

## EVERYONE NEEDS A LITTLE SPACE AT CHRISTMAS

The eight o'clock whistle rang through Santa's workshop at the North Pole. It was December 23rd, two days before Christmas, and all the elves were working overtime. Iggy (Junior Elf first class) sat back in his chair and wiped his forehead. He set down the toy he was working on, a little racecar that ran without batteries. It was one of Yugo's inventions. Iggy got up and filed out of the workshop with the other elves. He bumped into Sam at the door.

As usual, Sam was having a bad day. He had been assigned to doll duty, attaching plastic feet to little doll legs. Forty two thousand and six little plastic feet. Sam had counted.

"Where's Yugo?" Sam asked Iggy, "he was supposed to assemble feet with me, but I haven't seen him since lunch."

"I don't know," said Iggy. "Why don't you try looking in the motor pool, Yugo often goes down there to tinker with his snowmobile."

"Oh no, not that thing!" cried Sam, slapping his hand over his face. "Every time he starts tinkering with that silly snowmobile, I get dragged on some stupid adventure. I almost got eaten by a shark the last time I got in that thing."

"No" said Iggy, "last time you got turned into a circus freak by a couple of greasy rug" merchants. It was the time before that that you almost got eaten by a shark."

"You see what I mean, that thing is dangerous. Someone should drop it in a hole," Sam said. "With Yugo inside it."

Just then they heard a familiar rumbling noise. Iggy turned just as a sporty looking red snowmobile pulled up beside them. It had gleaming chrome exhaust pipes and a convertible roof. The windows were made of dark reflective glass. As

they looked at it, one of the windows slid down with a slight hum. "Hi guys!" said Yugo.

"Oh no, not again" sighed Sam. He just knew something awful was going to happen.

"Hop in guys," said Yugo, "I want to show you something." The passenger door popped open. Iggy shrugged his shoulders and stepped in.

Yugo looked out at Sam. "Aren't you coming?" he said.

Sam was about to tell Yugo that he'd sooner step into a car compactor than his snowmobile, but Yugo looked at him pleadingly with those big green elf eyes, and he couldn't say no. He stepped into the snowmobile. The door clicked softly into place. "I know I'm going to regret this," he said.

Yugo flipped a couple of yellow toggle switches and gently eased the snowmobile into gear. In seconds they were speeding across the snowy northern plain. Sam felt a little queasy. He had never gotten used to Yugo's driving.

Yugo punched the turbo-boosters. Brilliant orange flames burst out the rear of the snowmobile and it shot forward like a bullet. Now Sam felt really queasy.

"I've been working on a few new features all day," said Yugo.

"I know," sneered Sam, "I had to attach forty two thousand and six doll's feet all by myself."

Yugo blinked. "You counted?"

"Yes".

"Well, wait until you see this, it will make you forget all about doll's feet," said Yugo. "I've made a few new modifications."

"Oh no," replied Sam, "that's just what I was afraid of!" "What have you done this time Yugo," asked Iggy.

"Watch...." said Yugo. He reached down and pulled a lever labeled 'Rocket Launch'. A hush fell over the three elves as the engines surged into action. The elves were forced back into their seats as the snowmobile lurched forward at a tremendous velocity. Sam gasped as the snowmobile rose gently into the air.

"Wow!" wowwed Iggy.

"Oog" ooged Sam, turning a little greener. He turned a lot greener when Yugo pulled back on the steering wheel and the snowmobile climbed almost straight up into the air. "Just how high does this thing go?" queried Sam.

"I'm not sure, but lets find out," said Yugo, pulling back harder on the steering wheel. Sam looked out his window. The North Pole was turning into a small white spot below them. He was really feeling dizzy, and leaned forward to steady himself. He never meant to lean on the hyper-speed switch.

While the snowmobile had been rising quickly before, now it shot into the sky like a laser beam. By the time Yugo could switch off the hyper-speed function, it wasn't just the North Pole that looked like a little spot; the entire planet Earth was a little green dot, far far below.

Actually, there were two little green dots, one far beneath them, and one off to their left. They had experienced some turbulence when Yugo shut down the hyper-speed, causing the snowmobile to turn over a few times, and now they didn't know which of the green dots was Earth. Yugo didn't have the heart to explain this dilemma to Sam. Sam was looking awfully green himself by this time. The fact that there was no gravity inside the snowmobile wasn't helping matters at all.

Yugo leaned over to Iggy and whispered, "the zero gravity is playing havoc with all my gauges. I don't know which of these planets is Earth. One of them is probably Venus; it looks a lot like Earth. Unfortunately we only have enough power to go to one or the other.

