pants. Iggy pulled on the green shirt and said, “Is there Christmas? Do you still have Christmas?”

“Nah, man, there’s no Christmas here,” said the shaggy haired man.

“No Christmas?” said Iggy, gasping.

“No way, man. Freed myself of that whole Christmas trip, man.”

Iggy fell to his knees and lowered his head into his hands. “We did it. We did not mean to, but somehow, we did it. We squashed the butterfly. And now Christmas is gone forever.”

“Woah man, you are tripping me out. You squashed the butterfly? And now Christmas is gone? That is some wild ride you are on, my friend. I would very much like to join you on this journey. You got any stuff you can share?”

Iggy looked up, struggling for air, his face streaked with tears. The very large dog licked his cheeks.

Just then, a young woman walked by. She had bright blue eyes and freckled cheeks. Her long brown hair was woven with little blue and purple flowers. She wore a paisley dress that reached just below her knees. It was a little worn and overdue for a trip to the cleaners. She rushed over to Iggy’s side.

“Winnie? What have you done to this boy?” she said. She wrapped a comforting arm around the hyperventilating Iggy.

“Just gave my little man some truth about the realities of this reality,” said the shaggy haired man, who was apparently named Winnie.

“You didn’t tell him there’s no Santa Claus, did you? Can’t you see he’s just a child?”

Iggy clutched his chest at the mention of no Santa Claus. His vision grew dark and cloudy around the periphery. A faint light in the middle slowly brightened.

“Come on Abbie, you can see that little man is no kiddo. That little dude is one genuine died in the wool elf, man.”

The woman with the flowers in her hair, who was apparently named Abbie, said, “don’t be foolish. There are no elves around here.”

“Just look at him, man. The little dude has a pointy nose and pointy ears and wee little pointy boots. I can spot an elf anywhere.”

Iggy gasped for air and his whole body shook convulsively.

“Woah my little dude, don’t be such a downer,” said Winny. “Of course, there is a Christmas jam, man. I just meant to say that is not my jam, man. Christmas is just another part of the whole military corporate industrial complex, you know? It’s all just advertising and commercialism, man. Selling soda and sofas, man. Christmas is just about the man. Man.”

Iggy blinked between his tears. “Santa Claus is real?” he said between sobs.

“Little elf is on some serious pharmaceuticals,” said Winny. “Wish I knew his guy. But sure, my dude, Santa Claus is the man, man. Just go to the mall, you can find the man there. All dressed in red with the ‘ho ho ho’ and the candy canes and the merry Christmas and the buy some stuff. If that’s your trip, that’s cool. But it’s not my trip. It’s all just so commercial, man.”

The bright light in the middle of Iggy’s vision retreated into the distance. He drew in another deep breath. “There is Christmas in this time?” he asked.

“Of course, there is,” said Abbie. “Everyone loves Christmas. Everyone but Winny, apparently.”

Iggy sat up straight. “Please excuse me. I fear I may have had a modest overreaction. I just came from the dinosaur age and feared the worst.”

“Whoa. *Sound of Thunder*, am I right?” asked Winny.¹⁰⁸

Yugo, Sam and Bogglin Jinks finally caught up with Iggy. Yugo made a little bow. “Thank you for looking after our friend.”

“He can be a little sensitive,” said Sam.

“Tell me something I don’t know, man,” said Winny. “That must be some outrageous stuff. I want to be sensitive too. Can I get the name of your guy?”

¹⁰⁸ Winny was right, my dude.

Iggy carefully raised himself to his feet. “I think I am okay now. Now that I know you still have Christmas. And Santa Claus.”

“Whoa man, I didn’t say I believed in Santa Claus,” said Winny.

Iggy took a step back, his hand pressed against his heart. He took a deep breath. He had heard this sort of sentiment before. Often expressed by very smug ten-year-old boys. The very smug boys were just as mistaken as Winny was, of course.

“Where are we?” asked Bogglin Jinks.

Sam took a long sweeping look around. “Let me get this one, Yugo.” He pointed a silencing finger at Bogglin Jinks. “In spite of my microscopic brain, I do believe that I have it figured out. In fact, it is elementary, my dear Yugo.

“It is December 22nd, obviously. It always is. We are in a park with a lot of trash blowing around. Iggy has made friends with two hippies, one of whom is particularly smelly and is plainly under the influence of some combination of chemicals, not all of which can be legally ingested without some sort of medical approval.”

“Hey man, I got medical approval from the free clinic for all my medications, man,” said Winny.

“I am sure you do,” said Yugo.

Sam went on. “The other one of which seems very pleasant and helpful. I’ll come back to that. There is no snow on the ground and the grass is green even though it is December. There is no Beddleton or Beddlemess sign, that’s always a giveaway, so we aren’t in England this time. We haven’t been in California for a while, but we have been trying to get there and we keep coming back to it.” He pointed down the hill, “and there, rising out of the fog is the Golden Gate Bridge, so we are in San Francisco, again. Put it all together. Flower children. We are in San Francisco, California on December 22nd, 1967.”

Yugo looked up from his tablet in surprise. “You are exactly right.”

Sam took a little bow. “Thank you, thank you very much. But I am not done yet. This,” he pointed at Abbie, “is Mrs. Wiggins. And the smelly fellow with the oversized dog is Alistair or Herbert or John or Jack or John Jack or Jack John or some other Wiggins.”

“Miss Wiggins, if you please,” said Abbie. “And you are profoundly mistaken if you think that Winny is any sort of a Mr. Wiggins. That smelly fellow is Winton Terwilliger. And the oversized dog is Hobbs, who is not smelly, and who is a very good boy.”

Hobbs gave a low growl of approval.

“Oh, he sure is,” said Iggy, who had regained his composure and who was enjoying a moist tongue bath from Hobbs.

“I am Yugo,” said Yugo. He introduced the others. “This is Sam and Boggin Jinks. You have already met Iggy.”

Abbie furrowed her brow. “You aren’t children, are you?”

“No ma’am,” said Yugo. “We are elves.”

“Cool,” said Winny. “We don’t get too many elves around here. But what about your little green friend?”

“Jinks is a Boggin,” said Yugo.

“But it thinks it’s an elf,” said Sam.

“You are all welcome here,” said Abbie. “Everyone is.”

Sam looked around. There were a few other hippies wandering about the mostly empty park.

“It’s not much to look at now,” said Winny. “You should have been here in the summer.”

“The Summer of Love,”¹⁰⁹ they called it,” said Abbie. “There were thousands of us then, celebrating peace and love. Now, there’s only a few of us left.”

“Where did everyone go?” asked Iggy.

“Most of them left to go back to school,” said Abbie.

“Or they got jobs. Working for the Man, man,” said Winny. “But not us, man.”

“We’re still here,” said Abbie.

“Cuz we believe in peace and love, man,” said Winny. “That’s what it’s all about, man. Peace and love.”

“You believe in peace and love, but you do not believe in Christmas. Or in Santa Claus,” said Iggy. “My friends and I can fix that.”

¹⁰⁹ The ‘Summer of Love’ was a cultural phenomenon that took place in the San Francisco district of Haight-Ashbury in the summer months of 1967. Over one hundred thousand people, mostly young people devoted to the hippie lifestyle, converged in the area to celebrate music, free love, drugs and to protest the Vietnam War. Media reports that disparaged this counter-culture movement only drew more attention, and people, to the area.

Miracle on Contra Costa Boulevard

BOGGLIN JINKS HAD A FEW THINGS ON HIS MIND. His brain was larger by several orders of magnitude than these pitiful elves. And while he could have impressed his thoughts into their tiny brains just by concentrating, he did not, for he feared that the power of his intellect would overwhelm them and leave them nothing but even more gibbering fools than they already were. But still, he pondered as these tiny creatures slept, why this Christmas business was so important to each of them and why they stayed here, in this time, and this place, when their clever little machine could take them to any time or place in the universe. There was something happening here, and what it was, was not exactly clear.

Bogglins never sleep. That is a time wasting earthly endeavour. Still, the long dark December night was not boring. Bogglin Jinks lay back in his bunk in the snowmobile's camper module and amused himself by deriving new and fresh solutions to Fermat's Last Theorem in his head. Fermat's Last Theorem was, for Bogglin Jinks, easier to figure out than this Christmas business.

Iggy was the first elf awake that morning. By the time the others rose, he was already dressed in a tie-dyed T-shirt, faded bell bottom blue jeans and worn brown sandals.

Sam just shook his head as he fried up a pound of bacon and a half dozen eggs on the snowmobile's nuclear-powered stove.

After breakfast, Yugo drove the snowmobile into the vast parking lot in front of the Macy's store at the new Sun Valley Mall.¹¹⁰ "We need to find a Santa Claus. Where better to start than Macy's?"

"Just like in *Miracle on 34th Street*,"¹¹¹ said Iggy.

"Except this Macy's is on Contra Costa Boulevard," said Yugo.

¹¹⁰ The Sun Valley Mall was the largest indoor shopping mall in the world when it opened on August 5, 1967. It then had 1.3 million square feet of retail space, which included such leading retailers as Macy's, Sears, JC Penney and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

¹¹¹ In the classic 1947 Christmas film, *Miracle on 34th Street*, a young girl named Susan discovers that the gentleman working as the store Santa is none other than Santa Claus himself. The original Macys store where much of the movie takes place is located at 34th Street and Broadway in New York City. Macy's also sponsors a large Thanksgiving parade each year in New York City which usually finishes at, yes, 34th Street.

Bogglin Jinks spoke from the seat in the back. “I pondered this elvish plan of yours throughout the night. Perhaps my brain is just too big to understand your little plan. You can leave anytime you choose. Yet you choose to stay here because some foolish and malodorous young person does not believe in this Christmas of yours.”

“We are Christmas elves. It is what we do,” said Iggy.

“We cannot leave behind someone who does not believe in Christmas,” said Yugo.

“And when we return with a genuine Santa Claus, surrounded by real Christmas elves, Winny will have no choice but to believe in Christmas again.”

“And then we will be on our way,” said Yugo.

“It is a foolproof plan,” said Iggy.

“You told me that you are friends with the real Santa Claus. Why then do you need to secure the assistance of this imposter?”

“Jinks is right,” said Sam. “What good is another Santa Claus? We’ve already got one.”

“Our Santa Claus is over 2000 miles away,” said Iggy.

“2112 miles to be precise,” said Yugo.

Bogglin Jinks counted swiftly on his fingers. “That is exactly 3,415.03 fiddoms.”¹¹²

“It is a very long ways away,” said Iggy. “Which is completely inconvenient. We need a Santa Claus here.”

“Where better to find a really great Santa Claus than at Macy’s?” said Yugo. “If the movies are to be believed.”

“And the movies would not lie to us,” said Iggy. “Would they?”

“I foresee that this plan may not be as foolproof as you believe,” said Bogglin Jinks.

The elves and Bogglin Jinks walked quickly across the parking lot. They passed the Sun Valley Cinema, where *Camelot* was playing and strode confidently through the modern sliding doors that led into the mall. They entered a wide shopping plaza with gleaming linoleum floors. The high white walls were divided with a thick strip of light brown wooden trim. Round globe lights hung from the high ceiling above a metal statue of two roosters. Brightly coloured marquees

¹¹² By a remarkable coincidence, 3,415.03 Bogglin fiddoms is exactly the same distance as 3,415.03 kilometers.

appeared on the wooden trim above each store: Ganat Bros., Roos/Atkins, RCA Victor and R. Dalton Books.

“There it is,” said Iggy. He pointed to a large sign at the end of the mall that said

MACY’S

Hurry, Santa Claus awaits,” said Yugo. The elves and Bogglin Jinks scampered down the mall.

“Hey, you kids, no running in the mall,” shouted a stout security guard. Iggy and Yugo slowed down, but Sam and Bogglin Jinks were undeterred and raced ahead of the others. Soon they reached the end of the long line of children waiting to see Santa Claus that wound around and through the racks and display cabinets arranged about the big Macy’s store.

“This is longer than the line to see the real Santa Claus,” said Sam.

“It is a ponderous line,” said Bogglin Jinks.

Iggy and Yugo walked slowly up to join them. They walked even slower after that. The line to meet Santa Claus zigged and zagged through the store, then climbed up a flight of stairs, and circled the second floor before it returned to the main floor for a long, winding loop through the sporting goods section. It was a ponderous line indeed.

“Usually there is a roller coaster at the end of a line this long,” said Sam.

Hours passed as the elves and Jinx shuffled their way around the store. Finally, they reached Santa’s Winter Wonderland, which consisted of a small candy castle made of plasterboard. Inside the castle, Santa Claus himself sat on a large red chair with big armrests. A bored teenager in an undersized elf suit stood beside the chair with a bundle of candy canes in his hand.

“That is no winter wonderland,” said Iggy.

“That is no elf,” said Yugo.

“That is no Santa Claus,” said Sam. It certainly was not. ‘Santa’ was a red-faced and sweaty man with an obviously false beard that hung crookedly from his ears. He wore a white haired wig with limp and uneven curls. The corner of a pillow poked out from under his red flannel jacket. His eyes did not twinkle. Nor were there any merry dimples, rosy cheeks or a nose like a cherry.

“I cannot believe it,” said Iggy.

“The movies have lied to us,” said Yugo.

“This winter wonderland is a candy castle of lies,” said Iggy.

“We can’t introduce this guy to Winny,” said Sam. “He makes me believe less in Santa Claus, and I’ve actually met him.”

“It seems that this plan was not as foolproof as you thought,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“We are going to need a new plan,” said Iggy.

“We are going to need the real Santa Claus,” said Yugo.

“You guys said he was too far away,” said Sam.

“There is still a way,” said Iggy.


“Yes, we will need to do this the old-fashioned way,” said Yugo.

“Indeed. You know what that means,” said Iggy.

“Yes, we are going to need some groceries,” said Yugo.

“I wonder if there is a supermarket in this mall?” said Iggy.

The Winter of Love

 HEY DID NOT STAY TO MEET SANTA CLAUS in his candy castle, though Sam did collect a candy cane from the teenaged elf. Soon, they were back at Golden Gate Park, with a bag of groceries tucked into the back of the snowmobile, next to Iggy’s steamer trunk.

The sun had set by the time they returned. Abbie, Winny and a few other hippies were seated around a small fire, painting cardboard signs.

“Hey little dudes,” said Winny as they came by. “Did you find Santa Claus?”

“Not yet,” said Iggy. “But he will be here tomorrow night.”

“Sure, he will, little dude.”

“He will be here, you will see,” said Yugo.

“I sure hope he will be here,” Sam whispered.

“He will be here,” said Iggy.

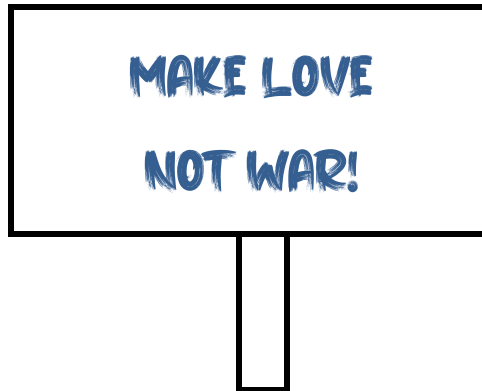
“What are you guys doing?” asked Yugo.

“We are having a protest march tomorrow,” said Abbie.

