

CD25: CHRISTMAS DAY

A HAIRY TALE

PROLOGUE: CHRISTMAS EVE

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM LIVE AT THE NORTH POLE. This is only to be expected, since they are Christmas elves, and living at the North Pole makes it much easier to commute to work.

They work on the sixth floor of a twenty four-story glass and steel building located exactly on the North Pole. It rises from the frozen white landscape like a gleaming black needle. It is the Santa Claus Tower, one of the little known wonders of the world.

The Santa Claus Tower is the centrepiece of Santa Claus' entire toy manufacturing and distribution empire. Every Christmas, millions of letters arrive here. Their contents are sorted and entered into a massive super computer, which maintains the enormous database of all the children of the world and which continually monitors them to determine which among them are "naughty" and which are "nice".

Most importantly, on the first ten floors the toys are made. Toys of all kinds, Wooden toys, metal toys and electronic toys. Dolls, robots, action figures and those amazing pink fluffy toys that squeal when you squeeze them. Every toy any child has ever imagined is made here.

Without the Santa Claus Tower, there would be no toys. There would be no elves and no Santa Claus. Without the Santa Claus Tower, there would be no Christmas.

So it was a real shame that on Christmas Eve, the giant spaceship which hovered over the Santa Claus Tower, hanging in the sky exactly the way an ocean liner can not, suddenly released an orange and green bolt of electric death on the building below.

The Santa Claus Tower glowed hotly for a moment and then was gone.

A COUPLE OF DAYS EARLIER: THEY MAKE CONTACT

THE WHOLE SAD STORY BEGAN SOME DAYS earlier, in Yugo's room in the elf barracks south of the Santa Claus Tower.¹ It had been a cold winter. Of course, winters are always cold at the North Pole, but this was different. This was the kind of winter your grandfather used to have when he was a kid. It was that cold.

Because of this, Yugo had spent most the previous days in his room experimenting with a sophisticated new toy he had developed. It looked like an oversized Frisbee with a digital control panel. By punching the right codes, Yugo could scan near space for stray radio and television signals. It was, in fact, the most powerful satellite dish ever invented, and Yugo could receive over 12,000 different channels. He was flipping from station to station; frustrated that there was nothing on that was worth watching. He was about to give up when his screen faded to violet and a peculiar voice crackled through his speakers.

"Tell Arbon we are in position," said the mysterious voice. It had an inhuman and mechanical sound that Yugo found strangely menacing.

Another voice crackled in reply. "Excellent. Arbon will be pleased. I shall relay your message at once. Stand by for further orders."

The transmission broke off, and a tall blonde woman in a small bikini shimmered into view. "That's better," thought Yugo. "I found it!" he called out. A few seconds later, Iggy and Sam charged into the room.

"It's about time," said Sam.

"Sorry," said Yugo. "I had trouble finding the station. I ran into some strange interference." He was about to tell the other two about the odd broadcast, but they were completely engrossed in the program. It involved a lot of very good-looking people in very small swimsuits running across a beach. Pretty soon Yugo himself had forgotten the unusual exchange.

"What I want to know," said Iggy, "is why they built the lifeguard station so far from the water. They have to run (in slow motion) for about a mile just to reach the ocean."

"Quiet," snorted Sam. "That's the genius of the show. The running. It really is terrific."

They watched the program in silence for several minutes, and then the screen started to fade to violet again.

"Not again," sighed Yugo.

"Come on, Yugo. Fix it. Quickly." demanded Sam.

Yugo struggled with some of the knobs on his control panel, but nothing changed. The violet hue on the screen deepened and once more strange, inhuman voices crackled out of the speakers.

¹ If you ever visit the North Pole, just walk about 3 blocks south of the Tower and you will get to Yugo's place. Of course, since the Santa Claus Tower is located precisely on the North Pole, every object in the world is located south of it. You may have to ask for some directions when you get there.

"Dipstil. Arbon has issued the order to attack. Please approach the world from the top and work your way down. Arbon awaits your further reports."

"I'll never understand this program," said Iggy.

Sam looked at his watch. "Holy smoke! Will you look at the time. It's almost midnight, we'd better hurry up or we'll miss supper."²

"Just a minute," said Yugo, "I want to hear the rest of this."

The crackly broadcast continued. "Thank you. We shall commence the invasion at once. Hail Arbon, High Lord of the Drackonian Galactic Empire and all its Dominions."

"What do you suppose it means?" asked Iggy.

"I don't know," said Yugo, "but it sure sounds sinister." The violet screen faded and Yugo switched off the set. "Who is Arbon? Who is Dipstil? What is the Drackonian Galactic Empire?"

"Hello! Hello there!" said Sam loudly waving his watch in the air. "It's supertime! Let's get going or all that's left will be broccoli again!"

Iggy and Yugo looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. Sam was right. If they were late for dinner, only the vegetables would be left.³ They decided to postpone further discussion of the issue until after they had eaten.

WHILE THEY WERE EATING DESSERT (which was Jell-O shaped like little green Christmas trees) Yugo cautiously raised the subject of the mysterious transmission. "I have an idea of what it might be," he began.

"What's that?" asked Iggy.

"Well," Yugo cleared his throat. "I think it might have an extraterrestrial origin. And I don't think it was at all friendly. The voices sounded mechanical and alien. They spoke of commencing an 'invasion' and approaching the world from the 'top and working their way down'. *We* live at the top of the world. I think we are going to be visited by spacemen."

Sam snorted so hard that a half chewed green Jell-O Christmas tree came out his nose. "Now I've heard everything," he said when he finished coughing. "Little green men taking over the world. I think that you've been reading too many comic books."

² It is a little realized fact that all time zones converge at the North Pole. Because of this, when it is midnight at the elf barracks, it is 5 o'clock in the evening at the mess hall. Since it only takes ten minutes to walk the seven time zones from the barracks to the mess hall, elves sometimes suffer from a rare form of jet lag called 'walking lag'. When Iggy first came to the North Pole, he developed a terrible case of walking lag and almost starved to death; he was always arriving for meals in the middle of the morning after the mess hall had closed for the night.

³ Elves are notoriously finicky eaters and will only eat vegetables at gunpoint or with chocolate syrup. This aversion to legumes accounts in large measure for the short stature of most elves.

"But how else do you explain the voices?" asked Yugo.