"Hmmm" Hmmed Iggy. "Let's try that one over there," he said, pointing to the planet just below them and to the right.

"Okee dokee," said Yugo, gently bringing the snowmobile around, and pointing it towards the chosen planet. "Hang on tight. I'll switch on the hyper-speed for a few minutes, and then we'll swoop in for a landing on the northern part of the planet. If it's Earth, we're home free. If it is Venus, you can tell Sam about it. After all, you picked this planet."

Yugo shifted the snowmobile back into hyper-speed. Once again, the elves were pushed back into their seats as the snowmobile burst forward at super speed. Yugo shifted carefully back down into normal speed and brought the snowmobile in for a landing on the planet's northern side. They landed in a lush forest region, covered with blue and yellow plants. Yugo slowed the vehicle to a halt and stepped out. "I think we guessed wrong," he said. "You tell Sam..."

Iggy stepped out behind Yugo. "It's okay," he said. "Sam's fainted. If we can find a way to recharge the snowmobile's batteries quickly, maybe we can get back home before he comes to.

"Good thinking," said Yugo. "There must be a two thousand megavolt battery charger somewhere on this planet. Let's go look over there." He pointed at a path winding between some blue bushes. Iggy nodded and they filed into the woods, leaving Sam to watch over the snowmobile. He didn't complain, he was still sleeping.

They walked about three kilometers when they came to a circle of little red huts. "This looks promising," said Yugo. They stepped up to the first hut and knocked at the door. Moments later a little red fellow opened the door. Now I say little, but compared to Iggy and Yugo, he was of about average build. He did have six arms however, and this distinguished him somewhat from the elves. He had a long thin neck topped with a head that resembled a basketball; except that it was red, had five eyes and a nose that looked like a kazoo. Come to think of it, it didn't really look like a basketball at all.

"Greetings," said Iggy, "we've gotten a little lost. You wouldn't happen to have a large battery charger would you?"

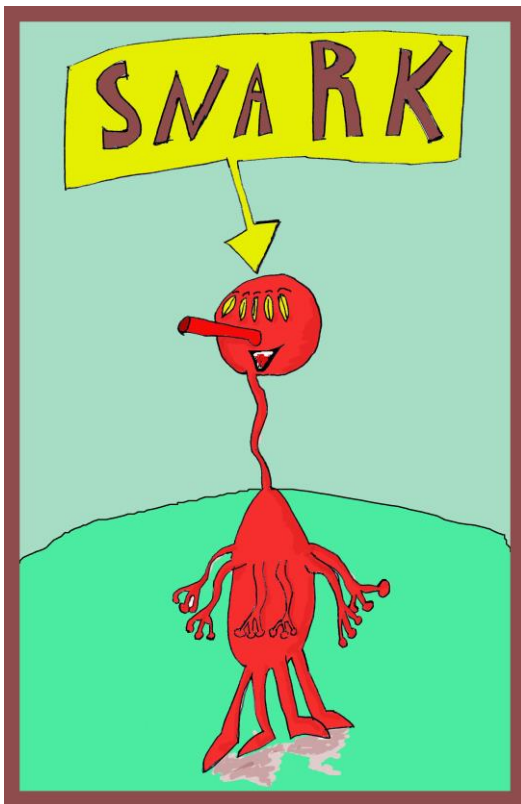
The Venetian looked at them, confused. Iggy held out his hand. The Venetian smiled and shook it, Iggy smiled too, until he touched the Venetian's hand, which sported a charge of about fifty thousand volts.

"Yeeow!" yeeowed Iggy, his eyes rolling and every hair on his body standing on end. "You don't need a battery charger, you *are* a battery charger!"

"Dreadfully sorry, old bean," said the Venetian, "You must not be from around here."

"Yes, you could say that," said Iggy, rubbing his wrist. "We're from Earth, but we got a little lost."

"You're from Earth? What funny people you must be to name your planet after dirt. Now you're lost in space, from the sounds of things" said the Venetian. "By the way, my name is Vernon, and I'm a Snark, one of the thirteen tribes of Venus. What can I do for you?"



"Well Vernon," said Yugo, "Our snowmo - uh, I mean spaceship needs a boost to get going again. I think that your body electricity just might do the trick. Could you give us a hand?"

Vernon nodded, and the three of them turned back into the woods. Yugo explained that if Vernon were to place his hand on the snowmobile's battery, it would absorb enough of Vernon's natural electricity to recharge itself and get them home. Vernon didn't mind helping out, in fact he seemed to get a real charge out of it. But then, Vernon got a charge of most anything.