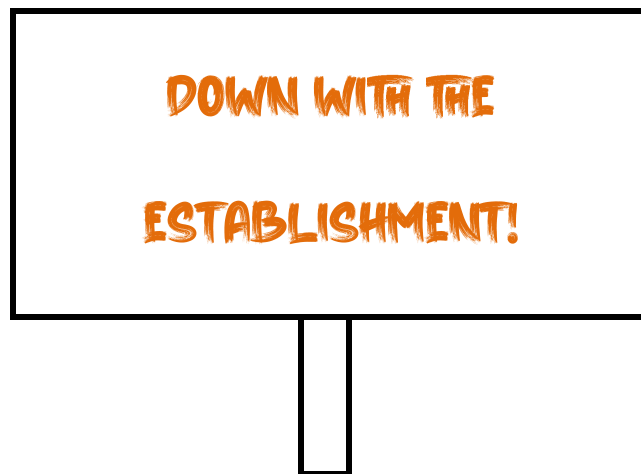
“What are you protesting?” asked Iggy.

“Everything,” Winny. “The war. The establishment. The Man!”

“Yes,” said Abbie. “But mostly the war.” She held up her sign which said:



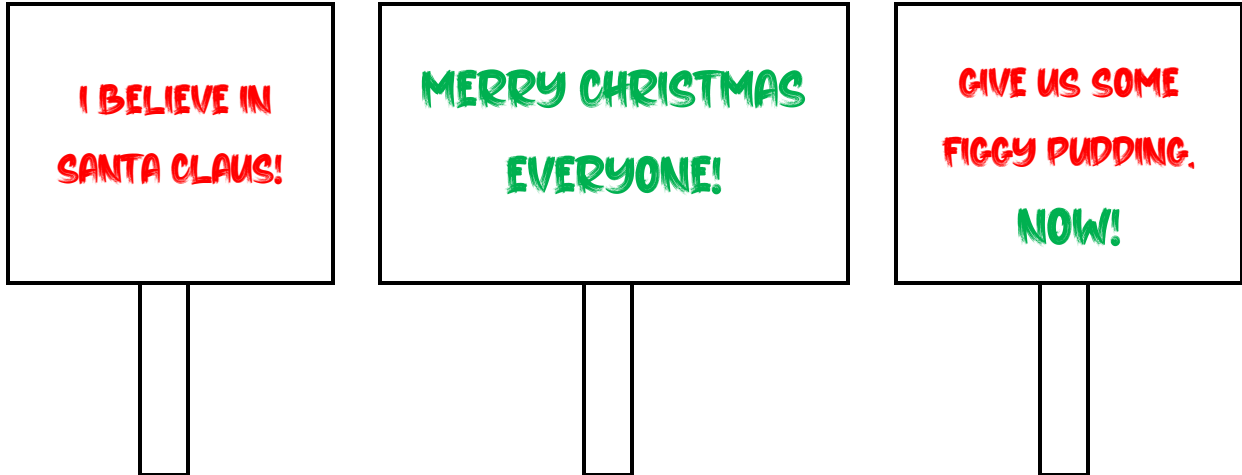
“Here, check out mine,” said Winny. He held up his own sign, which said:



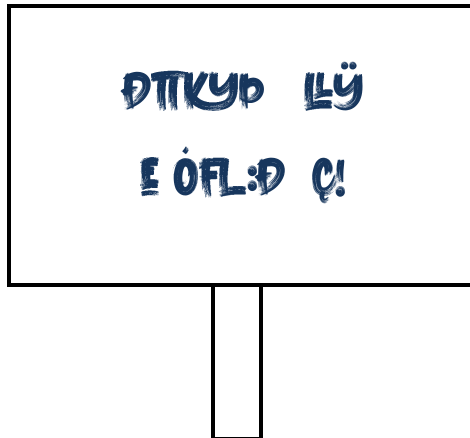
“You know my dad works for the establishment,” said Abbie. She whispered to the elves. “He has a job with the government. Top secret. Very hush hush.”

“Can we make some?” asked Iggy.

“Be my guest, little dude,” said Winny. Before long, the elves had made three protest signs of their own:



Bogglin Jinks had its own sign, but no one could understand what it said:



“Your earthly brains are simply too small to understand my truth,” said Bogglin Jinks.

The next morning, Abbie led eleven hippies, three elves and one Bogglin in a protest march through Golden Gate Park, protesting the war, the establishment, the lack of a good figgy pudding and the truth of Bogglin Jinks. For the most part, nobody paid them any mind at all. There were protests in San Francisco every weekend, after all. One park goer threw a tomato at them, which Winny picked up with some gratitude. A hippie has to eat, after all.

They returned to their little camp in the early afternoon. “Is Santa Claus coming tonight?” asked Winny with a laugh.

“He sure is,” said Iggy. “But first, we have some work to do. If you want to meet Santa Claus, we are going to have to get him here the old-fashioned way.” Iggy pulled a toque blanche¹¹³ from his steamer trunk and perched it atop his head.”

“What is with the hat, little dude?”

“Santa Claus has millions of places all over the world which he must visit every Christmas Eve,” said Iggy. “He appears for but a fleeting moment in each of them.”

“So, if you hope to have a proper visit from Saint Nicholas, you need to catch him when he stops for a moment. And to make him pause, even for just a few seconds, there is a ritual which you must follow,” said Yugo.

“Part of that ritual is homemade chocolate chip cookies,” said Sam.

“Yes, that is right,” said Abbie. “Homemade cookies. And a glass of milk. That is what we always left for him. But I never saw him.”

“He likes eggnog best,” said Iggy.

“With a little rum in it,” said Yugo.

“And carrots for the reindeer, right?” said Abbie.

“Definitely,” said Sam. “Reindeer can’t fly on empty stomachs.”

“And a letter,” said Iggy. “He stops and reads every one of them.”

“He is a very fast reader,” said Yugo.

“I will write him a letter right now,” said Abbie.

“Not me, man.” Said Winny.

“He couldn’t read your writing, anyway,” said Abbie,

“You must tell him that you have tried very hard to be a good girl all year,” said Iggy.

“But that you are sorry you pulled your brother’s hair or ate your sister’s candy bar. Something like that,” said Yugo. “He knows that nobody is perfect.”

“So long as you are on the list, you will be fine,” said Sam.

“The nice list,” said Iggy.

¹¹³ A toque blanche is a hat that looks like this →



“You do not want to be on the other one,” said Yugo.

A bell rung.

“Those will be the cookies,” said Iggy, and he rushed to pull a steaming tray out of the atomic stove at the side of the snowmobile. Sam’s stomach growled loudly. “Don’t worry, Sam, I made some extra for you.” He set a stack of two dozen freshly baked chocolate chip cookies in front of Sam. He gave a smaller pile to Boggin Jinks.

“Those smell totally real, man,” said Winny.

“Sam just nodded since his mouth was already fully packed with cookies. Boggin Jinks smacked its plump lips happily. Winny kept staring at them with big puppy dog eyes until Sam relented and passed one over.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam arranged six cookies carefully on a plate and garnished it with a sprig of holly. They set it down on a tree stump with a large mug of eggnog (with a dash of rum) beside it and then laid a bunch of carrots at the base of the stump.

Abbie passed over her letter to Santa, rolled up and tied with a length of woven macrame. Sam peeled back a corner to take a look. Iggy slapped his hand and set the little scroll beside the plate of cookies.

“That looks perfect,” said Iggy.

“The trap is baited,” said Yugo.

“So, we just wait for him, then?” asked Abbie.

“No, we cannot do that,” said Iggy.

“He never stops for those who wait,” said Yugo.

“The next part of the ritual is the most important one,” said Iggy.


“We all have to be asleep,” said Yugo. “He will not appear if you are awake. And you cannot pretend to be asleep either. He knows when you are awake.”

“If we’re sleeping,” how are we supposed to see him?” asked Abbie.

“Leave that to me,” said Yugo. “I have a plan.”

“There is no plan,” said Winny. “It’s just a scam, man. There is no Santa Claus.”

The Man

 LAYING A TRAP FOR SANTA CLAUS IS NOT AN EASY THING. Many have tried and most have failed. Trip wires around fireplaces, marbles scattered on the floor and hidden cameras; Santa Claus has beat them all.

Of course, Santa Claus had never tried to slip past Yugo unnoticed.

The elves and Bogglin Jinks were nestled all snug in their beds in the sleeper cabin of the snowmobile, while Abbie in her kerchief, and Winny in his cap, had settled down in their own tents for their long winter's nap.

A moment after midnight, Santa Claus arrived. As quick as a thought and as light as a ghost, he flickered through all the tents in the hippie camp. Then he saw the stump with the little plate of cookies and the mug of eggnog (with a drop of rum in it). A small note wrapped up like a scroll had been delicately placed under the rim of the plate.

"Ho ho ho," he chortled softly. "Don't mind if I do. This will only take a moment." Santa Claus paused his breakneck journey, for just an instant, to pick up a single cookie in his mittened hand.

A horn blew and the campsite was filled with light.

"Stop! Hey! What's that sound?" said Santa Claus. He turned his head from side to side. "Yugo! Is this your doing?"

Santa Claus was framed in the headlights of the snowmobile when the elves rushed into the clearing by the stump, with a group of hippies and Bogglin Jinks right behind them.

"Whoa," said Winny. Santa Claus himself stood before them. It has been said that Santa Claus is a fat man, but this is not right. It is correct to say, though, that Santa Claus is a very big man. He stands over six and a half feet tall, with shoulders as wide as a kitchen door. His chest is massive, and covered by a heavy red robe trimmed with white fur. Still, his eyes twinkle, and his dimples are just as merry as you please. It is all there: the rosy cheeks, the nose like a cherry, the works.

Behind him stood a magnificent gleaming red and silver sleigh, bigger than a steam engine, with a great sack on the back that was overflowing with packages wrapped in coloured paper, each one with a bow.¹¹⁴ The sack rose more than twenty feet from the back of the great sled.

¹¹⁴ There is always time for a bow.

Eight reindeer were leashed in formation at the front of the sled. These were no ordinary reindeer. Each stood more than thirty hands high and were covered in shaggy brown fur. The great racks of antlers on their heads stretched more than ten feet from the furthest points on each side. The front reindeer of the team pawed at the ground anxiously, scraping a long divot in the grass.

He leaned down and wagged a stern finger at Iggy, Yugo and Sam. "I really don't have time for you three troublemakers tonight."

Iggy lowered his eyes and said, "It is our friend here. Winny."

"He does not believe in Santa Claus, you see," said Yugo.

Santa Claus stood up straight. "Well, I suppose I have time for that." He looked Winny in the eye and said, "Winton Terwilliger. I have not heard from you in years. Tell me son, have you been a good boy this year?"

"Yessir," whispered Winny softly.

"Well good then, that's what I like to hear," said Santa Claus. "You might want to consider a bath and a haircut before next Christmas."

"Yessir," whispered Winny.

He looked about the motley group of hippies. "What about the rest of you? Have you all been good girls and boys this year?"

"Yessir," whispered the hippies.

"I have been a very good Bogglin," said Bogglin Jinks softly.

Santa Claus turned to the elves. "Don't think I haven't noticed you three over the years. I've seen you in the middle ages. In trenches and in shelters. You were in Germany a few years ago and San Francisco before that. What are you three up to?"

"Just the usual," said Iggy. "Out for some excitement."

"And adventures," said Yugo.

"Saving Christmas," added Sam.

"Christmas appears to be perfectly in order this year," said Santa Claus. "Maybe you three should get home."

"Yessir," whispered Iggy, Yugo and Sam.

Santa Claus looked back up and laughed. "Ho ho ho. It looks like my work here is done. I need to be on my way." He gulped down his mug of eggnog (with a

dash of rum) and picked up the bunch of carrots. "I'm taking these with me. For the lads."

Then he took two quick steps and bounded all the way up onto the bench at the front of his great big sled. He gave a pull on the reins and shouted, "on Dasher, ..." before he flashed out of sight.

Winton Terwilliger stared wide eyed at the spot where a giant sled rested only a moment before. "Oh man. He really is the Man."

"He sure is," said Iggy.

The next morning, once the elves had packed up the snowmobile, they went to say good-bye to Abbie and Winny.

Abbie held up a small painting of a flower, done in an impressionistic style. "Look, he read my letter. This is exactly what I asked for."

Iggy nodded. "Santa always knows."

"Was that really Santa Claus?" asked Winny. Hobbs padded up alongside him. "Was that really the Man?"

"That was really him," said Yugo. "The Man."

"Winny smiled. "Good, good. I was worried that it was the peyote. That's what he left me. Some peyote."


"Santa always knows," said Sam.

The elves and Bogglin Jinks climbed into the snowmobile. Yugo powered up the engines and reset the time interface.

"Your kind is very primitive, yet most complex," said Bogglin Jinks. "I am learning much on this journey."

"It is not over yet," said Yugo. He flipped an orange switch to engage the time-interface and the snowmobile spun back into the time vortex.

December 22, 3002

 HE SUN BEAMED THINLY THROUGH THE HAZY SHADE of a winter afternoon. The snowmobile burst into the chilly air and skidded to a landing on the frozen ground.

Bogglin Jinks climbed out of the snowmobile and stretched all four arms. “Where have you taken me?”

Iggy was the next one out of the snowmobile. He looked around. They were surrounded by shades of grey. A grey sky and grey fields in the distance. The horizon was just a grey line that separated the dark grey ground from the lighter grey above. The grey vista was only interrupted by sporadic flakes of grey snow. “I do not know Jinks. Maybe we are back on the moon?”

Yugo followed him and tapped his tablet. “Not the moon, I fear. This is good old planet Earth in the year 3002.”

“It’s December 22nd, isn’t it?” asked Sam. His breath made clouds in the chilly winter air.

Before Yugo could answer, something hissed to their right.

“Look out!” shouted a voice to their left. This was followed by an electronic ‘pew pew pew.’

The right side responded with an agonized ‘oof’.

Iggy spun to his right to see an enormous dark grey rat tip over onto its side. It twitched a few times and then gave out a last wheezing death rattle.

Yugo spun to his left where a young woman dressed in bright pink fur lowered her still smoking ray gun. She lifted her dirty ski goggles and pulled back the hood of her furry pink jacket. “Giant mutant rats,” she said. “Very dangerous.”

Sam looked down at the steaming corpse of the giant mutant rat. “I’ll say. That thing has teeth the length of my arm.” Sam is an elf, and his arm is not nearly so long as your own, but still, you get the idea. It was a prodigious set of teeth, indeed.

“Careful, Sam, rats carry disease,” said Yugo.

“A rat that big probably carries a lot of diseases,” said Iggy.

“Are you elves?” asked the young woman dressed in pink fur. “And is that a Bogglin?” she pointed her dangerous looking ray gun in Bogglin Jinks’ direction. Bogglin Jinks ducked and raised three arms and hands to cover its face. “We don’t get many elves or Bogglins around here. I haven’t seen any for ages. I haven’t seen anyone for ages.”

Iggy shivered and straightened his red velvet tunic. “We are indeed elves,” he said. “We are elves indeed.”

“Pleased to meet you, elves indeed,” said the young woman. “My name is A/B. A/B Wiggunz.”

Iggy gave a short bow and quickly introduced himself and the rest of their little group.

“What brings you here?” asked A/B. “Nobody ever comes here. There is nothing here but cold, damp and rodents of unusual size.” She spun and fired off a flurry of laser fire at a shadow in the distance. The ‘pew pews’ were immediately followed by another long dragged-out death rattle.

“We have come to save Christmas,” said Yugo, by way of explanation.

“Never heard of it,” said A/B, her laser pistol raised and her eyes darting from side to side.

“Everyone has heard of Christmas,” said Sam. “You know, deck the halls with boughs of holly? Warm woolen mittens and brown paper packages tied up with string? Cranberry sauce? Ho ho ho and all that?”

A/B shook her head. “Nope.”

“I could use some warm woolen mittens,” said Bogglin Jinks. It held up its four six fingered hands. The twenty-four green fingertips were all turning blue. “It is freezing here.”

“I expected the future to be warmer,” said Iggy. He brushed a light skiff of snow off the shoulder of his red jacket.

“It should be,” said Yugo. He tapped his tablet.