"Simple," said Sam. "You just picked up an old episode of *Star Trek* on your satellite dish. That sort of stuff happens all the time on those shows."

Iggy nodded. "I think Sam's right," he said. "You've got to admit, your idea is a little far-fetched."

Yugo poked aimlessly at his Jell-O. "Yeah, maybe you're right," he said softly. But he was not so sure. He had seen every episode of *Star Trek*, *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager* at least three times. He even watched *Babylon V* and *The X-Files* regularly. He had never heard mention of Dipstil or Arbon, High Lord of the Drackonian Galactic Empire and all its Dominions.

THE VERY NEXT DAY: THEY ARRIVE

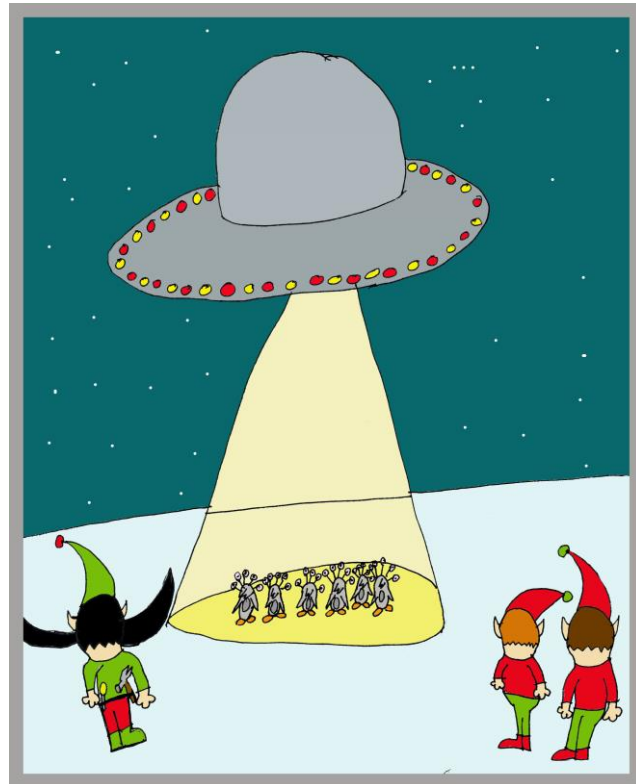
THE NEXT MORNING IT WAS CLEAR that Yugo's theory could not be so easily dismissed. This was because a gigantic spaceship had appeared in the night sky⁴ and was now hovering over the North Pole and the Santa Claus Tower.

To say it was a gigantic spaceship is a bit of an understatement, something like saying that Michael Jackson had sold a few records or that Saskatchewan was pretty flat. The spaceship was enormous. It was immense. It was huge. It was fantastically big and utterly colossal. Imagine a floating football stadium. Now imagine a hundred floating football stadiums. You are getting close. The spaceship floated eerily in the air, shamelessly breaking the law of gravity and several related statutes. Its surface was covered with an array of glittering red and yellow lights and it emitted a deep hum from its hundreds of engines.

There was a sharp crackle and a deep, mechanical and inhuman voice resonated from beneath the spaceship. "People of Earth," boomed the voice, "I am Dipstil, emissary of Arbon, High Lord of the Drackonian Galactic Empire and all of its Dominions. We do not come in peace. We come to conquer your insignificant planet and make you our slaves. This vessel has the power to obliterate this planet completely. Do not attempt to stop us. Resistance is futile and will probably hurt you all a great deal. Now, take me to your leader."

"How cliché," mumbled Sam. "'Take me to your leader.' You would think somebody that could build a spaceship like that could find a decent speechwriter."

The voice boomed out again. "I heard that. Your puerile sense of humour will get you nowhere. I am immune to sarcasm and irony in all of its forms." There was another crackle and the voice stopped.



A thin column of white light shone down from the spaceship and several figures slowly materialized on the ground. They were not big and green and slimy, as you might have expected conquering aliens to be. Rather, they looked like penguins, that is, if you can imagine a slender, six-foot tall silver penguin with six eyes. The tallest of the group made his⁵ way towards Sam.

⁴ It is always night in December. Accordingly, there is no difference between the night sky, the afternoon sky or the misty early morning sky. There will be no misty early morning sky until sometime in March.

⁵ The use of the masculine pronouns "he", "him" and "his" is simply for the convenience of the writer. The Alien Penguins come from a race with six genders, which makes the use of other pronouns impractical. For the Alien

"You. Funny man," he said pointing at Sam. "Take me to your leader."

"When am I ever going to learn to shut my big mouth," Sam muttered under his breath.

"I do not know," said the Penguin.

"I wasn't talking to you," retorted Sam.

"Then you should not have spoken. Now, I repeat. Take me to your leader. Do not delay me further or I shall be forced to disintegrate you."

"Charming," said Sam, speaking so softly this time, his lips barely parted.

"It was not meant to be," answered the Penguin. Sam decided that any further barbs were pointless and walked towards the Santa Claus Tower.

"Sam, what are you doing?" hissed Iggy.

"He asked me to take him to my leader," answered Sam. "So I'm taking him to see Santa Claus. That's who my leader is, and he's probably the only one who can figure out how to get us out of this mess."

"We're coming with you," said Iggy, pulling Yugo along behind him. The three elves led the small party of Alien Penguins into the lobby of the Santa Claus Tower. The building's lobby was decorated with the marble tile typical of most office towers. It was also filled throughout with Christmas trimming and decorations. Unlike most office buildings, the Christmas trim never came down. At the back of the lobby was a large counter with a directory which explained what departments were found on which floors; for example, floor 12 - accounting, floor 17 - human resources, floor 23 - legal.⁶ Sam led the group through the lobby and into the elevator. He pressed button 24 -- the top floor where all of the executive offices are located.⁷ Actually, there is only one executive at the North Pole and hence, only one executive office. But it is a pretty big office, for after all, Santa Claus is a pretty big man.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam led the Alien Penguins from the elevator to a wide oak door inlaid with shiny brass trim. On the door the following words were spelled out in raised brass letters:

<p style="text-align: center;">S. Claus Chief Executive Officer</p>
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Penguins, it also makes the dating scene even more confusing than it is on Earth.