They trudged through the forest and finally reached the clearing where the snowmobile had landed. Yugo walked up to the front and popped the hood. "Hey Sam," he shouted, "wake up, we're going to go home!"

There was no answer. Yugo shouted Sam's name again. Iggy opened the passenger door of the snowmobile and looked inside. Sam was gone!

The three of them quickly fanned out and searched the clearing. "Oh no," said Vernon, "this is terrible." He pointed to a large three-toed footprint near the snowmobile. "That's the print of a Carbolian."

"What on Earth is a Carbolian?" Iggy and Yugo asked in two-part harmony.

"Nothing on Earth, my friends; the Carbolians are the most vicious and wicked tribe on Venus," said Vernon. "And it looks like they've kidnapped your friend!"

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

"Well obviously we're going to have to stage some sort of spectacular rescue," said Yugo. "We'll charge up the snowmobile and blast Sam's way to freedom. I've made a few modifications since the last time I took you guys for a ride."

"Yes, we're well aware of that," sighed Iggy.

Yugo glared at him. "C'mon, let's charge up the snowmobile and go kick some Carbolian butts,"

"Obviously you folks have never seen a Carbolian," interjected Vernon. "They have eight legs, and two feet on each leg. Usually they do all the kicking."

"Not to worry," said Iggy, "we've been kicked by some of the best. Now let's get this sucker charged up."

Yugo popped the hood on the snowmobile, pulled back the frammistatic inverter, loosened the grapul grommets, and adjusted the sprackle gasket so that he could get at the battery. Then he called Vernon over.

"Now, just put your hand on the battery while I start up the snowmobile," said Yugo. Vernon put his hand on the battery while Yugo punched the started button and revved the engine a few times. The power gauge indicated that the battery was fully charged.

"It worked!" shouted Yugo. He jumped out of the snowmobile. Iggy was standing beside Vernon. Vernon wasn't standing at all; he had 'shorted' out.

"What happened?" asked Yugo.

"I don't know," said Iggy, "he just fainted."

"The battery must have sucked out all of his juice," said Yugo. "We'll have to let him recharge. Here, help me put him in the back seat." The two elves stuffed Vernon into the snowmobile and slipped in front. Yugo flipped a green switch and an antenna extended from the roof of the snowmobile. A little green light blipped on a little view screen on the dashboard. "With this radar we'll find Sam in no time," said Yugo. He shifted the snowmobile into gear and they rolled gently into the woods.

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In the meantime, Sam had woken up. He found that he had quite a headache, probably due to the fact that he was hanging upside down over the shoulder of a huge hairy green creature with sixteen feet. Now I say huge, but compared to Sam he looked something like a green skyscraper with legs. The Carbolian had thick

lumpy muscles, even on its forehead. In Venus they say that Carbolians have muscles everywhere, even between their ears. And with seven ears on each side of their heads, that is a lot of muscle.

Sam rubbed his relatively muscle-free forehead and considered his plight. He was in the clutches of a hostile being on an alien world. This was obviously all Yugo's fault.

About that time they reached the Carbolian village. The Carbolians lived in holes carved into the side of a cliff. The caves were damp and smelly, but were very easy to defend during wartime. For Carbolians, wartime was most of the time. The Carbolian dropped Sam onto a big rock and went over to a stool to sharpen his teeth.

Suddenly, a shrill voice pierced the air. "Spanner!" came the shriek. The Carbolian sneered and rolled its eyes.

"Yes my pet?" said Spanner sweetly, the sneer still on his lips.

"Have you brought supper home yet?" the voice shrieked again. A shadow fell over Sam. He looked up and saw for the first time where the voice was coming from. It was a huge female Carbolian, about twice the size of Spanner and twice as hairy. Little bones hung from each of her fourteen ears and she smelled a little like a kidney cannery. "Well," she shrieked, spotting Sam for the first time, "what have we here?"

"Supper, my dear Murga" said Spanner meekly.

"Supper?" shrieked Murga, "You call this little squab 'supper'? It's barely enough to feed a Snark!"

Spanner recoiled in fear. In moments he was recoiling in pain. This was because Murga had hit him with her war club. "All day long, me and the girls fight wars for you men, and this is the thanks we get. Squabs for supper! Now go get some real food!" she bellowed.

"Right away, my pet" mumbled Spanner, as he shuffled back into the wilderness.

Murga looked back down at Sam. "You're much too cute to eat anyway," she smiled. "I think I'll keep you."

"I think I'd rather get eaten," thought Sam.