Sam blew on his hands to warm them. “You heard her. A/B has never heard of Christmas. This is what a world without Christmas looks like.”

Iggy kicked the ground. Even though it was grey and dirty it was clear they were standing in the middle of an ice field. He looked up. In the distance he could see the towers of a collapsed bridge reaching up through the ice of San Francisco Bay. “We came out of the time vortex and landed in the same place we just left. We have not moved an inch. But now it is a frozen wasteland.”

“Excuse me, that’s my home you’re talking about,” said A/B.

Yugo shook his head. “I do not understand. This whole place should be under water. At the very least, global warming should have made this a steaming humid fetid swamp by now.”

“Still my home,” said A/B.

“The science was wrong,” said Sam.

“Science is never wrong,” said Yugo.

“Maybe this place should be a boiling ruin,” said Sam. But your scientists never counted on a world without Christmas.”

Iggy nodded. “Sam is right. How could a world ever heat up without Christmas? No warm feelings? No warm thoughts? A world without Christmas would be frozen to the core.”

“I’m still standing here,” said A/B. Then she twisted into a crouch and took aim at another gigantic rat that wandered by. From the point of view of the gigantic rat, its wanderings ended swiftly and quite unexpectedly.

“Is this all there is here?” asked Yugo. “You and too many gigantic rats to count?”

“I can count them,” said Bogglin Jinks, swiftly tapping all the fingers on its four hands.

“There used to be others, but I’m the only one left up here,” said A/B. “It wasn’t always just me. I used to live with my Gran. She never knew nothing about this Christmas, but she kept to the old ways. When I was a little one, we used to bash the Calabash tree. That was fun. But my Gran was fun like that. Nobody bashes a Calabash tree anymore.”

“Where is your Gran now? Where is everyone else?” asked Sam.

“Prisoners of the Rat King,” said A/B.

“The Rat King?” asked Iggy.

“Yes, the rats have a king,” said A/B. “Not all of the mutant rats are as big and dumb as the ones around here. Some of them mutated big and smart. They live in the tunnels under the city. And the biggest and smartest of the lot is the Rat King. He has all of the other people down there, working in his caves.”

“Working on what?” asked Iggy.

“Making cheese, I expect,” said A/B. “Isn’t that what rats like?”


Yugo stroked his moustache. “A world without Christmas would be the kind of place a king of rats could take over.”

“I could never take him on by myself,” said A/B. “But with your help, maybe we can get my Gran back. And everyone else down there.”

“Sounds like this Rat King needs a little Christmas,” said Sam. He slapped his fist into his palm.

“Right this very minute,” added Bogglin Jinks, slapping two fists with two palms.

The Lair of the Rat King

 ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-THREE FEET BELOW SAN FRANCISCO BAY. That was where the Rat King lived.

The Transbay Tube opened in 1974. It was part of the Bay Area Rapid Transit, or BART, system that connected San Francisco to Oakland through a three-and-a-half-mile tunnel that ran beneath the Bay. The BART stopped running long before 3002, but the Transbay Tube remained.

The Embarcadero Station was the last stop before the BART train began its high-speed undersea trip to Oakland. It was located at the end of Main Street, not far from where A/B Wiggunz lived in her little cardboard box.

“You live in a box?” asked Iggy, incredulously.

“Yeah, I’m pretty lucky,” said A/B. “Not everybody has a box.”

They had come to stairwell at the intersection of Main Street and Market that led underground. The way down was completely covered in ice.

“This is the way to the Rat King,” said A/B.

“We are going to have to chisel away all of this ice to get inside,” said Iggy.

“That is going to take days,” said Sam.

“I think not,” said Yugo. He walked back to the snowmobile and retrieved a large black object from the lower hold. He pulled a strap over his shoulder and lifted it with both hands. Then he pointed the flamethrower at the frozen stairwell and said, “stand back.”

In a matter of moments, a stream of steaming water poured down the stairwell. Yugo went on to clean up the surrounding sidewalk as well.

“You cannot melt all of the ice,” said Iggy.

Yugo raised the flamethrower and extinguished the burners. “I guess not.” He packed it back into the bottom of the snowmobile and then followed Iggy, Sam and the rest down the stairs.

Each of them wore a small lamp strapped to their foreheads. Iggy was dressed in layers. A whole lot of layers. “It is freezing here,” He explained. “I put on everything I had left in my steamer trunk.”

At the bottom of the long staircase, they found themselves in the concourse of an abandoned train station. The tiled walls were cracked and covered in grime

and mold. Broken pieces of decayed art hung on along the concourse walls. Once there were buskers¹¹⁵ plying their trade there, but now the floors were covered in a thick layer of dirt, dust and a few giant mutant cockroaches. They skittered away when Yugo shone his headlamp in their direction.

“The cockroaches get bigger the lower we go.” A/B led them to another, much longer staircase. “This way.”

Sam looked down the long dark stairwell. “Maybe I should wait up here.”

“Come on, Sam,” said Iggy.

“There is nothing to be afraid of except for giant rats and cockroaches,” said Yugo.

“I have a deathly fear of giants rats and cockroaches,”¹¹⁶ said Sam. “I am also terrified of stairwells¹¹⁷, the dark¹¹⁸ and dark stairwells.”

“Stay by my side, friend Sam,” said Bogglin Jinks. “I will look after you.”

Sam gulped and nodded. What Jinks did not say was that the Bogglin itself was every bit as afraid of rats, cockroaches, stairwells and the dark as Sam. It held Sam’s hand tightly with two of its own as they walked cautiously down the long dark staircase together.

At the bottom of the stairs, they found themselves on an underground train platform. It was covered in piles of dirt and trash and dimly illuminated by torches that hung at irregular intervals along the wall. At one end of the platform, there was a wooden rack where a row of ticket dispensing machines once stood.

It was an armoury of sorts, with swords and spears, shields and helmets and a variety of other armaments stacked on the shelves.

¹¹⁵ One infamous busker who worked the Embarcadero BART station for many years was known as the ‘Jazz Man’. The Jazz Man was in fact Ronald Brewington, who was arrested in the Embarcadero station in 2012 in connection with the murder of his wife in Albuquerque in 1987. The Jazz Man currently performs exclusively within a penitentiary in New Mexico.

¹¹⁶ The technical term for a fear of cockroaches is katsaridaphobia. A person who is afraid of rats and mice is said to suffer from musophobia. Elephants are generally considered to be musophobiacs. The fear of very long words is called hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliophobia, which would certainly be a terrifying diagnosis to receive.

¹¹⁷ Bathmophobia.

¹¹⁸ Scotophobia.

“This must be where the rat army caches the weapons they use when they go up top,” said Iggy.

“How convenient,” said Yugo.

“We are going to need this stuff. Gear up, everyone,” said Sam. He raised a short sword from the lowest shelf.

“These will do nicely,” said Bogglin Jinks, who gathered a sword in each of its four hands.

Thus armed, the group returned to the middle of the platform. “Now where?” asked Iggy.

“Down there,” said A/B. She pointed to the railway track that ran past the platform and disappeared into the underground tunnel. “This is the way to the deepest part. That is where we will find the Rat King.” She jumped off the platform and started walking down the tracks.

The others all stayed on the platform. A/B turned back and said, “are you guys coming?”

Sam gulped. “I’m dreadfully afraid of tunnels.¹¹⁹ Is it safe?”

A/B nodded.

Iggy shrugged and dropped down onto the tracks. Yugo followed and then Sam and Bogglin Jinks joined them. “This tunnel goes right underneath the Bay. It has not been maintained for centuries, but we should be fine,” she said. “As long as there aren’t any earthquakes.”¹²⁰ She pushed her way through some cobwebs and walked east, deeper into the tunnel.

They marched in single file, A/B out front, followed by Iggy, Yugo and Sam. Bogglin Jinks brought up the rear, all four swords at the ready. They continued in this fashion for more than an hour, the tunnel lit only by their headlamps and the occasional torch mounted on the wall.

Finally, a mile into the tunnel, and dozens of feet below the sea above, they reached a fork in the tunnel. To the left was a maintenance spur, where a broken train could be moved off the track, without closing the tunnel.

“I think this is the way,” said A/B.

¹¹⁹ Gephyrophobia.

¹²⁰ San Francisco is located atop the San Andreas Fault. This is the boundary between two tectonic plates that runs some 750 miles through California. The movement of these plates makes the area above the fault geologically unstable. As a result, there are over 300 earthquakes of varying severity in the San Francisco area every year.

“What makes you so sure?” asked Iggy.

A/B shone her headlamp on either side of the opening. Two enormous rats stood upright on each side, each dressed in the fashion of toy soldiers, with bright red jackets with golden buttons and tall red feathered hats on their head. They each held a sword in their right claws, pointed to the ceiling and at the ready.

“How cute,” said Yugo. “They look just like toy nutcrackers.”

The two rats hissed and pointed their swords at Yugo.

“Nutcrackers, eh?” said Sam. “All right. Let’s crack some nuts.”

The Nuts Cracking Suite

PEW PEW. The two rats guarding the entrance dropped to the ground. A/B holstered her pistol and marched into the side tunnel. The elves and Bogglin Jinks fell in behind her. “Never bring a sword to a ray gun fight,” she said.

This passageway was brighter and cleaner than the last. There were no spiderwebs and no graffiti. There were torches fixed to the wall every few feet.

“We are getting closer now,” said A/B. “Keep your eyes open. There are going to be more rats. A lot more rats.”

That was right about the time that they encountered a lot more rats. They came out of the shadows, dressed in brightly coloured toy soldier uniforms. They moved fluidly, and advanced in a perfectly choreographed group hortensia.¹²¹

A/B had warned them, and the elves were braced for the attack. They had, however, expected something a little less graceful. The rats dipped and spun, stepped forward and then bowed and turned upon their pointy little rat feet.

The elves lowered their swords and watched in awe as the rats kick stepped across the floor.

Bogglin Jinks was not awed. Not in the least. Jinks had trained with the Loyal Company of Murth, which was said to be the best dancing troupe in the twelve galaxies and Jinks found this performance to be comically clumsy.

¹²¹ An hortensia is a ballet dancer's step in which the dancer jumps into the air with the legs drawn up, one in front of the other, then reverses their position. Properly done, it gives the illusion of swimming in the air.

The Bogglin waded into the crowd, four swords in its four hands. As the rats quickly discovered, a duel with Bogglin Jinks was like a duel with a blender. The outcome was swift, and messy.

“Did you really need to eat their hearts?” asked Iggy.

“A Bogglin always eats the hearts of those defeated in battle. It brings honour to us both,” said Jinks. “But I only found one heart in each of these creatures. I fear I did not get them all.”

“You got them all,” said Yugo. He looked a little green.

“Then Bogglin honour is satisfied.”

“Stay ready, we’ve got incoming,” said A/B. Another troupe of rat guards appeared. They lined up and lifted their legs in a delicate arabesque and beat a rhythmic tattoo on their war drums.

A/B wasted little time in taking them all down with her ray gun. It hissed in her hand. “That’s just great,” she said. “My batteries are dead. Do you know how hard it is to get batteries in this post-apocalyptic wasteland?”

“Isn’t this your home?” asked Iggy.

“Some home. I live in a box,” said A/B grimly.

“All right, A/B is out of ammo. Time to bring out that flame thrower, Yugo,” said Sam.

Yugo coughed. “I left the flamethrower in the snowmobile.”

If glares went pew pew, then Yugo would have died just then from the glare that Sam threw his way. Happily, glares are just glares, and they only hurt feelings.

Yugo had no time to process his hurt feelings, for another wave of prancing, kicking rat guards was upon them. Bogglin Jinks set into them like a four-sided weed whacker, with Iggy, Yugo and Sam offering only peripheral support.

The ensuing consumption of rats’ hearts was, by every possible measure, disgusting.

“Aren’t you full yet?” asked Sam, himself an elf of some appetite.

Bogglin Jinks wiped its chin. “A Bogglin is not sated until the war is won.”

Sam nodded. “Nice sentiment. You should embroider that on a throw cushion.”

Bogglin Jinks nodded thoughtfully. It also wondered what a throw cushion was and how it might taste with salt and pepper and a little mustard.

They sliced and diced their way through the rat guard (and, in fairness, Bogglin Jinks singlehandedly¹²² did all the slicing and dicing). They carried on further down the tunnel, weaving their way between the giant mutated rat carcasses Bogglin Jinks left behind.

It was not much longer before they came upon the throne room of the Rat King. It was not much of a throne room, really. It was nothing more than an off shoot of an underwater transit line that was built a thousand years before. It was once a place to repair train cars. Now it was a place for an overweight rat to feast on figgy pudding¹²³ and otherwise hold court.

And that was how they found the Rat King at last. Lounging upon his throne of bricks, feasting on a platter of figgy pud and otherwise holding court. He was by far the biggest rat they had seen yet. His dark grey fur was matted and dirty. He wore a red silk house coat that barely wrapped around his enormous gut. A little gold crown rested on top of his head.

Bogglin Jinks approached, four swords swirling. The Rat King scampered behind his brick throne. Jinks pointed two of its swords in the direction of the throne and said, “come out from behind there you rat.”

The Rat King crept out from behind his throne, put up his thin ratty arms and cowered like the coward¹²⁴ he was. “Woah woah, ease up there. I’ve no quarrel with Boggilins or elves. You’ve beaten my lords a leaping and my drummers drumming fair and square. I surrender.”

“Is he allowed to do that?” asked Bogglin Jinks.

“It is what one does when the battle has been won,” said Iggy.

“But I have not feasted upon his heart yet,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“I think you have had enough rat hearts for one day,” said Yugo.

“You took my Gran,” said A/B. She threw her ray gun at him. It hit the Rat King on the forehead and knocked the little gold crown off his head.

“I guess I had that coming,” said the Rat King. He crouched down to pick up his crown. He polished it with the cuff of his robe and then set it back on his head.

¹²² In further fairness, Bogglin Jinks had done all the slicing and dicing four handedly.

¹²³ Figgy pudding is generic term for a type of sweet and savory cake, made with a sour-sweet creamy layer of honey, fruits and nuts, and, usually, rum. Rather a lot of rum.

¹²⁴ The words ‘cowered’ and ‘coward’ are a homophone, that is, a pair of words that sound the same but have two different meanings. This is, quite frankly, a particularly elegant example of a homophone, where both words are used in a single sentence only three words apart.

He gave a wide grin with his pointed rat teeth. "But what can you expect? I am a rat, after all. And a really big rat at that."

Sam looked around at the numerous former rats that lay scattered about the shabby little throne room. "You are a king without a kingdom, it seems."

The Rat King shrugged. "There will always be more rats."

A column of disheveled people approached from the dark recess behind the throne room.

"Gran!" shouted A/B. She ran over and embraced an old woman who might have been the most disheveled one of the lot.

"Would you like some cheese?" asked the old woman. A/B just shook her head.

Just then, there was a rumble in the distance and then the floor began to shake.

A/B pulled back from her Gran. "Earthquake. Could be a big one."

"We need to get out of here," said Yugo.

The Rat King chuckled. "You will never make it. This old tunnel will not hold up through another earthquake."

"We will make it," said Iggy.

They left the Rat King in his ratty little room and hustled quickly into the main tunnel. The ground was shaking even harder now, and water leaked through the cracks that emerged in the walls.

"We need to hurry," said Yugo.

Iggy said that they would make it and make it they did. The Embarcadero Station was a mile away, but it is surprising how quickly elves, Boggilins and a rag tag group of refugees can run when they are in a tunnel one hundred feet underwater during an earthquake. Even as the ground shifted and tilted under them, they pressed on and reached the train platform at the same time they heard the tunnel collapse behind them. They stood there as brackish grey water washed up the tracks and then swirled back down the tunnel.