⁶ Most people are surprised to learn that Santa Claus has over 30 lawyers on his staff, but it has to be this way. Every year Santa Claus faces hundreds of criminal complaints relating to breaking and entering and theft of milk and cookies and thousands of lawsuits brought by angry and injured parents who attempted to assemble defective toys and bicycles that would not go together properly. If it were not for all of this litigation, Santa Claus could probably retire. So, in a very real way, without lawyers, there would be no Christmas.

⁷ There is actually one other floor, the penthouse, where Santa Claus lives with his wife, Santa Barbara. They have a daughter, Santa Monica, but she moved to California to get away from the family business.

Sam tapped gently on the door. There was no answer. He knocked a little harder. Still, no answer. Finally he pounded the door as hard as he could with both fists.⁸

"Who's there?" called a deep voice from inside.

"Uh," said Sam, "it's me, Sam. I'm here with Iggy and Yugo and a few aliens who would like your permission to take over the world."

"Ho ho ho," laughed the deep voice. "Sam, you're such a kidder. Do come right in, and bring your little spacemen friends with you."

Sam pushed the door open slowly. It was, after all, a big door. It opened into a vast office. There were papers piled everywhere, on shelves and bookcases and chairs and tables. Those pages that could not be piled on any visible surface were simply piled on other papers. At the far end of the office was a big wooden desk that looked more like an aircraft carrier than a piece of furniture. From behind the heap of papers on the desk, Santa Claus rose and walked forward to greet them.

"Ho ho ho," he chuckled, "I'm glad you came Sam. With Christmas only a couple of days away, I could use a few laughs. Now why don't you introduce me to your new friends?"

"Um," began Sam.

The tallest of the silver Alien Penguins stepped forward. "I am Dipstil, emissary of Arbon, High Lord of the Drackonian Galactic Empire and all its Dominions. I am told that you are the leader here. We have come to take over your planet. We request your immediate surrender."

"Ho ho ho," laughed Santa Claus. His face turned red and his stomach jiggled, well, like a bowl full of jelly. "Well done, Dipstil. Well done. Beautiful uniforms. Ho ho ho. And who are your friends?"

Dipstil stepped back and struggled for words. When none came, he began making introductions. "This is Darium, Bantron, Eeevod and S'marl,"⁹ he said, gesturing to the other Alien Penguins in his party. "We are from the planet Drackon Six.¹⁰ It is a glorious world some 6000 light years from your own...."

Dipstil could not continue. Santa Claus was laughing too hard. "Stop it. Stop it, Dipstil, you're killing me," begged Santa Claus. He had fallen to the floor and was rolling around in an absolutely uncontrolled fit of laughter. He slowly composed himself and stood. He placed a big red hand on Dipstil's shoulder. "Thanks ever so much for coming by," Santa Claus had to stop here while he laughed some more. "It has been an absolute pleasure. Your costumes are fantastic." He slowly moved the aliens and the elves towards the door. "Now run along, I've got a lot of work to do. Do come again at Halloween." With that, Santa Claus fell down to his knees and started laughing again. He waved the group out of the door and slammed it shut behind them.

Dipstil's face turned red with rage. Well, as red as the face of a silver Alien Penguin can get. "Of all the ..." he stammered from between his clenched teeth. "I have never been so ..."

"Well, that's our leader," said Sam. "Is there anything else we can show you before you leave?" asked Sam.

⁸ Santa Claus is a great listener, but he is a little hard of hearing.

⁹ Why do aliens always have names like this? Why can't they ever be named John or Bob or Peter?

¹⁰ That's another thing. Why do other planets always have numbers in their names?

Dipstil spun and pointed a long feathered finger in Sam's face. "We are not going anywhere, Earth man. You tell your master we shall return in one hour to accept his surrender."

Sam shrugged and the five Alien Penguins strode (well really, waddled) down the hall.

"I think that they mean business," said Iggy.

"Yeah, but he doesn't think so," said Sam, pointing to the big oak door.

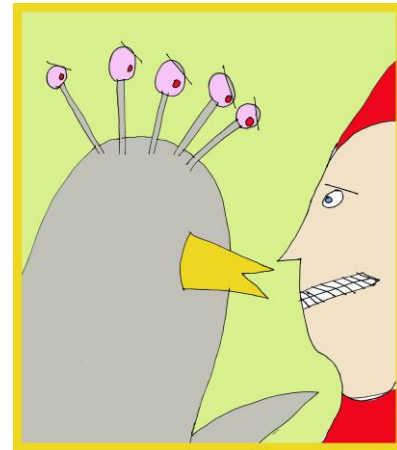
Sure enough, an hour later, Dipstil, Darium, Bantron, Eeevod and S'marl returned and burst into Santa Claus' office. They met with pretty much the same reception. A generous belly laugh from Santa Claus, a vigorous handshake, a friendly escort from the office and an invitation to return at Halloween.

"Your master is a fool," Dipstil snarled at Sam.

"Oh, I don't know," said Sam. "Most people just think he's jolly."

Dipstil leaned forward until his bill was only an inch from Sam's nose. "Well this time you tell him that if we do not have his surrender within 24 hours, we shall destroy this building and everything in it." Dipstil rose and gestured to the other Alien Penguins to follow him.

"Wait just a minute," said Iggy. "You can't destroy this building. It's only two days to Christmas."



Dipstil glared down from his full height and clucked. Darium, Bantron, Eeevod and S'marl clucked too. "I care not about this Christmas," said Dipstil. "I care only about your surrender. You have 24 hours." For the last time Dipstil and his comrades waddled down the hall.

"Well, it looks like we're really in for it this time," said Iggy. "We had better talk to the Chief."

They carefully opened the door and approached Santa Claus. "Uh sir," said Iggy. "We really have to talk"

Santa Claus looked up. "Where is that amusing friend of yours?" he asked and began laughing again. "Oh never mind, it's for the best anyway; I've got far too much work to do." He motioned the elves out of his office. "Come again next week," he said. "We'll talk then."

"But," said Iggy.

"But, but," said Yugo.

"But, but, but," said Sam.

"No buts," said Santa Claus. And laying a finger aside of his nose, and giving a nod, the oak door he did close.¹¹

Iggy turned to Yugo and Sam. "I guess it's up to us," he said.

¹¹ Ouch. I'm really sorry about that.