Just then, a horn blew in the distance. "Oh drat," said Murga. "Lunch is over. I have to go back to the front. Come along little one, you can watch Mommy work." Murga picked Sam up by one arm and carried him with her to the other side of the cliffs.

There was a war going on at the other side of the cliffs. Of course, the Carbolians were almost always fighting a war against somebody. Right now, they were at war with the Snarks.

Murga reached the front and dropped Sam on a tree stump. She walked up to the line and started looking for Snarks to whack with her war club. She found one hiding near Sam's stump and raised her club over her head.

"Hey!" shouted Sam.

Murga spun and stared at the elf. "You can talk!" she said.

"Of course I can talk," responded Sam. "Now I don't know where you people come from, but you can't go fighting a war this close to Christmas!"

"Christmas?" growled Murga, "what's Christmas?"

Sam jumped off his stump with his hands on his hips. "What do you mean 'what's Christmas?'" he asked. "Just what planet are you from?"

"Venus, where else?" replied Murga.

"Oh, Venus, that explains everything" said Sam. Then he did a double take. "Venus?!"

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Meanwhile, Iggy and Yugo continued to track Sam on their radar equipment. They had almost reached the Carbolian village when they noticed a thick knot of green trees. Closer inspection revealed that the green trees each had two feet. In fact, the green trees weren't trees at all, but legs. They had run into Spanner, and he looked angry.

"Yipes" said Iggy.

"Evasive action!" barked Yugo as he pulled back a blue lever. There was a metallic "shoonk" noise and a big net flew out from the snowmobile and wrapped around Spanner, "Got him!" shouted Yugo.

"Yeearrgh" yeearrghed Spanner. He took both ends of the net in his burly, muscle-bound arms and tore it to pieces. He flexed his sinewy thews and advanced towards the snowmobile.

"Now what" shouted Iggy, a touch of panic creeping into his voice,

"Plan B" said Yugo, smiling and spinning a red knob.

A nozzle sprang out from the front of the snowmobile. Spanner peered at it curiously. Then thick black gunk spurted out of the nozzle onto Spanner's face. Now he was really annoyed. He wiped the oil off his face with the back of his hand and made the most horrible faces at the two elves.

"Do you have a Plan C?" asked Iggy.

"Well, actually, no. But I can improvise." Yugo shifted the snowmobile into reverse and punched the hyper speed. The snowmobile raced backwards.

"Good plan, don't you think?" said Yugo, staring out through the rear window as he drove.

"Well," said Iggy, "I've seen better. Look!"

Yugo turned and looked out the front window. Spanner was chasing the snowmobile, and was actually gaining on them. It seems that with all those legs, he could really run.

Yugo sighed. "On to Plan D." He jammed on the brakes, shifted the snowmobile into forward gear and punched the hyper speed. The snowmobile darted straight into Spanner and stopped. Fortunately, Spanner stopped too: they had knocked him out.

"Well why didn't you do that from the beginning?" asked Iggy.

Meanwhile, in the back seat of the snowmobile, Vernon had regained consciousness. Iggy and Yugo stepped out of the snowmobile to take a closer look at Spanner. The big Carbolian laid perfectly still, the snowmobile perched on his expansive chest. Vernon took one look out the snowmobile window at Spanner and let out a squeal.

"What do you guys think you're doing!" shouted Vernon, "that's a Carbolian, the most dangerous thing on this planet!"

"He doesn't look so dangerous now," chuckled Iggy. "Since we knocked him out, he looks absolutely peaceful."

"You knocked him out?" replied Vernon. "Good, that means he'll die soon. Come on, let's get out of here!"

"What!" gasped Iggy and Yugo.

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Meanwhile, back at the front, Sam had just discovered he was on Venus. He was not amused. Moreover, he was faced with the task of explaining to an eight metre tall green Venetian woman what Christmas really is.

"You've never heard of Christmas?" asked Sam.

"No" answered Murga, "and just why can't I whack Snarks at Christmas time anyway?"

"It's just wrong, that's all," said Sam. "War is wrong at the best of times, but especially at Christmas!"

"Why," asked Murga, crossing her arms.

"Hmmm," thought Sam. "This is going to be tougher than I thought." Sam began to explain to Murga what Christmas was all about, about baby Jesus in the stable, about Santa Claus, about giving and sharing, and most importantly, about how good Christmas makes you feel inside. There was warmth that filled even the darkest, iciest Christmas nights and that same warm glow touched the hardest and coldest hearts at Christmastime. That the most dedicated enemies dropped their

weapons and called each other "friend" at Christmastime. Sam had been a Christmas elf for quite a while, but it was only now that he started to realize himself just how important Christmas was to him.