"That was a close one," said Yugo.

"I knew we would make it," said Iggy.

They marched up the long stairs and emerged back onto the icy grey ground beneath an icy grey sky.

Sam bent over to catch his breath. "I didn't think we would, but you were right Iggy. We made it."

Iggy just smiled.

They reached the snowmobile and Yugo fired up the lithium fusion engines with his remote control. "It is time for us to be on our way," he said.

"Where will you be going then?" asked A/B.

Yugo shrugged. "Hard to say."

"Every stop is a surprise," said Sam.

"A surprise every stop?" said A/B. "That sounds amazing. Take me with you."

Iggy coughed. "You cannot be serious."

"I am absolutely serious," said A/B. "You have said it yourself. This is an apocalyptic wasteland. And I live in a box. Wherever you guys are going it has to be an improvement."

"What about your Gran?" asked Iggy.

"Oh, she'll be fine," said A/B. "She has lots of new friends. And she can have the whole box to herself."

"Do we have room for another passenger?" asked Iggy.

Yugo tilted his head. "We could make room. But we would need to leave your steamer trunk behind."

"The more the merrier," said Iggy. "I can do without my luggage. I am already wearing the rest of my clothes in layers. It is very cold here in the future."

That was how the elves picked up another traveler, at the cost of one steamer trunk. "Think of it as a Christmas gift," said Iggy. He smiled and took his seat in the snowmobile.

Yugo launched the snowmobile up into the sky and engaged the time-interface. The snowmobile disappeared in a brilliant flash of light, like the brightest star in the sky.

Gran and her friends dug into Iggy's trunk and happily dressed up in the clothes that Iggy left behind, even though most of them were sized extra small. He called it a Christmas gift, they said. They looked up at the slowly fading star in the evening sky. They all agreed that Christmas gifts sounded like a good idea and that they should do it again the next year.

And so, they did.

And what of the Rat King?

Well, the old stories say that the Rat King lives there still.
Seated on a throne of bricks in a cavern beneath the sea.

There will always be more rats, he said.

The Rat King had that much right.

There are always more rats.

December 22, 1592

“WHERE ARE WE GOING NOW?” asked A/B. “I cannot wait to see.”

“Every stop is a surprise,” said Sam.

“Jinks has been working on the time-interface,” said Yugo. “Hopefully, there will be no more surprises.”

“My brain is both voluminous and beautiful,” said Bogglin Jinks.

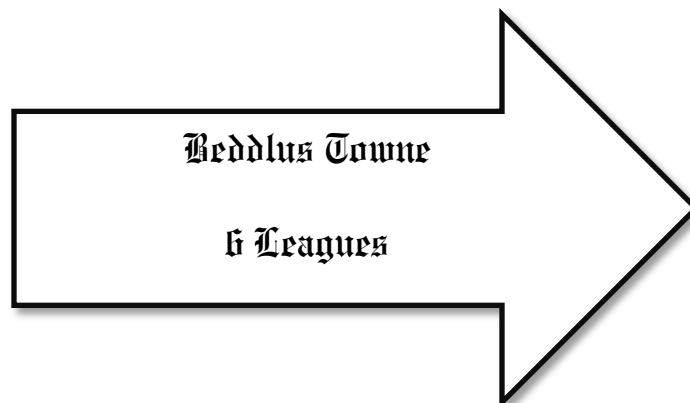
“So, you say,” said Sam. “But have you fixed it?”

“Indisputably,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“I am glad to hear it,” said Iggy. “We have a mission to finish.”

“We shall be at your desired destination in but a moment,” said Bogglin Jinks.

Yugo guided the snowmobile out of the time vortex and to a safe landing in 1592. There was a sign at the side of the road that said:



“You see?” said Bogglin Jinks. “The time-interface has been completely repaired.”

“Jinks, you dummy,” said Sam. “This is not the right time at all. It is definitely not the right place at all. This is Beddleton.”

“The programming is perfect,” said Bogglin Jinks. “The snowmobile is precisely where it is meant to be.”

“We can’t be meant to be back in Beddleton,” said Sam. “It is just about the worst place there is.”

“Beddleton is not that bad,” said Iggy.

A/B looked out the window and smiled. “This is perfect. The sky is blue. And look. There is green stuff on the ground. I’ve never seen green stuff. And I mean that. I had never even seen the colour green until just this minute.”

“I suppose even Beddleton is an improvement on your frozen rat world,” said Sam.

A/B glared at him.

“I am rather fond of this one pub there,” said Sam. “Yugo, to the *Moose and Pickle!* At once!”

Yugo shrugged and turned the snowmobile down the road. Iggy read from the dashboard monitor as Yugo drove. “It is December 22nd, 1586.” He turned to A/B. “We are currently 17 and a half miles from Beddlus Towne, which was once a Roman outpost, and which will one day be called Beddleton. In between it is a lot of other things.”

“What about this *Moose and Pickle* place?” asked A/B.

“It is a tavern of varying quality,” said Yugo. “Depending on the century.”

“They do serve a fine frumenty most centuries” said Iggy.

“And a fine elfmeäde,” added Sam.

“It sounds divine,” said A/B.

A few minutes later, Yugo parked the snowmobile in what he had come to consider was his usual spot. In 1586, his usual spot was a patch of weedy grass thirty feet from the front door of the *Moose and Pickle*.

Sam scampered out of the snowmobile and ran up the steps. By the time the others had entered, Sam was seated at a table near the bar with three mugs of

foaming elfmeäde before him. Bogglin Jinks sat down next to Sam and reached over for one of the mugs. Sam slapped its arm. "These are mine. Get your own elfmeäde."

Bogglin Jinks raised three of its arms and was swiftly rewarded with three mugs of elfmeäde of its own. The Bogglin nodded and said, "I believe that I now understand your affinity for this establishment." Sam raised one of his mugs in reply.

Iggy and Yugo had their usual mugs of unsweetened water. A/B enjoyed a white wine spritzer, the newest addition to the menu. Sam ordered a large frumenty. Bogglin Jinks had a bowl of rat's hearts.

Their orders were written down by the latest Mrs. Wiggins on a white tablet with a thick black charcoal marker. She was slim, with the usual freckles and a mass of unruly curly brown hair stacked on top of her head. When this latest Mrs. Wiggins returned with two large waters and a single medium white wine spritzer, she mentioned to the group, "you have arrived on a particularly auspicious occasion. Mr. Shakespeare is putting on his newest play tonight. In this very room. On this very night. As I say, a most auspicious occasion indeed."

"Mr. Shakespeare, you say?" said Iggy.

"William Shakespeare?" asked Yugo.

"Is it Hamlet?" asked Sam.

This latest Mrs. Wiggins gave Sam a hard look. The type of look he used to get as a boy in toymaking school and this latest Mrs. Wiggins were his underpaid and overworked teacher. "You, foolish elf, Mr. Shakespeare won't write Hamlet for another 8 years."

At least that is what Sam thought she said. The others heard her say, "whatever are you yapping on about ye wee daft elf? Of course, it is Mr. William Shakespeare. There is no such person as Mr. Hamlet Shakespeare."

"Why is he putting on a play in a pub instead of a proper theater?" asked Iggy.

“It’s the plague, isn’t it,” said this latest Mrs. Wiggins. “All of the theaters have been closed because of the plague.¹²⁵ By order of the Queen,¹²⁶ herself.”

“It is like that everywhere we go,” said Yugio.

“What is it about?” asked Sam.

“Nobody knows, he has kept it all a great secret,” said the latest Mrs. Wiggins. “But I know it will be a right proper play for Christmas.”

Iggy nudged Yugo. “Did Shakespeare write a Christmas play?” But before he could get an answer, the lights dimmed and William Shakespeare himself stepped into the open space in the middle of the room.

He gave an exaggerated bow and then announced the first performance of his newest play. “It is a Carol of Christmas,” he said. “A ghost story in three acts.”

And then he bowed again, even lower and more extravagantly this time and the performers walked out onto the floor and the play began. It was, indeed, a ghost story in three acts. It began with a soliloquy by the main character, one Elizabener Skrooge, who despised Christmas. At the end of his monologue, he declared the whole Christmas season to be naught but a humbug.

The story followed Elizabener as he was visited by three ghosts over the course of Christmas Eve, each visit accompanied by vignettes performed by the company with enthusiasm and a good measure of hithers and yons. The play reached its climax when Elizabener was shown his poor, unkempt grave and he vowed, anon, to keep Christmas well for the rest of his days.

As the troupe bowed to the applause of the patrons of the *Moose and Pickle*, Sam said, “I think I’ve seen this one before.”

Iggy whispered, “I’ve made a terrible mistake.”

¹²⁵ The bubonic plague swept Europe in waves throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. It was prevalent in London in 1592 and early 1593. Then, as now, governments reacted to the spread of the disease by banning mass gatherings. Since theaters were considered to incite lewdness at the best of times, they were usually the first thing to be shut down, along with the bear baiting arenas and the brothels. The Globe Theater in London, where many of Shakespeare’s plays were performed, was shuttered from time to time for a total of 78 months (about six and a half years.) between 1603 and 1613.

¹²⁶ In 1592 the Queen was Queen Elizabeth, but not the Queen Elizabeth you know. This was Queen Elizabeth I, the daughter of King Henry VIII, who ruled from 1558 to 1603. She was famously played by Cate Blanchett in the films *Elizabeth* and its sequel, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, which was not called *Elizabeth 2* because that name was otherwise taken.

Boggin Jinks Has a Plan

“IT IS ALL MY FAULT,” SAID IGGY as they settled into their room for the night on the second floor of the *Moose and Pickle*.

It was the same room they had spent forty days and nights in two centuries earlier. When Sam looked carefully, he could still see a faint trace of the lines and strokes he had that he had once carved into the wall.

Boggin Jinks shared their room this time, but A/B was shown into her own room the third floor. “For modesty’s sake,” explained the latest Mrs. Wiggins, as she slammed the heavy oaken door behind her.

“What do you mean, Iggy?” asked Yugo.

“I did not want to say anything before, but I left my copy of *A Christmas Carol* behind in this very room,” said Iggy. “When were stuck here all those days.”

“Forty days,” said Yugo.

“And nights,” said Sam.

“This is all my fault,” said Iggy. “Mr. Shakespeare must have read it and then written his play.”¹²⁷

“This is not good,” said Yugo. “We have stepped on the butterfly. If this play becomes as famous as Shakespeare’s other works, then Mr. Dickens will never write *A Christmas Carol*. And without that, the Christmas that we know would be very different. Something important would be missing.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Sam.

“We need to fix this,” said Yugo. “And we need to stop running around making mischief throughout history.”

“I have a plan,” said Boggin Jinks. “A ridiculously simple plan.”

“Let’s have it, Jinks,” said Sam. “I can’t wait to hear your ridiculously simple plan to fix history.”

¹²⁷ Like most dramatists of his day, many of Shakespeare’s plays were based on other stories and historical records. Hamlet may have been adapted from the Norse *Saga of King Rolf Kraki*. In the same vein, most movies today are likewise based on novels, plays or even comic books.

“We steal the script,” said Bogglin Jinks. “Ridiculously simple.”

Iggy gasped. “We cannot do that! Stealing is wrong!”

“Jinks is on to something,” said Yugo. “This a new play. Printing was expensive in the 16th century, so there cannot be more than three or four copies of the script. They are probably all in this very tavern. If we take them all, tonight, then nobody else in history will ever know that this play was written.”

Bogglin Jinks nodded. “Ridiculously simple.”

“Then nobody else will ever see this play!” said Iggy. “A play by William Shakespeare!”

“Not every play that Shakespeare wrote still exists,” said Yugo. “Some have been lost to history.”¹²⁸

“So, what’s another lost play, then?” said Sam.

Bogglin Jinks leaned back in its chair. “Ridiculously simple.”

“It still seems wrong,” said Iggy.

“Misplacing Victorian novels in the dark ages is also wrong,” said Yugo gently.

“Stepping on butterflies is wrong,” said Sam.

“There is a saying on Warden Ridge,” said Bogglin Jinks. “Three left turns make a right. Logic therefore demands that three wrongs equally make a right.”

“It is ridiculously simple when you put it like that,” said Iggy.

Bogglin Jinks pressed all twenty-four fingers together and bowed its head.

“We should get A/B to help,” said Yugo.

“She is good in a scrap,” said Sam.

“She is very nimble,” said Iggy.

Bogglin Jinks just shook its head. “Girls always make things ridiculously complicated.”

¹²⁸ There are records of performances of Shakespearean plays that no longer survive, including one called *Love’s Labour’s Won* and another called *Cardenio*, which Shakespeare likely cribbed from a sequence in the novel *Don Quixote* involving a character of that name.

The Play's the Thing

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND HIS COMPANY WERE CAMPED for the night in three pageant wagons¹²⁹ parked in a row next to the snowmobile. It was a clear night, the moon glowed down on them warmly and a thousand stars twinkled in the sky. One twinkled more brightly than the others, but that only meant that Christmas was near.

The five of them crept up to the first wagon in the row. Bogglin Jinks in front, followed by A/B, Yugo, Sam and Iggy. Iggy still had reservations about the propriety of stealing a classic work of literature, but he could not overcome the power of the logic of Bogglin Jinks. Only a brain of truly great enormity could think like that.

Bogglin Jinks pressed three hands on the door of the first wagon and gently lifted the latch with a fourth. The door opened quietly. A/B lowered her night vision goggles and slipped inside.

A moment later, she slipped back out with a thick bundle of papers under her arm. She passed them to Sam, who inspected them quickly.

On the top was a script for Mr. Shakespeare's *Carol of Christmas* and below that several handwritten pages titled "Macbeth – First Draft." Sam stuffed all the papers into his tunic. "I'll just hang on to these for safe keeping."

"Good thinking, friend Sam," said Bogglin Jinks.

"I don't know why you guys want this script so badly," said A/B. "It was a silly thing. What sort of a Christmas story has ghosts in it? And all of the lady parts were played by men.¹³⁰ None of those actors even have any lady parts."

"We told you," said Iggy. "We need it to save Christmas."

"It is what we do," said Yugo.

"If you say," said A/B. "That's everything I could find that was written down in that wagon. I did find some false noses and moustaches as well."

¹²⁹ A pageant wagon was a covered wagon used by theatrical troupes in the middle ages. They had a self-contained stage and all of the props needed to put on a show, or pageant.

¹³⁰ In Shakespeare's time, female roles were played by men, usually adolescent boys. It was felt that acting was too disreputable a profession for a proper lady. Women were not permitted to perform on stage until the 1660's, and even then, respectable women would not seriously consider a career in the theater.

“Oooh,” said Iggy. “I would surely like a false nose and moustache.”

A/B turned back to the door. “Aren’t you the guy who thinks stealing is wrong?” asked Sam.

Iggy gulped and nodded. “Quite right. I will get my own false nose and moustache the proper way.”

“Suit yourself,” said A/B.

They reached the second wagon. Bogglin Jinks worked the lock and then A/B slid inside.

Once more she emerged with a bundle of papers in her hand. There was another script for *The Carol of Christmas*, with stage directions scribbled in the margins and a few pages of another work in progress. She turned them over to Sam.

He was about to tuck them into his jacket with the others before the title of the other work caught his eye. “What is this? *Robert and Juliet*? No, no, no. That will not do at all,” said Sam. He read further down the page. “Oh, come on. ‘that which we call a turnip by any other name would smell as sweet?’ This guy is a complete hack.”

He pulled a Sharpie™ from his pocket. He scribbled out the word ‘Robert’ and replaced it with ‘Romeo’. He likewise stroked out ‘turnip’ and replaced it with ‘rose’. Then he added a few lines to include a balcony in the set directions and changed Robert (now Romeo’s) last name from ‘Jones’ to ‘Montague’. He shoved the corrected pages at A/B. “Take these and put them back where you found them.”