CHRISTMAS EVE: THEY ATTACK

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM ROSE EARLY THAT MORNING and headed straight to the garage. They had stayed awake most of the night trying to come up with a way to chase away Dipstil and his enormous spaceship. Iggy suggested one pretty attractive plan, but unfortunately it required a squadron of stealth bombers, several hundred tanks, some anti-aircraft guns and a nuclear missile.

"And just where do you suppose we are going to get all of these things?" asked Sam.

"Well, we can just call on all of the world's leaders and ask for help," Iggy suggested.

"Sure," said Sam. "Most of the people in the world don't even believe in us. How are you going to convince them to send a few thousand troops to the North Pole in the middle of winter to take on some oversized penguins?"

"Sam's right," said Yugo. "Santa Claus doesn't even believe it. Nobody else is going to believe it either." A gleam shone in his eye. "We'll just have to rely on our own devices."

"Oh no," said Sam. "Not that ..."

Of course, Sam understood that when Yugo spoke of his own 'devices' he could only be speaking of his red snowmobile. Now, to call it a snowmobile is to do it an injustice. Though it began life as a snowmobile, Yugo had added so many modifications and special features that it had evolved into something different and much more fantastic. It was fully enclosed and had its own internal air supply. It traveled on any terrain; it traveled in the sea and through the air. It had even traveled through time. The complement of optional extras was without peer: air-conditioning, heated seats, radar, sonar, satellite communications, and electric windows to name a few. Indeed, about the only thing it did not have was an in-flight meal service.

Sam hated it. But he recognized that they really had no choice. The only thing on Earth that gave them a chance against Dipstil's spaceship was Yugo's snowmobile.

So it was that early in the morning on Christmas Eve they found themselves in the garage where Yugo parked his snowmobile. Yugo walked over to a large object that was shrouded in a pea green tarpaulin. With a matador's flourish, he pulled the tarpaulin away, and revealed the shiny red snowmobile beneath it.

Yugo had added a few modifications to the snowmobile since Sam had last seen it. It still resembled a snowmobile in a vague way, but Sam could not remember seeing the triple wide chrome exhaust pipes before. He could not recall the flashing green lights that scrolled across the front and back of the snowmobile. He was sure that he had never seen the weapons array mounted at the front of the snowmobile.

"I've made a few new modifications," explained Yugo. He gestured to the snowmobile. "The nuclear exhaust vents here. These are sensor systems, to alert us of any nearby objects. And this," he said, pointing to the weapons array, "this is a computer guided laser system that can pierce the hull of a battleship from a thousand metres."

Sam looked around the garage. "That should come in handy. If a battleship ever gets several thousand miles off course and grounds itself at the North Pole."

Yugo glared at Sam. Then Iggy interjected "We had better get going. Dipstil's deadline will be up in just a few hours." Sam followed Yugo and Iggy into the snowmobile. He shuddered as the hydraulic doors slid shut and clicked into place.

Yugo leaned forward and pulled a black lever. "Better fasten your seatbelts," he said. He punched a flashing yellow button and the snowmobile lurched out of the garage. Yugo eased the lever forward and the elves soon found themselves bounding across the bleak snow swept landscape that surrounded the North Pole.

Yugo made a wide turn and headed towards the Santa Claus Tower. Dipstil's spaceship hung above it like an executioner's axe. Yugo twisted a green dial and a pair of stubby red wings extended from either side of the snowmobile. "Hang on," he said as the snowmobile slowly rose into the air.

"I hate this part," whimpered Sam.

The snowmobile gained altitude quickly; the illuminated windows of the Santa Claus Tower flashed past them like an old black and white movie. Soon they flew over the roof of the building and alongside the sleek black metal hull of the space ship. Its dark exterior was punctuated by millions of flashing lights. Yugo continued up above the spaceship and circled over it.

"Now what?" asked Iggy.

"I'm looking for a way in," answered Yugo.

"In what? In that thing?" Sam whined.

"I don't have the firepower to shoot that thing down," said Yugo. "We are going to have to get inside if we are going to stop it."

For a change, Sam was left without a sarcastic remark. This was because he had fainted.

Yugo looked down at the top of the spaceship, which spread out for acres in all directions below them. "This looks promising," he said and guided the snowmobile to a soft landing near the centre of the massive vessel. He flipped a blue switch. There was a soft hum and the snowmobile shook slightly.

"What was that?" asked Iggy.

"I've engaged the electromagnets," explained Yugo. "Nothing short of an atomic bomb can shake the snowmobile off of this spaceship now." Yugo flipped another blue toggle switch and the driver and passenger doors slid open silently. "Better wake up Sam," he said.

Iggy shook his friend and dragged him groggily out onto the surface of the spaceship. They joined Yugo, who was kneeling beside a large round vent. He pulled his Swiss army knife from his pocket, flipped out the screwdriver, and began to carefully pry open the edge of the vent. A few minutes later, he pulled the cover away and looked inside. He looked back at Iggy and Sam and beckoned them to come forward. "Let's get inside," he said, then he squirmed through the opening and disappeared. Iggy boosted Sam into the chute and followed quickly after him.

NEARLY 300 METRES BELOW, DIPSTIL SAT in his high backed black leather chair on the bridge of the enormous spaceship. His crewmembers and advisors were seated at control panels ringed around him, preparing for the imminent invasion and occupation of the Earth. Dipstil had just completed a transmission to Arbon, High Lord of the Drackonian Empire and all its Dominions. "It's not much of a world," he had reported. "It is dark and cold. The people here are so little, they will make hopeless slaves. The leader is an odious fat man. I do not expect that he is good for much hard labour."

Arbon cared little for Dipstil's concerns. He cared only for conquest and the expansion of his Empire. If the Earth was cold and barren, as seemed to be the case, it could always be disintegrated and used for fuel. Arbon had done it before.

Dipstil sighed. He leaned back in his chair and pressed his long feathered fingers together. He stared at the wide view screen at the front of the bridge. It displayed a dark white landscape, which, with the exception of a polar bear and a couple of seals, was utterly devoid of life. "I can not imagine why we are here," he thought.

Dipstil pondered the hundreds of other worlds he had conquered. It was so easy, really. And it was all becoming so pointless -- the Drackonian Galactic Empire comprised ten thousand planets, half of the galaxy itself, and all but one of them home to nothing but slaves. The giant spaceships of the Drackonian Galactic Empire were so powerful that nothing he had seen could ever stand up to them. It did not occur to him that anything ever could. Their massive weapons had always crushed everything in their path. Nations and empires had fallen before him. Soon enough, the Earth would, too.