Murga still looked confused. Sam stuffed his hands into his pockets and thought for a moment. His hand touched something funny. He pulled it out and discovered that it was one of the twenty one thousand and three dolls he had been putting together back at Santa's workshop. He had no idea how the doll had gotten into his pocket, because he couldn't remember putting it there. Perhaps it was just another example of Christmas magic at work. He held the doll up to Murga. "Here, its a gift. Merry Christmas."

Murga picked up the doll gently. Nobody had ever given her anything before. In a manner of speaking, the concept of *giving* was totally alien to her. She smiled softly and held the doll tightly.

"Now do you understand what Christmas is all about?" asked Sam.

"I think I'm beginning to," Murga said softly. It was the first time she had ever spoken without shrieking. She looked up, and saw the little Snark she had been trying to whack earlier, hiding behind a big green plant that looked like a Venus Fly Trap. A real Venus Fly Trap. She set down her war club and gestured for the Snark to come closer. The Snark came forward nervously.

Murga reached up to one of her fourteen ears, removed one of her little bone earrings and gave it to the Snark. Now the Snark smiled too. Sam thought to himself that a bone earring wasn't much of a gift, but then, he did not have any way of knowing that on Venus, bone earrings were only slightly less valuable than a fleet of Rolls Royces made out of solid gold would be on Earth.

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Iggy looked at Vernon blankly and pointed to Spanner. "You mean if we leave him here like this, he's going to die?"

"Yep" answered Vernon, "anytime a Carbolian sleeps for more than fifteen or twenty minutes, they just keep on sleeping until they die of starvation. I think its because their brains are too small to wake them up."

"We have to wake him up then," said Yugo. "We can't just leave him here to die!"

"Why not, he was going to kill us until you guys knocked him out!" answered Vernon smugly.

Iggy and Yugo looked at each other, trying to think of a good answer. "I don't care what he says," Yugo said to Iggy. "We can't just let him die."

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

"Come on," said Yugo, "I have a plan." The two elves stepped back into the snowmobile. Yugo flipped a few knobs and then pressed a flashing blue button. A sticky green liquid sprayed from the front grill of the snowmobile onto Spanner's face. His eyes slowly blinked open.

"What was that awful stuff?" asked Iggy

"Antifreeze," answered Yugo. Spanner sat up, rubbed his eyes and blinked a few times.

"I feel great!" he shouted. "I haven't had a nap in years!" Spanner looked over at Vernon and smiled. "I don't even hate you Snarks anymore!"

"It's amazing what a nap can do for some people," said Iggy.

Yugo turned the radar screen on. "Lets go find Sam," he said.

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Sam, Murga and the Snark (whose name happened to be Sheldon) heard the rumbling of the snowmobile's engines about five minutes before Spanner and the snowmobile entered the Carbolian village.

Murga ran over to Spanner and gave him a big hug. Spanner looked a little surprised, but he didn't seem to mind.

Iggy and Yugo ran over to Sam. "Are you all right?" they asked in unison.

Sam looked at thee two of them crossly. "Am I all right?" he barked. "Am I all right? You drag me across the Solar System, abandon me in the clutches of a

gigantic green monster with eight legs and teeth as long as my arm and you ask me if I'm all right?"

"Well," mumbled Iggy, "are you?"

"Never better," answered Sam, smiling. Then he hugged his two friends. They both looked surprised, but they didn't seem to mind.

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Two hours later, the elves had finished saying their goodbyes and were driving out of the Carbolian village.

"Everything seems to have worked out just great," said Sam, "the reason the Carbolians were always so cranky was that they just weren't getting enough sleep. Now the Snarks have agreed to use their electrical powers to zap the Carbolians awake every morning."

"And the Carbolians are going to use their strength to help the Snarks build new houses in their village," added Yugo.

"The Venetians all seem to understand the meaning of Christmas now," said Iggy.

"Speaking of which, we had better get back home," said Yugo, "It's Christmas Eve right now, and Santa will be needing our help." He shifted the snowmobile into high gear and pulled the 'rocket launch' lever. The snowmobile burst forward and slowly rose into the air. Soon they were drifting through the blackness of space. Yugo turned the snowmobile towards Earth.

A large and brilliant star seemed to hover over the tiny blue planet.

Iggy gasped. "Peace on Earth, good will toward men" he whispered.

"And peace on Venus, good will towards Snarks," added Sam.

Yugo smiled, and pushed the hyper-speed button. The big thrusters kicked in, punching the snowmobile forwards at tremendous speed towards the North Pole. The elves were going home.