A/B took a quick read of Sam’s edits. “Oh yes, this is much better. But what did you think of the ending? Do you really think Romeo would run off with Juliet’s mother at the end? It feels unearned to me.”

“It’s terrible,” said Sam. “It would be better if they both just drank poison.”

“That is much better,” said A/B. She grabbed Sam’s Sharpie™ and scribbled a few new paragraphs at the end. She returned the Sharpie™ to Sam and crept back to the wagon. “I’ll be back in a jiff.”

“Sam,” hissed Iggy. “You cannot do that. You are changing history.”

Sam smiled. “Sometimes you have to step on a few butterflies to make an omelet.”

Before Iggy could respond, a jiff passed, and A/B returned. “That’s another job well done.”

“If there are any more copies of the Christmas play, they will be there.” Bogglin Jinks pointed seven fingers at the third and last wagon.

“This plan has proven ridiculously simple, so far,” said A/B.

“All of my plans are elegant in their perfection and simplicity,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“Let’s go get it,” said A/B. Bogglin Jinks nodded and quickly released the door latch. A/B scampered up the three wooden steps that led inside.

The elves waited nervously for A/B to return. Then a voice called out from within the wagon, “What is this! Something rotten in my wagon!” Then there was a



and a



and the door snapped open. A/B tumbled down the three wooden steps and landed in a heap next to Bogglin Jinks.

A figure with a pointy beard and ruffly collar stepped into the doorway. It was William Shakespeare himself and he was most displeased with the intrusion.

“Oops,” said A/B.

“Girls always make things more complicated,” said Bogglin Jinks.

The Bard

“**F**orsooth and anon,” said Shakespeare. “*Wicked deedf afoot, blackgvardf at my door. Begone uillianf, trouble Shakefpeare no more!*”

Iggy took off his cap and made a little bow. “We are very sorry, sir. We do not mean to be any trouble.”

“If we could just have a quick look around,” said Yugo.

“Then we could save Christmas and be right on our way,” said Sam.

“*Eluef and bogglinf!*” barked Shakespeare, “*fcarce feen their kind about, leaue me at nonce, lest I gvue thee a clout!*”

“Give us a clout, you say?” said A/B. She had picked herself off the ground and wagged her finger at Shakespeare. “You should be thanking us. ‘Robert and Juliette?’ That is just awful.”

“And we fixed it for you!” said Sam. “You’re welcome.”

“Shakespeare needf not the aid of impf or tartf, his plays be the best, diuine workf of art!”

Sam turned to A/B. “He feels his plays to be the best plays.”

“I beg to differ,” said A/B. “I feel them not to be.”

“What say you Jinks,” asked Sam. “Do you feel them to be or not to be?”

Shakespeare raised a finger. He was about to bark out another threat in iambic pentameter, but then he paused and said, *“hold thy tongves, knaues; I mvst maketh a note.”* He turned back into wagon and pulled the door shut.

“Parting is such sweet sorrow,” Sam called after him and gave a deep bow. A/B shook with giggles.

“I haft noted that one af well!” called a voice from within the wagon.

“You know what they say,” said A/B. “All’s well that ends well. Sam gripped his sides with laughter as tears rolled down his eyes.

“What are you two laughing about?” asked Iggy. “He is on to us. We will never get in there now.”

“We are going to need a new plan,” said Yugo.

“I have a notion,” said Bogglin Jinks. “A ridiculously simple notion.”

“Cool your notions, Jinks,” said A/B. She reached into her jacket and pulled out a rumpled stack of pages. “I nicked the last copy before he threw me out.

“I knew that,” said Bogglin Jinks. “That was my notion. Really.”

“Sure Jinks,” said Sam.

“It really was,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“I got this, too,” said A.B. She pulled out a dog-eared paperback copy of *A Christmas Carol*. It looked to be a couple of hundred years old.

“That’s my book!” said Iggy. A/B passed it to him.

“We should move on,” said Yugo. “Before we cause any more trouble.”

“Hang on,” said Sam. “There’s something I have to do before we go.” He marched up to Shakespeare’s wagon and banged on the door.

The door swung open and Shakespeare stuck out his head. *“What if it elf? Thov art making my winter discontent!”*

“I’ve got a few things to say to you, Bill,” said Sam.

“*Speak then, you elf-skin!*”¹³¹ shouted Shakespeare, “*I haſt great worſh to write thiſ night!*”

Sam stood up as tall as his elf’s skin would allow. “You are supposed to be the greatest writer in the English language. But you don’t even write in English. It’s all wherefore this and forsooth that and nobody has any idea what in the world you are even talking about. And don’t get me started on all of the misery you are going to cause schoolchildren for the next four hundred years. They all hate you. Their teachers tell them that there are jokes in these plays. Nobody gets your jokes. Get it together man. Clean it up and start using proper sentences with proper words. And get better jokes.”

Shakespeare raised his quill and began to reply, but Sam slammed the wagon door in his face. He turned and walked down the steps to A/B’s polite applause.

“Okay, I’ve said my piece, we can go now,” said Sam.

“We have already stayed to long,” said Yugo. He led the others to the snowmobile which was parked beside Shakespeare’s wagon. They all piled in; it was becoming progressively more crowded.

“Here is hoping we get it right this time,” said Iggy.

“The time-interface is working perfectly now,” said Bogglin Jinks. “It will take us precisely where we are meant to go.”

“I hope you are right,” said Yugo.

“I am always right,” said Bogglin Jinks.

Yugo raised an eyebrow and then pressed the orange button that initiated the time-interface. In a moment they were gone. They had left the renaissance behind.

EXEUNT

¹³¹ Shakespeare used the expression “elf-skin” as an insult in his play, *Henry IV, Part 1*. There, Falstaff berates Prince Harry as ‘you starveling, you elf-skin, you dried neat’s tongue, you bull’s pizzle, you stockfish!’ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “elf-skin” as “a man of shrivelled and shrunken form.” However, the only recorded use of the expression ‘elf-skin’ is in the second act of *Henry VI, Part 1*. It has also been suggested that the actual insult was ‘eel’s skin,’ or ‘el’s skin,’ but spelled with the first ‘s’ in the old-fashioned long form that resembles the letter ‘f’, like this: ‘el] skin.’ Eel’s skin seems to fit in better with the tone of the harangue.

December 22, 1977

DECEMBER 23RD IS THE NIGHT BEFORE THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS. That is the night when the good people of Garland Grove light up the big Christmas tree in the town square every year. Garland Grove is a little town of no more than five thousand people situated in the rolling hills of Northern California, not far south from San Francisco. But not so far north of Gilroy,¹³² that it can avoid a faint smell of garlic in the air when the wind blows from the south.

December 22nd is the day before the day before the day before Christmas Day. That is the day that a group of townspeople range out into the nearby forest and pick out the tree they will stand up in the town square. A great deal of care is taken in selecting the tree. The townsfolk search for weeks in advance to seek out the tree that will stand for the town's Christmas.

This year was more important than most, for it was the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of Garland Grove and the annual Christmas tree needed to be the tallest, the greenest and the most magnificent that the townsfolk had ever raised in the square. There was such a tree, and Nick had found it.

Nick was everyone's favourite. He had arresting blue eyes, the colour of robins' eggs, with fleck of silver in the irises. His crooked smile set off a dimple on his broad chin which was covered with the faintest skiff of slightly greying stubble and ended in a jawline so sharp you could cut out a paper snowflake with it.

All the men in town wanted to be Nick and all the women in town wanted to be with Nick. In fairness, a good number of the men wanted to be with Nick, too. But so far, he had remained steadfastly single.

The tree that Nick had found stood at the edge of a clearing in the forest. It was thick and green and bushy with a million branches that angled in all directions and yet formed a perfect tall cone. It stood nearly a hundred feet tall and was surrounded by little red and green flowers. As Nick and his companions approached, the sun broke through a gap in the clouds and shone down on the tree with an ethereal light. One could almost hear a choir of angels singing the Hallelujah chorus as they stood about it.

The trunk was fully four feet across and it took the concerted effort of all the men pulling on the long saw to bring it down. It would take all of them, and a very large truck, to bring it into town.

¹³² Gilroy, California is located about 80 miles south of San Francisco and is best known for its crops of garlic and mushrooms. It is a rather smelly place.

It was then, as the townspeople were pushing the enormous, perfect tree onto the back of a flatbed truck that the snowmobile burst out of the time vortex and into the little clearing in the woods.

“Watch out!” yelled Iggy. The snowmobile skidded across the clearing and then bounced off the stump that was once the 1952 Christmas tree.

“I knew I should have never have let you drive,” said Yugo.

“You act like I’ve never driven an atomic powered snowmobile before,” said A/B. “I am from the future you know.”

“You mean you have driven an atomic powered snowmobile before?” asked Iggy.

“Goodness no,” said A/B. “I drove a dog sled once. That was fun.” The snowmobile careened across the clearing.

“Hit the brakes,” shouted Yugo.

“What are brakes?” asked A/B, she turned the wheel and the snowmobile slid sideways into the crowd at the edge of the clearing. That was where Nick was guiding people out of harm’s way when harm came his way, in the form of a gleaming red snowmobile with a woefully inexperienced operator at the controls.

There was a heavy thump, and the snowmobile came to a stop.

“Why did you let this novice drive?” asked Bogglin Jinks.

“She asked nicely. She said she knew what she was doing,” said Yugo.

“Girls always make things more complicated,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“Where are we?” asked Iggy.

Yugo tapped the touch screen of his monitor. “We are back in California. In 1977.”

“We just ran over somebody in California?” said Sam. “The lawsuits are going to bankrupt us.”

“Oh, it will be fine,” said A/B. She opened the door and then looked at Yugo. “It’s your snowmobile, you go first.”

Yugo shook his head and stepped out of the snowmobile to investigate the damage. He immediately returned and said, “you guys have to see this.”

Iggy, Sam, Bogglin Jinks and A/B scrambled out of the snowmobile and gathered beside Yugo.

“That is the most handsome man I have ever seen,” said Iggy.

“I know,” said Yugo. “You had to see this.”

Nick lay on the ground beside the snowmobile. He clutched his right elbow in his left hand. He looked uncomfortable, or as uncomfortable as the most handsome man in the world could ever look.

A/B knelt by his side. She gently cradled his arm in hers and looked into his eyes. Those robin’s egg blue eyes.

“You’re hurt,” she said.

“It’s nothing,” said Nick. But he winced when he tried to sit up.

“You poor, poor man. We must get you to the hospital at once,” said A/B. “I will take you. Come with me.” She helped Nick to his feet and then guided him into the passenger side of the snowmobile before she climbed behind the wheel herself.

Before Yugo could stop her, A/B had put the snowmobile into gear and sped out of the clearing.

“She’ll never make it,” said Sam. “She doesn’t even know how to drive.”

“I am sure she will find her way,” said Iggy, ever the optimist.

“I just hope she makes it there in one piece,” said Yugo. “The snowmobile can be a bit fussy.”


Another engine growled. The big flat bed truck with a hundred-foot tree in the back began to pull out of the clearing. The elves and Bogglin Jinks ran after it. “Wait for us,” shouted Iggy.

The big truck slowed down. The driver leaned out and said, “sorry boys, we don’t have any more room. But if you just follow this road, it will take you straight into town.”

“How far is that?” asked Yugo.

“About 18 miles.” The driver rolled up his window and the big flatbed truck slowly wound its way out onto the road.

The Night Before the Night Before

IGHTEEN MILES LATER, THREE WEARY ELVES, and one weary Bogglin, arrived in the little town of Garland Grove. It was half past three in the morning when they reached the town limits. There was a large sign at the side of the road that said as follows, and I quote:

Welcome to Garland Grove
The Jolliest Town This Side of the Nut House

There was another sign beneath it that said:

The Nut House 4 Mi.

“I have pockets of fluid between the layers of skin on the bottom of my feet,” said Bogglin Jinks. “What wickedness is this?”

“Relax Jinks,” said Iggy. “Those are just blisters. We all have them now.”

“It is very painful,” said Bogglin Jinks. “You may not realize this, but pain is very hurtful to Boggilins,”

“Your feet would not hurt so much if you wore shoes,” said Yugo.

“A Bogglin would never disgrace its feet with these affectations you call shoes,” said Bogglin Jinks, with a sneer.

“Suit yourself, Jinks,” said Sam.

“We made it,” said Iggy. “Now what?”

“We need to find someplace to stay for the night,” said Yugo. “Then we need to find A/B and the snowmobile.”

“How about that place,” said Sam. “It looks nice.” He pointed to a two-story building at the end of the block that looked like a house built in the Tudor style.¹³³ The sign above the old-fashioned wooden door said:

WIGGINS' OLD TOWNE INN

“I wonder if they have frumenty,” said Iggy.

“I wonder if they have foot baths,” said Boggin Jinks.

They walked in and were greeted by a sleepy looking woman at the front desk. She was about thirty years old, with a dirty blonde page boy haircut. She wore a polyester shirt with vertical green stripes with a matching headband.

“What are you wee fellows doing out so late?” she said.

“Ah, you must be Mrs. Wiggins,” said Sam.

The woman laughed. “Goodness no. I’m Mrs. Terwilliger. There hasn’t been a Wiggins in the Old Towne Inn for a hundred years. Old Mr. Wiggins sold the place and moved to the City. Didn’t want any part of Garland Grove. Funny they kept the name for all these years. Will you be wanting a room for the night? What’s left of it?”

“Yes please, Mrs. Terwilliger,” said Iggy.

“And a foot bath,” said Boggin Jinks.

Mrs. Terwilliger leaned over her desk and looked down at Boggin Jinks’ feet. “Those look terrible,” she said. “Why aren’t you wearing shoes?”

“Shoes are vulgar,” said Boggin Jinks.

“Maybe so,” said Mrs. Terwilliger. “But vulgar people don’t get blisters like that.”

She showed them to a room on the second floor. They collapsed into their beds and were asleep in moments.

¹³³ A Tudor house is a house that looks like this: →



Despite their late night, they were up early the next day. Elves are early risers. Overnight, Bogglin Jinks' feet had swollen to the size and shape of footballs and Iggy decided they needed to see a doctor.

"I do not trust your primitive Earth medicine," said Bogglin Jinks.

"Our primitive earth medicine can make your feet stop hurting," said Yugo.

"Very well," said Bogglin Jinks. "Let us see these doctors of yours. But I am leaving as soon as he brings out the leeches."

That was how the elves ended up at the hospital, which was only two streets away from the Old Towne Inn. Which was fortunate, since they had to take turns carrying Bogglin Jinks the whole way. But once they arrived, they quickly got their blisters lanced and had a refreshing ice bath, which for elves is most invigorating indeed. Bogglin Jinks declined the ice bath. And any leeches.

The doctor wrote up a prescription for Bogglin Jinks. "I've never treated a Bogglin before," he said. "I understand that pain can be very hurtful to your kind. I am going to prescribe Advil¹³⁴ for this. It is new, but I've heard good things. You also might want to consider wearing shoes in the future."

They were pushing Bogglin Jinks through the foyer in a wheelchair when they ran into A/B, who had just walked in.

"Where have you been?" asked Iggy.

"And where is my snowmobile?" asked Yugo. He crossed his arms and tapped his foot while he waited for her to reply.

"You will be happy to know that the snowmobile is parked right outside," said A/B. "There is a little dent on the fender though. Sorry."

Yugo gasped. "How little?" he asked. His voice was just a squeaking whisper. He began to hyperventilate.

"Just a little one," said A/B. She held up her hands about a foot and a half apart.

Yugo clutched his chest and fell to the floor. Fortunately, the best place in the world to have a heart attack is in the foyer of a hospital, as he was immediately surrounded by a team of doctors and nurses who were able to quickly resuscitate him without the use of a single leech.