The ships themselves were unassailable, of course. Their defences were absolute. There was simply no way to get into them. Of course, Dipstil never considered that someone might try to break in through the septic system.

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM FELL INTO A CIRCULAR room and landed heavily in a deep, soft, dark substance. The room had a conical ceiling that narrowed like a funnel towards the vent at the top. The smell in the room was awful.

"Eeew," grimaced Sam. He stood, up to his elbows in the thick, putrid goo. "What is this terrible new smell you've discovered?" He started choking and gasping for fresh air.

Yugo looked around at the heaps of steaming gunk that surrounded them. "We seem to be in a waste disposal room," he said, wiping gobs of the fetid crud off of his arms. "A ship this size must have thousands of crew members. Imagine the tons of waste they generate. It all has to go somewhere. The hatch we came in must be used to vent the waste outside the ship."

Sam coughed again. "You mean we're inside the space ship's septic tank?" he gasped.

"Something like that," answered Yugo. "Come on, let's see if we can find the way out." At that moment, there was a low rumbling noise like the grinding of gears. Then the floor started to slowly rise.

"Oh oh," said Yugo. "I think we've triggered some kind of sensor. It's about to flush." The elves quickly scrambled to the edge of the room and started feeling along the slime covered walls for an exit. The floor continued its inexorable rise towards the ceiling.

Iggy's hands slid along the slick walls until he felt a thin crack. He pushed gently against the crack and a small panel in the wall popped open. "I think I found the way out," he said. He scrambled through the opening with Yugo and Sam right after him. Behind them, the floor accelerated upward, expelling the foul contents of the room through the vent and high into the sky.

They were in a small storage room. Hanging on the wall were some thick rubber coats with thick rubber boots beneath them. There was a set of shelves against one wall, which held a variety of what could only have been a collection of alien plumbing tools. Sam walked over and picked up a large pipe wrench. He swung it in a purposeful arc. "I think I'll hang on to this," he said.

Iggy and Yugo walked over to the door. Yugo opened it a narrow crack and peered out. He looked into a long hallway as several Alien Penguins marched past. He quickly shut the door. "We're surrounded. We can't get out that way," he said.

"Then now what?" asked Sam. "The only other way out is the way we came in, and I'm not stepping in that stuff again."

Yugo looked up. There was a round duct running across the back of the room. It was about two feet in diameter with a small grate in one section. Yugo pointed up to it. "We can get out through the ventilation system," he said.

Sam looked up. The duct seemed to be the only escape route; but it was at ceiling level, far above their heads. "Great idea," he grunted, "but how do we get up there?"

Yugo pointed to the metal shelves. "We can climb up these shelves like a ladder. Come on, give me a hand."

The three elves pushed the contents of the shelves onto the floor with an enormous clatter. They rocked the heavy shelves back and forth until they came loose from their footings and slid them beneath the grate. Yugo scampered up the shelves like a monkey and pried the grate open with his Swiss army knife. It dropped to the floor, narrowly missing Sam's toes.

"Hey, watch it!" barked Sam.

Yugo reached up and pulled himself inside. "Come on up," he called down to the others. "There's plenty of room."

Iggy and Sam carefully climbed up the shelves and slid through the grate. They found themselves in a narrow, dimly illuminated tunnel. Though the tunnel was scarcely two feet high, that was not uncomfortable for an elf. In fact, it was quite roomy. They crawled along the tunnel on their hands and knees for some time, turning left and then right. Then they turned left, left again and right. The tunnel seemed to wind throughout the entire ship. From time to time they reached an intersection and chose one path or another. They had no real idea what they were looking for, or what they were going to do when they found it.

After a while, they reached another section of the tunnel with a grate in the floor that let them look outside. They saw a small room occupied by three Alien Penguins. At one end of the room, two penguins stood at a console and tapped authoritatively at a keypad beside two small video monitors. The third walked to the other end of the room and stood on a raised platform. There was a quick flash of light and the Alien Penguin disappeared. The two other Penguins nodded and continued tapping away.

"Wow," said Iggy. "What was that?"

"That has to be the teleporter that Dipstil and his cronies used to land," said Yugo. "They probably just beamed that fellow to the other side of the ship."

"Sure beats waiting for a bus," said Sam.¹²

"Let's move on," said Yugo. They continued crawling along the tunnel. They looked into other rooms through other grates and saw Alien Penguins going about a number of mundane tasks. In one room they saw a group preparing a large meal out of a greasy blue material. In another, a bunch of Penguins were washing some of the silver crew uniforms and pressing them with a small hand held device.

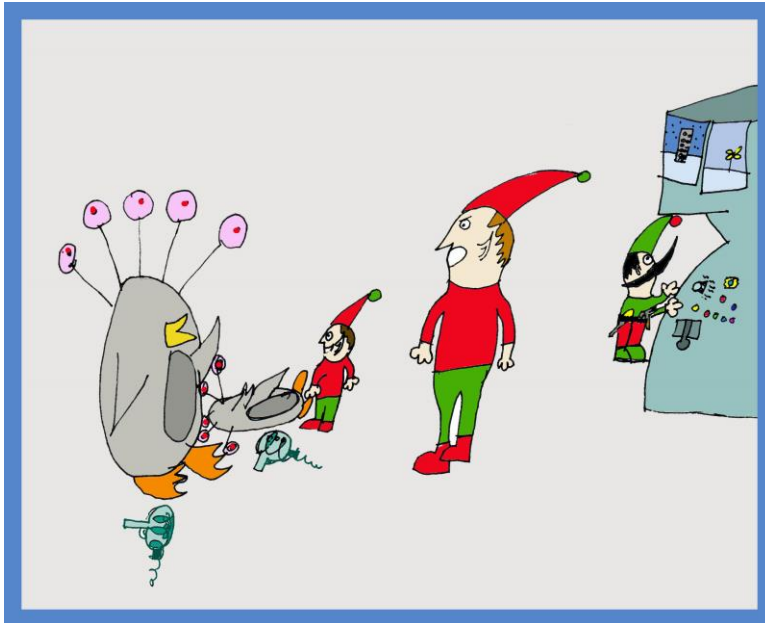
Eventually, they reached another grate that looked down upon a vast control room staffed by dozens of Alien Penguins. Along one wall were a number of large video monitors. Several Alien Penguins manned the equipment below each screen.

At that moment, Dipstil walked into the control room, flanked by Darium, Bantron, Eeevod and S'marl. Dipstil walked along the wall and gazed admiringly at the many display monitors. Then he stopped and stared at one screen in particular. Iggy, Yugo and Sam noticed that the monitor which had captured Dipstil's attention clearly showed Santa Claus and a group of elves loading up the sleigh at the base of the Santa Claus Tower.

"Holy smoke," said Iggy. "It's getting late. Santa Claus is getting ready to leave."

"Their time is nearly up," announced Dipstil. "Initiate the attack sequence." One of the Alien Penguins nodded and began pressing a series of buttons.

"We've got to do something," hissed Sam.



Yugo turned and started clambering down the tunnel. "Follow me," he called over his shoulder, "I have a plan. Iggy and Sam crawled after him. They passed back over the many grates until they reached the teleport room. They stopped and looked down. The two Alien Penguins were still there, leaning against their consoles with bored expressions on their faces.

"Cover me," said Yugo. Before either Iggy or Sam could ask what he meant or how they were supposed to 'cover him', Yugo hunched

over the grate and kicked at it sharply. On the third kick, it gave way and he tumbled out of the tunnel and onto the ground below.

¹² Sam would know. He once waited six weeks for a bus to arrive to take him home from a party at the North Pole. Bus service in the high Arctic is erratic at the best of times.

The two Alien Penguins spun and looked at Yugo, who smiled up at them weakly. They pulled what appeared to be two very dangerous looking ray guns from holsters on their belts and pointed them at Yugo. Back up in the tunnel, Iggy nudged Sam in the ribs. "Come on," he said, "time to cover him." With that, Iggy jumped through the opening and fell down, not upon the ground, but upon the nearer of the two Alien Penguins. The big bird collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Sam shrugged and jumped out onto the second Alien Penguin, who fell to the floor. The Penguin rolled away from Sam and then got up and stood over him. He glared down at Sam, his face a mask of hate. He aimed his dangerous looking ray gun at Sam and pulled the trigger.

Sam jumped up in the air as the dangerous looking ray buzzed past his feet. He crawled backwards, and then felt the pipe wrench that was still in his pocket. The Alien trained the dangerous looking ray gun at Sam's groin. Just as he was about to release another searing bolt of raw energy at Sam, the little elf hurled the wrench as hard as he could at the Alien Penguin. It struck the Penguin above one of his six eyes. He wobbled unsteadily and the dangerous looking ray gun dropped to the ground.

"Which way to the circus?" he asked with a bemused look on his face. Then he slumped limply to the ground.

"Woo Hoo," Sam hollered, trading high fives with Iggy.

Yugo climbed over the two unconscious Penguins and made his way to their consoles. Iggy and Sam followed, but not until they had collected the two dangerous looking ray guns from the unconscious Alien Penguins.

Yugo scanned the many buttons and dials and hummed softly to himself. At the top of the control panel were two video monitors. On one was an image of the raised platform at the opposite end of the room. The other displayed only static. Yugo reached up and twisted a dial under the monitor. A series of images flashed by. "Ah, I thought so," he said. He kept spinning the dial and stopped at the image of Santa Claus and the group of elves loading the sleigh. They were nearly done, and Santa Claus would soon be leaving. Yugo pushed on the knob and the image zoomed back until the entire Santa Claus Tower came into view. Then he started flipping the knob under the other screen. Another series of images flashed past until Yugo stopped on an image of a barren, but sunny, winter landscape.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing?" asked Sam.

"I think so," said Yugo. He leaned back and let out a deep breath. Then he slowly reached forward and pressed a red flashing button.

AT PRECISELY THAT MOMENT, several hundred metres away, an Alien Penguin leaned back and said to Dipstil, Darium, Bantron, Eeevod and S'marl, "the attack sequence is complete."

Dipstil looked down his long bill at him. "Initiate," he said. With that, the other Alien Penguin slowly reached forward and pressed a flashing red button.

From the bottom of the spaceship, a giant laser cannon released an orange and green bolt of electric death on the building below.

The Santa Claus Tower glowed hotly for a moment and then was gone.

IGGY AND SAM STARED IN HORROR as the Santa Claus Tower disappeared from the little video screen. "Oh no," gasped Iggy. "They really did it."

"Wait a minute," said Yugo, who was staring at the winter landscape on the second screen. Suddenly, there was a bright flash of light and the Santa Claus Tower reappeared, whole and intact on the second screen. Yugo whooped with delight.

"What the ..." asked Sam blankly.

"I teleported it!" shouted Yugo. "I teleported it! I moved it from there," he said, pointing to the first screen, "and teleported it to there," he exclaimed triumphantly, pointing to the second screen.

"Great, " said Iggy. "But where is there?"

"Oh, I have no idea," said Yugo. "But Santa Claus and all of the toys are safe. Sure enough, on the little screen they could see a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer swiftly take off and fly out of sight.

"It looks like we'll be having Christmas this year after all," smiled Iggy.

"Sure," said Sam, "as long as we can get rid of this ship.

Yugo nodded grimly and rubbed his hands together. "Then I guess we had better get to it. After all, what are we waiting for, ... Christmas?"

CHRISTMAS DAY: THE DAY WE FIGHT BACK

DIPSTIL POUNDED ACROSS THE CONTROL ROOM, shrieking at Darium, Bantron, Eeevod, S'marl and any other Alien Penguin who got in his path. "Where did it go!" he screamed. "Find it! Find it now and blow it up!"

The Penguins at the control panels tapped frantically at their keyboards trying to find some sign of the missing building. There should have been pieces of the building strewn all over the North Pole. They had all seen it disappear from the main screen, but they had no way of telling where it had gone. Something had made the building disappear entirely. But who had done such a thing? And how?

Finally one of the Penguins stood up, cleared his throat and said to Dipstil "It has vanished sir. Gone without a trace."

"Aaargh!" screamed Dipstil.

Then S'marl turned to him. "Arbon is expecting your report," he said.

Dipstil screamed again and stormed from the room, with Darium, Bantron, Eeevod and S'marl struggling to keep up.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE TELEPORTER ROOM, Iggy, Yugo and Sam sat on the raised platform and discussed their next move. "If we can get to that control room and take it over, we should be able to stop the invasion," said Yugo. "Let's take an inventory of what we have. We've got two dangerous looking ray guns and my Swiss army knife."