"I spent the night at this charming place, Wiggins Old Towne Inn," said A/B. "You should check it out. They serve a traditional English breakfast; I think it

¹³⁴ Advil was first available in the United States in 1974. It did not become an over-the-counter medication until 1984.

was called frumenty. I came back this morning to collect Nick. They made him stay over night. For observation.” A/B made the air quotes sign with her hands.

“You did run over him with a snowmobile,” said Sam.

“It was just a little bump,” said A/B. “Though that is where the dent came from.”

Yugo gasped and clutched at his chest. All the doctors and nurses in the room rushed to his side.

“And there he is!” shouted A/B. A nurse wheeled Nick into the room in a wheelchair of his own. His arm was in a sling, but otherwise he looked none the worse. A/B ran over and took the handles of the wheelchair from the nurse.

Iggy looked around the room and nodded. “Everything seems to have worked out then. Maybe we should move on before anything else goes wrong.

“Oh no,” you can’t leave yet,” said Nick. “We hardly ever get elves around here and you’ve arrived on a very auspicious occasion. We are lighting up the big tree in the town square tonight. You simply must stay.”

“We simply must stay,” echoed A/B.

“I guess we are staying, then,” said Iggy. “But mind yourselves. Don’t be stepping on any butterflies.”

“I cannot step on anything,” said Bogglin Jinks.

Later that evening, they all gathered in the town square, three elves on their feet, Bogglin Jinks in a chair and A/B beside Nick, holding on to his good hand. At six o’clock precisely the townsfolk counted down to the moment when the giant perfect tree would be lit for Christmas. When the count reached zero, the tree flashed into a brilliant array of red and blue and gold and purple and apricot and mauve and olive and lilac and azure and Iggy could only look on in awe and wonder where all those unusual lights had come from.


And it was then, as the tree burst into a brilliant rainbow of colour that Nick and A/B shared their first kiss. Fireworks exploded in the sky above the tree, but only Nick and A/B could see them. Which was odd, since they both had their eyes closed.

And then the party began. There was music and dancing and laughter and many glasses of eggnog, some of which were heavily fortified. A man dressed as Santa Claus arrived and threw gift wrapped packages into the crowd and chortled ‘Ho Ho Ho’ all the while.

Sam caught one of the packages. Inside he found a coupon for a free pedicure at Madam Isabella’s Salon on the Main Street. He resolved to pay a visit there in the morning.

It was a most festive time. The elves staggered happily back to the Old Towne Inn, with visions of sugarplums dancing in their heads and with Bogglin Jinks draped over Iggy's shoulder as they mounted the steps to their second-floor room.

The Night Before

 LOVE IS A FUNNY THING. No one knows where it might find them. Sometimes it arrives unexpectedly. Sometimes it appears to those who wish for it most. But it has no schedule. It arrives when it arrives.

And it had arrived for Nick and A/B.

He collected her early the next morning from her cozy room at Wiggins Old Towne Tavern. That took a walk down Holly Road towards the park. They passed a row of clapboard houses,¹³⁵ painted in pastel colours, each with a little white picket fence and perfect green lawn out front.

“Look at all the pretty houses,” said A/B. “I used to live in a box.” Nick laughed and then they walked through the park and along the river, where they stopped to feed the ducks and watch children racing paddle boats. They stopped for lunch at the Winter Tavern, a glass walled building with a white roof in the center of the park. They ate mince pie and drank candy cane tea.

As they walked back to the Old Towne Inn, they passed Madam Isabella's on Main Street. They looked in the window and saw Sam, seated in a big leather massage chair getting a pedicure.

They walked in to join him. Sam leaned back in his massage chair with his freshly painted toes spread out. His toenails were coloured navy blue with silver sparkles.

“Your toes look like a Christmas night,” said A.B with a giggle.

“I have Christmas in me,” said Sam. “All through the year.”

“Where are the others?” asked A/B.

¹³⁵ A clapboard house is a house that looks like this: →



“Back at the hotel. They did not want pedicures.”

“We should get pedicures, too,” said A/B.

Nick just shrugged. “Why not?” Soon all three of them had sparkly painted blue toenails.

“Now we all our toes look like a Christmas night,” said A/B.

“Like last night,” said Nick. A/B smiled and leaned her head on his shoulder. It took all of Sam’s strength to keep from throwing up a little bit in his mouth.

They returned to the Old Towne Inn before dinner time. Iggy and Yugo were in close conversation at one table. Bogglin Jinks sat at another table, fiddling with the time-interface.

“What is Jinks up to?” asked Sam.

“He is repairing the time-interface,” said Yugo.

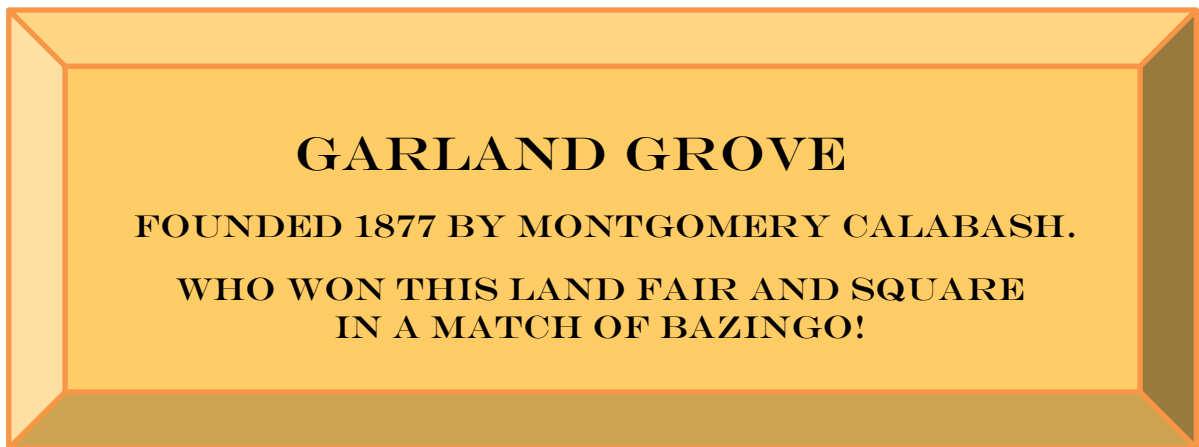
“Do you think it can be fixed?” asked Sam.

“It is simplicity itself,” said Bogglin Jinks. It held the time-interface in one hand while replacing a screw with another and soldering a seam closed with another.

“Must be handy to have so many hands,” said Sam.

“Yes, you could say it is very handy,” said Bogglin Jinks. It spun the screwdriver in its fingers.

Yugo beckoned Sam to come to their table. “You guys have to see this,” he said. He pulled back a curtain to reveal an old, slightly tarnished plaque which was mounted on the brick wall. It said:



“I love bazingo,” said Iggy.

“We’ve been looking for a man named Calabash,” said Sam.

“Yes, we are in the right place, but our Calabash will not be here for another 40 years,” said Yugo. “This also explains why Yellowstone Wiggins hated the Calabashes so much. His old land claim where he found all that gold was right around here. It looks like he lost it to this Montgomery Calabash fellow in a game of chance.”

“I bet Calabash cheated,” said Sam.

“Old Yellowstone thought so,” said Yugo.

“I’m sure of it,” said Sam. “I could never win at bazingo without cheating,”

“Excuse me?” said Iggy.

Sam changed the subject. He pointed his thumb at the table where A/B and Nick were leaning in close and making googly eyes at each other. “Get a load of those love birds.”

“It is just like a Hallmark™ Christmas movie,” said Iggy. “Girl from the future travels to a small town at Christmas time, then finds her true love when she runs him down with her atomic snowmobile.”

“This is nothing like a Hallmark™ movie,” said Yugo. “In a Hallmark™ movie, the woman is an overworked executive. She works in advertising or publishing. She has a name like Carol, or Joy or Holly. She goes back to the small town where she grew up for the first time in fifteen years and she meets the awkward boy she knew in high school, except now he is a veterinarian or a schoolteacher and he helps her rediscover the true meaning of Christmas.”

“Or sometimes the story is about a guy,” said Sam. “And he is a high-powered lawyer or a CEO who never had time for a family and he hates Christmas.”

“And does this guy have a Christmas name, too?” asked Iggy.

“Oh yes,” said Sam. “Something like Kris, with a K. Like in Kris Kringle.”

“Or Nick?” asked Iggy.

“Yeah, that’s a good one. A name like that,” said Sam. “And he has to return to the small town he left behind a long time ago. It does not really matter why, maybe an old school friend needs some help or his mom had a fall. And the town has a Christmassy name too, like Chestnut Cove, or New Bethlehem or even Christmas.”

“Or Garland Grove?” asked Iggy.

“Yeah, something like that,” said Sam. “And then he runs into the girl he left behind. She probably runs a little bakery or a bookstore or even a Christmas tree lot and she is about to be foreclosed by the bank, but he rallies the town to

help and along the way he finds true love and rediscovers the true meaning of Christmas.”

“Sometimes, the girl is not a high-powered executive,” said Yugo. “She might be a dog walker. And she runs into a mysterious stranger, who is new to town. He is incredibly handsome and has a vaguely European accent. At first, he seems aloof, but then he warms up to her and it turns out he is really a prince in disguise, and they both find true love and rediscover the true meaning of Christmas.”

“Or the guy might be a banker or a factory owner,” said Sam. “And the factory is going to be shut down because of a big merger that he has been working on for years. And the factory makes toys or candy. But then he comes to the town to close the deal and falls in love with the little town and the plucky girl who works on the line and then they go to the town Christmas celebration together.”

“Like a tree lighting ceremony?”

“Yes, that sort of thing,” said Sam. “And they fall in love that very night and the banker or business owner has a change of heart because he has rediscovered the true meaning of Christmas.”

“Or what about this one,” said Iggy. “Our heroine, who might dress in a jump suit and have an odd name, is just passing through a beautiful little town on her way somewhere else. It might have a Christmassy name, like, say, ‘Garland Grove,’ and she ends up staying around and meeting the local heart throb, who probably does have a Christmassy name, like ‘Nick’, and they fall in love at the town’s big annual Christmas celebration, which is in fact a big tree lighting ceremony, and they rediscover the true meaning of Christmas.”

“Well, when you put it like that,” said Yugo. “I suppose it is a bit like a Hallmark™ movie.”

“You don’t suppose that Nick is really a prince in disguise, do you?” asked Sam.

“No, he is just astonishingly handsome,” said Iggy. “Being a prince on top of that would be a little too much.”

“No vaguely European accent either,” said Yugo. “That’s usually a dead giveaway.”

“We should write a screenplay,” said Sam.

“It is done,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“The screenplay?” asked Iggy.

“The time-interface is repaired,” said Bogglin Jinks. “It was a simple fix. But the new programming is very sophisticated. Your elfish brains would explode if

you tried to read it. And I have also completed the screenplay you were discussing. I think you will find it to be superior to Mr. Shakespeare's work. Frankly, that man was a hack."

That was when a group of carolers arrived at the Old Towne Inn. They sang in three-part harmony and soon other townsfolk joined along and the arrangement became even more complicated and everyone in the dining room clapped their hands and danced in time to the music.

"How nice," said Bogglin Jinks.

"Have you rediscovered the true meaning of Christmas?" asked Sam.

"Your Christmas is fine," said Bogglin Jinks. "But it is no Bogglin Crimmins Day." Still, the Bogglin wiped a small acidic tear from its eye when it felt no one was looking. Perhaps, in its own way, Bogglin Jinks had rediscovered the true meaning of Christmas.

The Day

CHRISTMAS DAY IN GARLAND GROVE CAME WITH A SURPRISE SNOWFALL. The palm trees bowed low under the weight of all that snow.

At the crack of dawn, Iggy leapt from his bed. He tore open the shutters and threw up the sash. A luster of midday shone off the new fallen snow.

"Snow on Christmas in California," said Iggy. "Just like a Hallmark™ movie."

Santa Claus had visited Wiggins' Old Towne Inn in the night. Of course, he had. He left a pair of mittens for each of Iggy, Yugo and Sam. He left two pairs of mittens for Bogglin Jinks, each with an extra thumb.

He left a small diamond ring for Nick with a tag that said, 'you know what to do.'

He also left a note for the elves:

Hello Boys -

What are you doing here? I thought we talked about this.

Get home now before you cause any more trouble!

And one more thing ...

Merry Christmas.

Your pal,

Santa C.

“We really need to go,” said Yugo.

“But what about the snowmobile?” asked Sam. “It has a big dent in it.”

Yugo breathed through his nose for a few moments and then said, “the snowmobile will work with a dent. And Bogglin Jinks has fixed the time-interface. It will get us home now. Santa is right. We need to be on our way before we cause any more trouble.”

“These mittens are incredibly comfortable,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“Santa Claus always knows,” said Iggy.

“I’m just surprised you were on the Nice List with that attitude of yours,” said Sam.

Bogglin Jinks frowned. “What attitude?”

“You know what attitude,” said Sam.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” said Bogglin Jinks. It crossed all four of its arms in a pattern that was just confusing.

“We really need to go,” said Yugo. “Iggy, go get A/B.”

Iggy nodded, then walked briskly down the hall and knocked on A/B’s door. “Time to go, A/B,” he said.

“I’m coming,” said A/B.

Iggy bounded down the stairs and joined the others at the side of the snowmobile. Yugo was stroking the dent A/B had made with a pained look on his face.

“That will rub right out,” said Sam.

“Put all of your hands into it,” said Bogglin Jinks, raising all four of its own.

Yugo sighed. “I will fix it when we get home. Which is where we are going now that Jinks has fixed the time-interface.”

“What about the mission?” asked Iggy.

“The mission can wait until we get rid of this dent,” said Yugo.

The elves and Bogglin Jinks were all in the snowmobile, with the engine running, when A/B arrived, with Nick at her side.

“It is time to go,” said Iggy. “Get in.”

“I’m not coming,” said A/B. “I’m staying here. With Nick.”

“I knew it,” said Bogglin Jinks. “I had already included this part in my screenplay.”

“Are you sure?” asked Iggy.

A/B turned and looked up into Nick’s eyes. “I’m sure.”

“If you say so,” said Yugo. “But we need to go. Now.” He pressed the orange button that initiated the time-interface.

“I don’t think we’ve ever been properly introduced. A/B thinks the world of you guys. Thanks for bringing her here,” Nick said. He stuck his hand into the open window. “I’m Nick. Nick Calabash.”

And then the snowmobile spun away from Nick and A/B and Garland Grove.

“Did you hear that?” said Iggy. “Nick is a Calabash.”

“Are you saying that he is not a prince in disguise then?” asked Sam.

“And A/B is a Wiggins.” said Yugo.

“The ghost of Yellowstone Wiggins cannot be pleased with this development,” said Iggy.

“Don’t worry,” said Sam. “He’s harmless.”

“Harmless he may be,” said Bogglin Jinks. “But you have all stepped on the butterfly this time.”

December 22, 1997

IGGY LOOKED THROUGH THE PASSENGER WINDOW AS THE SWIRLING GLOW of the time vortex faded, and the snowmobile burst into the clear afternoon sky over the desert. “Wait a minute, this is not the North Pole,” he said.

“You said you fixed this,” said Yugo. “I trusted you to fix this.”

“The time-interface is operating perfectly,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“What’s the deal Jinks?” said Sam. “We were supposed to go home. You said we were going home.”

“I said I was going home,” said Bogglin Jinks. “And I am.”

The radio on the snowmobile played *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* by the Wiggles. “Where are we?” asked Iggy.

“We are near Groom Lake, Nevada,” said Yugo. “In 1997. December 22nd, 1997.”

“I knew what day it was,” said Sam. “What are we doing in the middle of the desert three days before Christmas?”