"Don't forget my pipe wrench," said Sam.

"And one pipe wrench," added Yugo. "It's not much of an artillery, but it's all we've got. We'd better get moving."

"We can't get back up into that duct," said Iggy, sadly looking up at the open ventilation duct two metres over his head. "We're going to have to get there some other way."

Yugo rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I can't imagine there are more than 30,000 aliens on the ship. That makes the odds against succeeding in a direct attack about 10,000 to one."

Iggy shrugged his shoulders. "We've had worse," he said. "Let's go."

The three elves got up and walked to the door of the teleporter room. They leaned against it while Yugo counted to three. On three, he kicked the door open. Iggy and Sam leapt out, hollering maniacally and firing the dangerous looking ray guns in all directions. Yugo stepped out after them, brandishing the pipe wrench. "Okay guys, you can stop now," he said. "This hallway is deserted."

So it was. They waited for the smoke to clear and then crept cautiously down the hall. It was a wide hallway with tubular lights built into the walls. These lights cast shadows on the opposite wall, which made all three elves a little jumpy. Sam shot his own shadow with the dangerous looking ray gun twice before he realized what it was.

Just then, a group of about a dozen Alien Penguins came around the corner. They stopped abruptly and reached for their own dangerous looking ray guns. Before they could pull them from their holsters, Sam had drawn his and shot two dangerous looking ray blasts at the aliens. Sadly, his aim was terrible and he missed them entirely. Happily, however, his stray shots struck the ceiling above the heads of the aliens and several ceiling panels, support struts and conduits came crashing down upon their heads.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam did not wait to see the extent of the damage that had been inflicted by Sam's attack. They spun around and ran as fast as they could in the other direction. The Alien Penguins struggled out from under the wreckage of the shattered ceiling and sprinted after them.

The elves rounded a corner and ran through the first door they saw, slamming it shut behind them. The sole Alien Penguin in the room was seated behind a small desk staring at a computer terminal. He looked up at them as they entered and his six eyes widened in surprise.

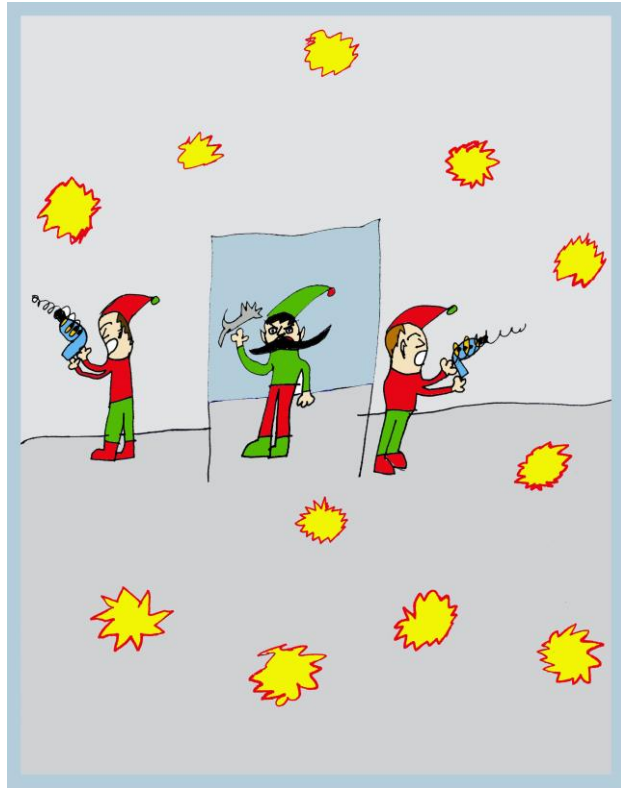
"Pipe wrench?" asked Sam.

"I think so," said Yugo. He handed the wrench to Sam who jumped up on the little desk. He drew the pipe wrench behind his ear and swung it like a baseball bat. It struck the Alien Penguin on the side of the head. He rocked from side to side and then tipped over like a bowling pin and fell to the ground.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam quickly surveyed the room. There were some low cabinets along one wall. Without another moment's thought the elves rolled the Alien Penguin into the cabinet and crawled in on top of him. They gently closed the cabinet door just as the other Alien Penguins walked into the room.

"No one's here," said a voice.

"Seal off the room and search the next one," came the reply.



There was a sharp hiss and the room fell silent. Iggy crawled slowly out of the cabinet with Yugo and Sam right behind him. They were in a small office with a desk, chair, cabinet and computer terminal. On the desk were several files, some pink message slips and a framed picture of an Alien Penguin family.

"Where do you figure we are this time?" asked Sam.

"Who knows?" answered Yugo. "If I had to guess, I'd say this is the office of some bureaucrat. I suppose that any organization this size must have its share of accountants, auditors, administrators and human resources managers."

"I think you mean alien resources managers," quipped Sam.

"Whatever," said Yugo. He climbed onto the chair and sat down behind the desk. he started typing away at the computer keyboard. "Hey guys, you won't believe this," he said.

"What's that?" asked Iggy.

"This computer is part of a network. I think I can get into the spaceship's main computer. And if I can do that, I may just be able to send it home."

"Cool," said Iggy.

DIPSTIL WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF A MOST unpleasant conversation with Arbon. No one enjoys telling their boss bad news, but few people have bosses who are genocidal maniacs like Arbon. Dipstil had just explained that they had launched an attack on the Planetary Headquarters,¹³ but that somehow the building had disappeared.

Arbon was unimpressed, to say the least. "You are a fool, Dipstil. I have given you a ship with enough firepower to destroy a dozen planets and you are telling me that you have misplaced a building? I have never seen such incompetence."

Dipstil stammered, "it is just a minor setback. We are making every possible inquiry. The planet will be under our control very soon."

"Do not fail me again Dipstil," replied Arbon and he ended the communication.

Dipstil stood up and began pacing back and forth. Nothing like this had ever happened before. But it did not really matter. He was the captain of the largest military spaceship in the universe. It was only a matter of time before the planet was under his absolute control.

Then he felt the floor shift under him. The ship was moving.

¹³ Dipstil just assumed the Santa Claus Tower was the Planetary Headquarters. Remember, it was very dark outside.

"I DID IT!" SHOUTED YUGO. "I'M IN the spaceship's primary navigation program!"

"So?" said Sam.

"So, now I'm steering the ship!" answered Yugo. "Now, I'm in command."

It was true. Yugo was steering the ship. Of course, since he had never piloted a 45 billion ton spaceship before, he was not finding it at all easy. Indeed, trying to drive a ship that size with only a mouse is exceptionally difficult.

The spaceship skimmed over the snowdrifts around the North Pole and started to build up speed. It cruised metres over a herd of very surprised looking walruses before Yugo was able to gain altitude. The ship was faster than Yugo would have believed possible; once it started gaining elevation, it very quickly sliced through the Earth's upper atmosphere and into orbit.

Yugo stared at the computer monitor. Different images on the screen flashed on and off with each click of his mouse. "I think that I have done it," said Yugo. "I think that I have sent the ship home."

"You cannot imagine how disappointed that I am to hear that," said an inhuman and mechanical voice from the doorway. Yugo looked up. Darium was standing in the doorway, with Bantron, Eeevod and S'marl at his side.

Sam drew his dangerous looking ray gun, but this time, before he could shoot holes in the ceiling, Bantron stepped quickly across the room, picked up the pipe wrench, which was still lying on the desk, and struck Sam on the side of his head.

The elf mumbled, "I hear San Francisco is nice this time of year," and toppled to the floor. Eeevod and S'marl walked over to Iggy and Yugo, efficiently disarmed them and carried them to the doorway under their stubby wings.

"You will all come with us," said Darium. "You have much explaining to do."

THE FOUR ALIEN PENGUINS BROUGHT IGGY, Yugo and Sam to the bridge and dropped them in a heap in front of Dipstil's chair. Dipstil leaned forward.

"So it is you, little Earth thing," he said to Sam. "I should have expected as much."

Sam looked up groggily. "Oh, it's you, Dipstick. I should have expected as much."

Dipstil leaned back in his chair and pressed his long feathered wing tips together. "Perhaps you could tell me why you have gone to so much trouble to thwart my plans."

Iggy stood up and straightened his tunic. "I'll tell you why," he said, "because it's Christmas. We came here to stop you because of Christmas."

Dipstil tipped his head and raised two of his six eyebrows. "This is the second time you have spoken of 'Christmas'. What is this ... 'Christmas'?"

Iggy took a deep breath. "Christmas is the most important day of the year. Even the coldest winter day carries a trace of summer sunshine when it's Christmas Day. The most humble and weary and lost walk with a lighter step on Christmas Day. Everyone has a smile and a nod for a stranger on Christmas Day.

"Christmas is the laughter in a child's eyes on an early frosty morning. It's joy we keep hidden in our hearts the rest of the year sprung free for just one day.

"Christmas is food and cookies and rock hard fruitcake and egg nog spiked with rum. It's fireplaces and carols and trees covered with tinsel. It's toy trains and blonde haired dolls and bicycles and yo-yos. It's family and friends and singing and laughter.

"Christmas is the one day of the year when all of the people of the Earth stop thinking of themselves for a little while and start thinking of others. And it all starts with Santa Claus. He goes out once a year and gives presents to everyone, to remind them to be generous to others. To remind them to give a little bit of themselves, just once every year.

"And maybe, if Santa Claus does his job right, the people of the Earth will give a little more of themselves the rest of the year too, and walk a little lighter, and let the joy that is in them fill their hearts every day. That's what Christmas is."

Dipstil stood up and walked to Iggy. "Fascinating," he said. "You faced an unstoppable foe and certain death all for ... Christmas. I have journeyed across galaxies and seen thousands of worlds. But I never heard of anything like Christmas before."

"Well perhaps you need a little Christmas yourself," said Sam. "Maybe then you wouldn't run around the universe blowing up planets and enslaving people."

There was no sound on the bridge. Dipstil was stared idly at the view screen, at the hundreds of stars streaking by the ship. "Maybe there is something to what you say," he said. "I grow weary of this endless conquest. Maybe we do need a little Christmas.

"But Arbon would never understand. I could not explain it to him." He turned to the elves. "But you could."

Dipstil strode across the bridge and lowered his face to Iggy, "I will give you a chance to live and spare your world." He gestured to his crew. "I could turn this ship around and conquer your planet in a moment. But this notion of Christmas intrigues me.

"I will keep this ship on its present course. If you can convince Arbon of the value of your little Christmas, then perhaps he will agree that your pitiful little world is worth sparing."

Iggy looked around the bridge. It was clear that the Earth stood no chance against a ship like this. They really had no choice. He looked at Yugo and Sam and then back at Dipstil. "Okay," he said, "we'll go with you."

For only the second time in recent memory, Sam was left without a sarcastic remark. Once again, he had fainted.

EPILOGUE: BOXING DAY

SANTA CLAUS STOOD IN FRONT OF THE Santa Claus Tower staring at the faint speck of light still visible in the bright morning sky, but growing fainter by the minute. He had finished his deliveries for another Christmas and would soon be turning in for the day. He just wanted to take one last look for himself.

He had learned what had become of Iggy, Yugo and Sam on his return to the Santa Claus Tower. The whole thing had been broadcast over Yugo's little satellite dish and all of the elves had watched it.

Santa Claus stood in the snow with three other elves, Ziggy, Mango and Stan. The tiny speck of light had disappeared. Santa Claus sighed and wiped his moist cheek with the back of his mitten. "They were our friends," he said. "They were ours. But now they belong to the stars."

He turned to Ziggy, Mango and Stan. "Don't be sad, boys" he said, placing his big hands on Ziggy's shoulders. "They'll be back someday. Six thousand light years isn't so far away, really."

Santa Claus turned and went inside. Ziggy, Mango and Stan stayed outside for a while. There was one other problem they were going to have to explain to Santa Claus, but they just did not know how to tell him.

A couple of penguins strolled past the three elves and looked up at them quizzically. These were little black and white Earth penguins. Ziggy, Mango and Stan looked back, equally confused. They realized of course, that penguins do not live at the North Pole. They just did not know how they were going to tell Santa Claus that when Yugo teleported the Santa Claus Tower, he did not move it a kilometre or even a hundred kilometres away.

He moved it all the way to the South Pole.

MERRY CHRISTMAS.