“The first Christmas happened in the desert,” said Iggy.

“This is where we picked up Jinks,” said Yugo. He guided the snowmobile to a soft landing inside a chain link fence that surrounded a group of low grey brick buildings. “When we were at Area 51 before. Fifty years ago. In 1947.”

“Feels like longer,” said Sam.

“Exactly one Bogglin year ago,” said Bogglin Jinks. “We have returned for Bogglin Crimmins Day.”

“We don’t do Bogglin Crimmins Day here,” said Sam.

“There will be a grand celebration soon on Warden Ridge, with feasting and singing and a visit from Old Bogglin Crimmins itself,” said Bogglin Jinks. “We simply need to wait. The others will be here soon.”

“What others?” asked Iggy.

“My Bogglin family,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“Looks like some others are coming right now,” said Sam. Sure enough, three old men in white lab coats slowly approached the snowmobile. The one in front used a cane. There was a balding man beside him who carried a clipboard. A third white-haired man with a stringy white beard slowly navigated a walker in the rear.

“You!” said the white-haired man at the front of the group. He waved his cane at the snowmobile. “You!”

Iggy pointed at himself and said, “me?”

“Not you,” said the white-haired man. He wagged his cane at the back of the snowmobile. “You!”

Sam pointed at himself and said, “me?”

“No! Not you!” More cane wagging. “That one. That Bogglin. You!”

Bogglin Jinks pointed at itself with three fingers from three different hands. “Me?”

“Yes you! Get out of that contraption this minute!”

Bogglin Jinks stepped out of the snowmobile. It was joined by Iggy, Yugo and Sam.

Iggy squinted. “Agent Wiggins?” he asked.

The old man leaned forward on his cane. “I am indeed Agent John Jack Wiggins. I am in charge of this super top-secret facility. You are trespassing. But I do thank you for bringing back my Bogglin. He has been missing for a long time.”

“Fifty years!” shouted the old man with the walker.

“You have been here all this time?” said Yugo. Indeed, it was the same Agent John Jack Wiggins who had overseen Area 51 in 1947. Yugo recognized that his elderly companions were the same Agents Terwilliger and Hobbs that they had met before, only now the former was balding and the latter could only get around with the aid of a walker.

“Yes, we’ve been here for fifty years keeping the secrets of Area 51. Waiting for our Boggilns to come back,” said Agent John Jack Wiggins. “Do you realize how much trouble you have caused me, Bogglin Jinks?”

Bogglin Jinks bowed. “You put the Boggilns in glass rooms. I hope that we caused you a very great deal of trouble, indeed.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” shouted Agent Wiggins. The cane waggled again. “Do you know how many presidents have called up and asked to see the aliens at Area 51?”

The elves shrugged.

“All of them!” shouted the balding Agent Terwilliger.

“That’s right. All of them,” said Agent Wiggins. “After every election, the new president learns about Area 51 and wants to see the little green men. And every time the president calls, we tell him that the green men all have the Bogglin Pox and that it is very contagious and deadly to people. That buys us a little time, but the one we have now call calls every six weeks. We are running out of excuses.”

Agent Terwilliger coughed a long wheezing cough and said, “the real cover up at Area 51 is not that we have aliens here, it is that we don’t!”

“But now we have our Bogglin back,” said Agent Hobbs.

“I can’t wait to tell the president,” said Agent Terwilliger.

“Why do you get to tell the president?” asked Agent Hobbs. “I should tell the president.”

“I will tell the president,” said Agent Wiggins. “After all, I am the one in charge.”

“In charge of an empty building,” said Sam.

“Not for long,” said Agent Wiggins. “Soon we will have Bogglin Jinks back in a cage where it belongs. And some elves as well.”

“We don’t get many elves around here,” said Agent Terwilliger.

“The president will be very pleased,” said Agent Hobbs. “Boggins and elves in one place.”

“I can’t wait to begin the probings,” said Agent Terwilliger. “It’s been a long time since we had a good probing at Area 51.”

“You are going to have to catch us first,” said Sam. He turned and set off at a brisk walk. Iggy, Yugo and Bogglin Jinks fell in behind him.

The three agents hobbled after them in pursuit. It was, quite possibly, the slowest foot race that has ever taken place. The elves and Bogglin Jinks walked along the chain link fence that surrounded the super top-secret government buildings. They completed a single lap in just under an hour, then slowed down to allow the white coated agents a chance to catch up. By the time they finished their second, slower, lap, the agents were wheezing loudly. As they passed the

snowmobile a second time, Agent Wiggins removed his white laboratory coat and left it on the sandy ground.

Agent Hobbs never finished the second lap. He blew a tire on his walker on the last turn. It slowly tipped over, taking Agent Hobbs to the ground with it.

Agent Terwilliger was the next to exit the chase. “My back!” he cried out and then dropped to his knees clutching his side with an arthritic hand.

Bogglin Jinks and the elves decided to wait by the snowmobile for Agent Wiggins to finish his second circuit of the super top-secret facility.

Agent Wiggins panted. “Why have you stopped?”

“We thought you could use a break,” said Iggy.

“That was very kind of you,” said Agent Wiggins. “Perhaps you would like to come inside for some iced tea while we rest.”

The Nevada desert surrounding Area 51 is not particularly hot in the winter,¹³⁶ but a long walk in a velvet jacket can make for thirsty work.

“Some iced tea would be nice,” said Yugo.

“Some iced anything would be nice,” said Sam.

“Very well,” follow me,” said Agent Wiggins. He limped to the nearest cinderblock building and tapped a code into the keypad beside the green metal door. It swung open with a creak and Agent Wiggins gestured to the elves and Bogglin Jinks to enter. He followed them in and pulled the door shut with an ominous



Agent Wiggins rubbed his hands together. “I’ve got you now, Bogglin,” he whispered to himself. “And your little elf friends too. You may be able to outrun me, but you are locked in now and there is no escape from Area 51!”

¹³⁶ The average daily high in December in Area 51 is only about 12° Celsius. Which is very comfortable for an elf, but most people would consider wearing a sweater.

A Visit From the President

“I can not believe that we fell for that,” said Iggy from inside his little glass walled cell. “Sleeping powder in the iced tea.”

“The iced tea gambit,” said Yugo with a shake of his head. “It is the oldest trick in the book.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Sam. “I always thought the oldest trick in the book was knocking out the guard and then putting on his uniform.”

“Or throwing a rock in the opposite direction to make a noise that distracts the guard,” said Bogglin Jinks. “That is also a very old trick.”

“It does not matter which trick is the oldest,” said Iggy. “We were fools to fall for it.”

Yugo nodded. “His maniacal laugh when he served up the iced tea should have given the game away.”

“We have to get out of here,” said Sam. “I can’t spend another Christmas in Area 51.”

“Never fear, friend Sam,” said Bogglin Jinks. “My Bogglin family will here soon. They will know what to do.”

“I dunno, Jinks. It’s been fifty years,” said Sam. “They have probably forgotten you by now.”

“Bogglin Jinks cannot be forgotten. Bogglin Jinks is unforgettable.”

There was a tap tap tap on the shiny navy blue floor outside the cells. Agent John Jack Wiggins limped into the room. Agents Terwilliger and Hobbs followed slowly behind. One of the wheels on Agent Hobbs’ walker wobbled dangerously. Agent Wiggins had a big grin on his grizzled face. “I have good news for you. I have just spoken with the president. He is coming to see the little green man this very afternoon.”

“And our elves,” said Agent Terwilliger proudly.

“He is very excited to see our menagerie,” said Agent Hobbs.

“He is going to be disappointed,” said Bogglin Jinks. “The other Bogglin will be here soon.”

“The more the merrier,” said Agent Terwilliger.

“More Boggins for the president,” said Agent Hobbs.

“We will probably all get medals,” said Agent Wiggins.

“Medals for Christmas,” said Agent Terwilliger.

“This will be the best Christmas ever,” said Agent Hobbs.

“Do not get your hopes up,” said Iggy. “Naughty boys and girls are usually very disappointed at Christmas.”

“And the three of you have been very naughty,” said Yugo.

“I’d plan on the worst Christmas ever if I were you,” said Sam.

“I am planning on a most joyous Boggin Crimmins Day,” said Boggin Jinks.

Agent Wiggins laughed. Then he wheezed and coughed and had to bend over to catch his breath. When he finally composed himself, he said, “we will be able to decorate an entire Christmas tree with all of the medals we are going to get this Christmas.”

“And a Silver Star¹³⁷ for the treetop!” said Agent Terwilliger.

Just then there was a knock at the door.

“He’s here!” said Agent Wiggins, and he shuffled as quickly as he could to answer the door. It took rather a while before he reached it.

It swung open slowly. But it was not a presidential entourage that stepped through. It was an entourage of Boggins, with Boggin Mews at the front, followed by the rest of the Boggin family; Boggin Crump, Boggin Dervish, Boggin Grooper, and Boggin Percy. Each of them wore full Boggin military dress, complete with small, coloured thongs, sabres and sashes with an array of medals pinned to them.

Agent Wiggins stepped backwards slowly and stuttered. “Boggin Mews, how nice to see you again.”

Boggin Mews pressed its fingers together and said, “Agent Wiggins. I regret the feeling is not mutual.”

The years have not been kind to you, Agent Wiggins,” said Boggin Crump.

¹³⁷ The Silver Star is a medal awarded by the United States Air Force for valor in combat. It is the third highest award after the Medal of Honor and the Distinguished Service Cross. Although it is called a ‘silver’ star, it is signified by a gold five-pointed star measuring 1½ inches in diameter with a smaller silver star in the middle, surrounded by a laurel wreath. It would be a stunning addition to the top of any Christmas tree.

“Most unkind indeed,” said Bogglin Dervish.

“As we promised, we have come to collect our Bogglin Jinks.” said Bogglin Grooper.

“It would be a kindness to us if you would release our Bogglin Jinks,” said Bogglin Percy.

“And its friends,” said Bogglin Dervish. It rested a hand on the shining silver sabre strapped to its waist.

“Yes, yes, right away,” said Agent Wiggins, as dreams of presidential medals danced out of his head. He unlocked Bogglin Jinks’ cell with a shaking hand and then released Iggy, Yugo and Sam in turn.

“That is better,” said Bogglin Mews, who greeted Bogglin Jinks in the traditional Bogglin fashion. They pressed all twenty-four of their fingers together and exchanged a sticky blue fluid through their joined fingertips. It was a repulsive ritual.

Bogglin Jinks’ elfish aspect faded away. It placed its thick black glasses back onto its face and turned to the elves. “I rejoin my family now. I have learned much in our travels of Christmas and the stories of Shakespeare and Hallmark™. And of friendship. I thank you all.” And then it made the traditional Bogglin gesture of thanks, which ended with a lot of spittle dribbling from its thick green lips.

“Thanks Jinks,” said Iggy.

“So, you will be on your way then?” said Yugo.

“Yes, we will all be home in time for Bogglin Crimmins Day,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“What about this lot?” said Sam. He pointed his thumb at the three geriatric agents in charge of Area 51 who were huddled at one side of the big room, at the pointy end of Bogglin Percy’s shiny sabre. “They’ve all been very naughty boys.”

“We could take them with us to Warden Ridge,” said Bogglin Mews.

“For analysis,” said Bogglin Crump.

“Detailed analysis,” said Bogglin Grooper.

“Probing analysis,” said Bogglin Dervish.

“They are decrepit samples, unfortunately,” said Bogglin Mews.

“We could rejuvenate them?” said Bogglin Crump.

“Make them fit for study,” said Bogglin Grooper.

“Probing study,” said Bogglin Dervish.

The Boggins surrounded the elderly agents and held their hands in a complex interwoven embrace. They hummed and their foreheads began to glow. Soft music filled the air, the kind played on harps and windpipes.

A faint light surrounded the agents and then old ligaments and tendons loosened. White hair turned to grey and then to russet brown. Spines straightened and ached a little less. Cataracts dissolved and yellowed eyes twinkled once more. Wrinkled skin became smooth and all those nasty brown spots faded away. Even that saggy bag of stuff from beneath the arms tightened up and stopped sagging.

Agent Wiggins looked in awe at his unwrinkled and unspotted hands. “We’re young again,” he said.

“It’s a Christmas miracle,” said Agent Terwilliger, riffling his hands through his regrown sandy brown hair in wonder. He took off his old glasses and threw them onto the ground.

“I can walk again!” cried Agent Hobbs, and he threw his broken-down walker aside with unexpected strength.

“These specimens should serve nicely,” said Bogglin Mews.

“They seem healthy enough for experiments,” said Bogglin Crump.

“Extensive experiments,” said Bogglin Grooper.

“And extensive probing,” said Bogglin Dervish.

The agents stood up straight, admiring their posture, their dark and lustrous hair and their white teeth. All of which was much easier for each of them to see without those bothersome cataracts in their eyes.

“Let us get these specimens aboard our ship,” said Bogglin Mews. The other Boggins drew their ceremonial sabres and waved them at the rejuvenated agents.

“Come along,” said Bogglin Jinks. Bogglin Mews led the other Boggins, and their newly acquired specimens, through the grey metal door and into the dusty yard where the Bogglin ship awaited them. It was a gleaming silver saucer that hovered a few feet above the ground. A shining ramp lowered to the ground as Bogglin Mews approached. The other Boggins led the agents up the ramp at sabre-point while Bogglin Mews and Bogglin Jinks remained below.

“Fare well, elf friends,” said Bogglin Jinks.

“Will we ever see you again?” asked Iggy.

“We will return these specimens when we have finished our researches,” said Bogglin Mews.

“When will that be?” asked Yugo.

“We should complete our researches by next Bogglin Crimmins Day,” said Bogglin Mews. “We will return them then.”

“That’s fifty years from now!” said Sam.

“Is this a problem?” asked Bogglin Jinks.

Sam shook his head. “I thought it would take longer than that.”

“Until we meet again,” said Bogglin Mews. It wrapped two arms through Bogglin Jinks’ elbows and they walked up the ramp together.

Bogglin Jinks he reached the top of the silver ramp and turned to look back at the elves. “If you have any more trouble with the time-interface, try turning it off and then back on again.”

“You cannot be serious,” said Yugo.

“That is what I did,” said Bogglin Jinks. And then it joined Bogglin Mews inside the floating saucer. The ramp slid up and the ship began to slowly spin. It rose straight up into the air and then rocketed across the evening sky.

“I guess it is just the three of us again,” said Iggy.

“Yes,” said Yugo. “And now that we have a working time-interface, it is time that we completed our mission.”

“It’s about time,” said Sam.

The three of them returned to the snowmobile and soon it too shot across the evening sky before disappearing into the time vortex. The newspapers were filled with reports of UFO sightings all across the southwestern United States that Christmas.

There is no official record of his visit, but President William Jefferson Clinton, the 42nd President¹³⁸ of the United States, arrived at the super top-secret base at Area 51 an hour and a half later. He had come as quickly as he could after learning about the little green men during his daily intelligence briefing. It takes


¹³⁸ Although Bill Clinton is regarded as the 42nd President of the United States, he is only the 41st person to hold that position. Grover Cleveland served two non-consecutive terms in office, from 1885 to 1889 and again from 1893 to 1897 and is therefore designated both the 22nd President of the United States and the 24th. Benjamin Harrison, who held the office of President between those two terms, was the 23rd President.

a while to coordinate the logistics of any presidential visit, and by the time he arrived, the base was completely empty.

His shiny patent leather shoes reflected off the shiny navy blue floor, which in turn reflected off his shiny patent leather shoes as he walked upon it. His eyes twinkled as he took in the room and his droll little mouth drew up like a bow. The glass walled cells were empty. There was nothing on the walls but hooks and some wire.

“Hillary is never gonna let me forget about this,” the President said. “She says there’s no such thing as little green men. Just once I wanted to prove her wrong.”

March 30, 2020

 FLOYD CALABASH HAD JUST FINISHED MAKING A BIG POT of armadillo stew when there was a flash outside his window followed by a whooshing roar of air that sounded something like ‘vwumph’. Then he heard voices outside his window.

“I think we made it!”

“We did indeed. We have arrived just outside Garland Grove. It is March 30th, 2020.”

“I can’t believe it isn’t December 22nd.”

“I smell something. Something awful.”

“We are downwind from the garlic plant.”

“That’s not garlic.” Then there were some snuffling noises. “That’s stew.”

Floyd gave his stew a quick stir and looked out his window. He saw three little men with pointed ears dressed in red and green suits. They argued like old women at a bridge table over what day it was.

“Huh,” said Floyd. “Don’t see many elves around here.”

The bickering outside continued unabated. “I have a good feeling that we are right where we are supposed to be.”

“Yes, we are right on time.”

“We haven’t been on time for weeks.”

“This time it is the right time. I can feel it.”

“Spring is in the air.”

“So is the stew.”

“We need to deal with that stew.”

“We need to stop the stew.”

“We could get T-shirts like that. With ‘Stop the Stew’ across the front.”

“I would like a T-shirt like that.”

“Can we focus on the mission? We can all get T-shirts afterwards.”

“And maybe some stew. Could we get some stew afterwards?”

“Yes Sam, all the stew you can eat.”

“But only after we finish the mission.”

“Fine. Let’s get this mission finished then. I’m starving.”

“Is this the right house?”

“Yes, this is the place.”

“Do we knock? Or just kick the door down?”

“I think we should knock. It is only polite.”

“Yes, we should knock. It is not like any of us can actually kick down a door, anyway.”

“Speak for yourself.”

There was a knock at the door. Floyd decided that it was time to meet these unusual visitors. Maybe they would like to try his stew. The chubby one would surely like some.

There were three small men at the door, each of whom had to look up to see Floyd’s belt buckle. The one on the left was a skinny fellow, with a pointy nose and unkempt black hair. The one in the middle had a sturdier build. He had thick strong arms and the biggest moustache that Floyd had ever seen. The one on the right was as big as the other two put together. He looked angry.

“Mr. Calabash?” said the skinny one on the left.

“That’s me. Or my Dad. But he’s not around so I’m the only Calabash here.”

“Gosh he is nothing like I expected,” said the skinny one on the left. “He is so handsome. His eyes, how they twinkle.”

“His dimples, how merry,” said the one with the big moustache.

“Will you two knock it off,” said the chubby one.

“Excuse us, sir,” said the skinny one. “I am Iggy. And this is Yugo and Sam. We are here about the stew.”

“Have you had any yet?” asked the one called Yugo.

“Not yet,” said Floyd. “I was just about to have a bowl. This stew comes with its own bowl you see. Would you like some?” He gestured to the elves to come into his little house. They wandered past his sitting room and surrounded his stove where his stew pot was bubbling away. Floyd could not get within three feet of his own stovetop.

The big fellow, the one called Sam took a deep sniff of the pot. “No matter how delicious it smells; we cannot have any of this stew.”

“Nobody can have any stew,” said Iggy.

“You need to throw it out. All of it,” said Yugo. “Better yet, bury it in a hole in the ground.”

“Or nuke it from orbit, to be sure,” said Sam. “Even though it does smell really, really good.”

“What’s wrong with this stew?” asked Floyd.

“Everything,” said Iggy.

“It really is the worst stew,” said Yugo. “It is filled with bugs and grubs.”

“Smells great, though,” said Sam.

“Nobody ever died from eating stew,” said Floyd.

“Oh, this stew will not kill anyone,” said Iggy. “It is much, much worse than that.”

“How much worse?” asked Floyd.

“If you eat that stew, your skin will turn green and your hair will fall out,” said Yugo.

“That stew won’t kill you,” said Sam. “But it will kill Christmas.”

Floyd shook his head. “What are you talking about this stew will turn me green and make my hair fall out and kill Christmas. That is just the goofiest thing.” He pushed past the elves and looked out the door. “Are there cameras out there? Am I on the TV?”

Iggy grabbed Floyd by the back of his jeans and spun him around. “Come on. Do you really think this a TV show? A show about elves attacking people in their own kitchen? What kind of a show is that? Who would watch a show like that?”

“I’d watch a show like that,” said Sam.

“Listen to us, Floyd,” said Iggy. “We have seen the future. We have been to the future. If you eat that stew, there will no Christmas this year.”

“Or any year,” said Yugo.

“You guys remind me of my mom,” said Floyd. “She is a bit of a nut, my mom. She always says she’s from the future. Always going on about growing up in a box where it was winter all the year around. Says she even travelled with elves for a while. Can you believe it? Elves?”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam looked at one another. “I can believe it,” said Sam.

“In the future, you are the most hated man in history,” said Iggy. “The man who ruined Christmas.”

“They build statues of you every December, just so they can bash them into bits,” said Yugo.

“They call it the Cala-BASH,” said Sam. “Get it? Cause your name is Calabash. So, they bash you every Christmas.”

“And then, without Christmas, the whole world freezes over,” said Iggy.

“Did my mom send you?” asked Floyd.

“It is a long story,”¹³⁹ said Yugo.

“Look,” said Floyd. “It’s just a stew. And the three of you seem very earnest and perhaps a little disturbed. And by disturbed, I mean dangerous. If it means that much to you, I’ll just toss it into the bin.”

“We are not disturbed,” said Iggy.

“Or dangerous,” said Yugo.

“It seems a shame to toss such a delicious smelling stew into the bin, though,” said Sam.

“It does, doesn’t it?” said Floyd. “I was going to save some for Connie at the office. I think she is kind of sweet on me.”

“Of course, she is,” said Iggy. He seemed captivated by Floyd’s merry dimples.

¹³⁹ And getting longer all the time.

Yugo stamped his little elf feet. “Can we please focus on the mission. The mission is not about Connie or merry dimples, it is about the stew. We need to ditch the stew.”

“We could put it in a ditch, if it really means that much to you,” said Floyd.

“It really does,” said Iggy.

“The deeper the ditch, the better,” said Yugo.

“Follow me,” said Floyd. He lifted the aromatic pot off the stove and carried through his back door. He walked across his little yard, which was tastefully landscaped with rows of snowballs¹⁴⁰ beginning to bloom.

“It is just like the North Pole,” said Iggy as he looked around at the brightly blooming flowers.

“The only snowballs at the North Pole are made of snow,” said Yugo.

Floyd reached the edge of his property and dumped the contents of his stew pot onto a pile of dirt and refuse. “This is my compost pile,” he said. “You said my stew was full of worms and grubs. The worms and grubs can have it then.” He stood up straight and looked off into the distance. “It’s just a pot of stew and I don’t want to be bashed for eternity.”

“Your mom would be proud,” said Iggy.

“My mom is a loon,” said Floyd. “But maybe she did travel with elves.”

“I am sure she did,” said Yugo.

Floyd nodded. “I am sure that she did,” he said. “I’ll ask her about it this Christmas.”

“Say hi from me,” said Sam. “I was always her favourite,”

“Seriously?” said Iggy. “You know that I was A/B’s favourite.”

“I do not think so,” said Yugo. “That was definitely me. She liked me for my cleverness.”

“She liked me for my charm,” said Iggy.

“She liked me just because,” said Sam.

¹⁴⁰ Snowballs are flowers that look like this: →



And so, the bickering began again. Floyd just shook his head. These three little people seemed to be the best of friends and at the same time they seemed to hate each other. Just like any other family, thought Floyd.

December 22, 2020

YUGO PULLED UP TO HIS USUAL PARKING SPOT at the front of the *Mouse and Pickle*. “I thought we could stop in one last time,” said Yugo. “Before we get back to the Pole and back to work on Christmas.”

“Great idea, Yugo,” said Iggy. “Let’s see what the world is like without the Armadillo Flu.”

“And we can get a fine pint of Elfmeäde,” said Sam.

But when they reached the front steps, there was a sign on the door that said:



“They must be joking,” said Sam.

“I don’t have a mask,” said Iggy. “All of my face masks are in my steamer trunk and we left behind in the future.”

“Why would we need face masks?” said Yugo. “We have taken care of the Armadillo Flu.”

The elves pulled up their winter scarves and stepped inside. They passed the familiar daguerreotype by the door, with three blurry children standing beside the first Christmas tree in Beddleton. There were only six tables in the dining room, spaced several feet apart and separated by plexiglass barriers.

Everyone in the room wore a face mask, except for one table in the corner, which was occupied by four people, all of them green-skinned and bald.

They took the last unoccupied table. A few moments later, a stout white-haired woman in a mask approached with a notepad in her hand. "I don't believe my eyes! Elves. We haven't had elves here for the longest time."

Iggy blinked. "The next Mrs. Wiggins? Is that you?"

"My goodness, Iggy?" said the next Mrs. Wiggins. "You haven't changed a bit since Hamburg!"

"Three elfmeådes, please," said Sam.

"And you haven't changed a bit either, Sam," she said.

"What is going on?" said Yugo. "Why is everyone wearing a mask? Why are the tables so far apart?"

"The Armadillo Flu, silly," said the next Mrs. Wiggins. "You don't want to end up like those greenies over there do you?" She pointed her thumb at the group of green skinned diners in the corner of the room.

"But how?" asked Iggy.

"We destroyed the stew," said Sam. "How can there still be Armadillo Flu?"

Yugo sat quietly. He turned the time-interface in his hands. He had intended to ask the next Mrs. Wiggins to shove it down the garbage disposal.

Then it came to him. His eyes lit up so brightly one could almost see a lightbulb glowing over his head.¹⁴¹

Yugo stood up and stepped back from the table. "You get yer mask on, young man," shouted the newest Mrs. Wiggins. Yugo pulled his scarf up over his nose.

"You guys wait here. I have to run a quick errand," he said. And he ran out of the Mouse and Pickle, with the time-interface in his hand.

¹⁴¹ The first use of a lightbulb over a character's head to signify a new idea is generally attributed to the cartoons of Felix the Cat in the 1920s. Mr. Edison's electric light was still relatively new at the time and the image of a light bulb itself was associated with invention and imagination. It was only natural that a fresh idea be depicted this way in a silent film.

Sam shrugged and emptied his pockets onto the table. He had accumulated a valuable collection, indeed. An autographed photograph of the **BEATLES**, an early handwritten draft of *MacBeth*, a mint copy of *Captain America Comics No. 1*, and one thousand golden solids.

“Hey! That is my photograph,” said Iggy.

Sam picked it up. “It says ‘To Sam’ on it.” And so, it did.



An Expected Visitor

YUGO KNOCKED RAPIDLY ON THE DOOR OF A FAMILIAR apartment at the North Pole. It was a little before midnight by the time he arrived. At least, that was the time on his watch, but since all time zones converge at the North Pole, it could have been any time at all when he knocked.

A surprised looking elf opened the door. He had a great big black moustache and was dressed in his red and green pajamas, that appeared to be flannel coveralls. He looked like he had just woken up from a long winter’s nap. The time on Yugo’s watch looked to be correct after all.

Yugo looked into his own face. For he had knocked on his own door and Yugo himself had answered it.

“Hello,” said the Yugo at the door.

“What are you doing here?” asked the Yugo in pajamas.

The other Yugo reached into the pocket of his coveralls and pulled out the time-interface. “You are going to need this,” he said.

Yugo in pajamas took a step back and waved his arms. “No way,” he said. “I disabled that years ago and threw it away. It is nothing but trouble.”

“I used to think that way, too,” said Yugo.

“You should know better than anyone,” said Yugo in pajamas. “That is my old time-interface. I did not want to see it ever again.”

“You are going to need it again and very soon,” said the Yugo at the door. “You are going to need a working time travel mode in the snowmobile. You are going to need it to save Christmas.”

“I am sure I will figure something out,” said Yugo in pajamas.

“Yes, you will,” replied Yugo. “And this is what you figured out. To deliver the time-interface to yourself tonight.” He lifted his hand and offered Yugo the time-interface again.

Yugo hesitated.

“Come on, take it,” said Yugo. “If you can not trust me, then who can you trust?”

“Give it over, then,” said Yugo. He took the device from Yugo and stuffed it into his pocket. “But I’m bringing it back as soon as this is over.”

“I know you will. Where do you think I got it from?” said Yugo. “But be careful with it. It can be a little glitchy.”

December 22, 2020 (Reprise)

BY THE TIME YUGO RETURNED TO THE MOOSE AND PICKLE, everything had changed. Iggy and Sam were still seated at the same table, but there were more tables than before. There was no room at the inn, every seat was filled, and patrons stood three deep at the bar. Someone was singing and a good many people laughed loudly.

Nobody wore a mask, and nobody was green.

Yugo took a seat beside Sam. He thought about taking one of Sam's elfmeädes, but reconsidered. Someone had to pilot the snowmobile.

"Things got weird while you were gone," said Iggy. "One minute there was hardly anyone here. Everyone was wearing a mask."

"And avoiding the greenies," said Sam.

"And then, then everything shimmered, and the room was full," said Iggy. "A few people sung Christmas carols."

"And no greenies," said Sam.

"It worked then," said Yugo. "We did it."

"Where did you go?" asked Iggy.

"I had to pass the time-interface on. To myself," said Yugo. "Otherwise, we never would have started on our mission. And if we never started it ..."

"We could not finish it," said Iggy.

"But we did finish it!" said Sam.

"We did not finish it until we took the time-interface back to the beginning," said Yugo. "That is what I just did. Now it is finished."

"What about the other Yugo?" said Iggy. "He has not finished it, he is just getting started."

"By now he has finished it, too," said Yugo. "And passed the time-interface on."

"This is why I hate time travel," said Sam. He ordered another round of elfmeädes.

"Drink up," said Iggy.

"Yes, we have to get back to the North Pole," said Yugo. "We just saved Christmas and that means we have a lot of work to do."

The End

At last.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam Will Return In:

The Night Before Bogglin Crimmins Day

or

The Carol of Christmas (A Play in Three Acts)

or

The Rise of the Rat King

or

A Hidden Prince in Disguise

or


The Invasion of the Boggilins

or

Something Else Entirely



SPREAD
CHEER, NOT
COVID

 ONE HUNDRED FEET BENEATH SAN FRANCISCO BAY, the Rat King leaned back on his throne of bricks. It had been a troubling time. He had lost his leaping lords, his piping pipers and his drumming drummers. There was nobody left to make his cheese.

And of course, his entire underground layer had been flooded in an earthquake.

But the Rat King endured. There would always be more rats, and even now his rat army was growing.

Elves and Boggilins live a long time, and the rat king would be waiting for them when they returned.

And when they returned, it would be different. Oh yes it surely would.

The Rat King hummed a few bars of the *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* and smiled a yellow grin. Those elves would be along soon enough. And he would be ready for them.

It would be different the next time. He would show those elves. They would see. He would get those elves next time.



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The world has been gripped by the horror of a new pandemic: the Armadillo Flu.

With the world reeling from the effects of this horrific new disease, Christmas is cancelled, maybe forever.

Unless three plucky elves can stop the whole thing from ever starting. But they are going to have to take the long way around to get there in time, and step on their share of butterflies in the process ...

Advance praise for

Stepping on Butterflies

• *This story will make you flip your peruke.*

- Jean Le Wiggins (Wigmaker to Louis XVI)

• *Wow. That was a long story.*

- Leo Tolstoy

• *I do not have time for this lengthy amusements. However, the Boggins, especially that Jinks fellow, were wicked cool.*

- Dr. James Redcliffe, PhD., age 21

• *You can expect to hear from my lawyers.*

- William Shakespeare

