

The Treasure of the Claus

A High Sea Shanty
Sung in High C¹

The First Ziggy, Mango and Stan Story

IGGY WOKE LATE THAT MORNING. He lay in bed with his eyes closed and let the memories sweep over him. He was aboard a giant spaceship with Yugo and Sam. It was the flagship of the evil Drackonian Galactic Empire and all of its Dominions. The ship was populated by a crew of more than 30,000 aliens who looked a great deal like tall, six eyed penguins.

Their captain was Dipstil, despotic conqueror of a thousand planets. The previous Christmas Dipstil had been on the verge of conquering the Earth as well, when he took pity upon it and three certain elves after Iggy had told him of Christmas. Iggy's story had softened Dipstil's hard heart (all three of them) and made Dipstil re-evaluate the personal satisfaction he had previously obtained through galactic conquest.

Now Dipstil was taking the elves to the centre of the galaxy and the heart of the evil Drackonian Galactic Empire and all of its Dominions. There they were to meet with Arbon, High Lord of the Drackonians and infamous genocidal maniac. Dipstil felt that if Iggy, Yugo and Sam could explain the meaning of Christmas to Arbon, he might abandon his plans to conquer and enslave the Earth.

¹ This story is a sequel, which continues the tale begun in *CD25: Christmas Day*. I probably should have called it *CD25: Christmas Day II* or *CD26: Boxing Day*, which would have been a little more clever. Anyway, since this picks up where the other one left off, you should go read the first story before you dig into this one. Off with you then. This story will still be here when you get back.

Of course, if Iggy failed to dissuade him, Arbon would likely have the elves for dinner. Their situation was dire and their prospects -- grim.

Iggy rubbed his eyes and sat up. He smiled. "It was just a dream," he thought to himself. "The spaceship, the penguins, it was all just a dream. When I open my eyes I will be in my little grey room at the North Pole"

He opened his eyes and looked around at the familiar bare grey walls of his little room. He looked at the little mat on the floor, at the little book shelf in the corner and at the large framed portrait of Dipstil hanging over his bed.

He sighed. It was not a dream after all. They really were on a giant spaceship in deep space travelling towards almost certain doom.

Iggy stepped out of bed and picked a black grease pencil off of the bedside table. He drew a small tick mark on the wall; the one hundred and seventy fifth tick mark in a row, to mark his one hundred and seventy fifth day in space.

Almost six months had passed since they had left the Earth. Dipstil said that the journey to the centre of the galaxy would take about six Earth months.

The physics of the trip are a little difficult to explain, so bear with me. The fastest thing in the universe is light. Nothing can ever go faster than light; it is a rule on the order of "Don't run with scissors", so you know it is important. In order to reach the centre of the galaxy in six months, the spaceship had to travel at 12,000 times the speed of light. It is absolutely impossible to go anywhere that fast. Einstein said so, and he ought to know.

Because the spaceship cannot possibly travel that fast it's massive hyperwarp engines actually pull the centre of the galaxy *toward it* at a velocity equal to 12,000 times the speed of light. Apparently this does not break any of the laws of physics, though it does sprain them somewhat.²

This method of interstellar travel has certain relativistic consequences. Anyone who sprains the laws of physics knows that it hurts even worse the next morning. The most obvious consequence has to do with time. Time is nothing more than the thing that keeps everything else from happening all at once. But when you travel faster than light, you can arrive before anyone can see you and time gets all confused. So to accomodate this kind of a trip, time has to stretch out in some places and shrink up in others. What all of this means is that while the elves perceived the trip as lasting only six months, over 50,000 years would pass on Earth during their journey. They were quite literally flying into the future.

Iggy looked out his small window in the direction of the Earth. 50,000 years was a long time. Everyone they ever knew was long dead. Even their grandchildren had been forgotten for centuries. It was quite probable that the human race (and the elven race, for that matter) was extinct. What kind of Earth would be waiting for them if they ever made it back?

² It is also a moving violation on most planets.

MEANWHILE, OR PERHAPS MORE CORRECTLY, 50,000 years earlier, Christmas came to the South Pole for the first time.

There had never been a Christmas quite like it. This was because the Christmas before, through an improbable series of events, Santa Claus' headquarters, his workshop and all of the accessory buildings had been transported to the South Pole.

Not surprisingly, Santa Claus and the remaining elves had a little trouble adjusting to their new surroundings. First, it is even colder at the bottom of the world than it is at the top, and it is really, really cold at the top. The kind of cold that makes you think about licking a chain link fence, just to see if your tongue would really stick to it.

To complicate matters further, there is a giant multinational research station located at the South Pole. The place is absolutely crawling with scientists. This is hard to understand because there is absolutely nothing to see at the South Pole aside from snowflakes, snow drifts, snow banks, snow dunes and the occasional penguin. The arrival of three thousand elves came as a very welcome diversion to several hundred very bored scientists and researchers.³

The scientists were absolutely tenacious. They were always eavesdropping and spying on all aspects of Santa Claus' toymaking and distribution business. It had become impossible for Santa Claus or any of the elves to go for a walk without running into little balding men with pocket protectors, calculators and very expensive video equipment demanding interviews, taking pictures and collecting specimens of every description.

Moreover, the scientists as a group were completely lacking in even the most basic and rudimentary social skills.⁴ This is complicated by the fact that at the South Pole in December, the sun stays up all night and most of the scientists, in spite of their extended educations, were simply not smart enough to go to bed. They would stay up to all hours watching reruns of *Star Trek* and *The X-Files* at surprisingly loud volumes and laughing loudly whenever one of them would push an entire cheesie up his nose.⁵

Santa Claus had always run a clandestine operation. In the past, everything was done in private, far away from cameras, video tape recorders and scientific paparazzi. It was part of the mystique of Christmas. This Christmas, there was no mystery. Every move Santa Claus had made for the last six months had been fully studied, documented, analyzed and reported.

³ Overnight a dozen treatises were published with titles like *"Toymaking at the Turn of the Century: A Comparative Review"* and *"Elf Customs of the Southern Hemisphere: A New World Order"*. Discover Magazine even ran a cover story titled, *"Elf Lifestyles, Culture and Mating Practices: Not a Fairy Story"*.

⁴This is probably a consequence of years of isolation and exclusion in high school, university and society in general. But do not feel too badly for them. Now that they have the Internet, they can at least socialize with each other.

⁵ Which happened a lot more often than you might think.

So it was with some discomfort that Santa Claus threw his big red velvet bag over his shoulder, walked past the documentary film crew and climbed into his big sleigh. He lifted the reins gently in his hands and shouted to his team of eight mighty stags,⁶ "Up and Away!" With a flash of red the sleigh was gone.

Santa Claus circled the South Pole and looked back over his shoulder at the group of elves who had come to see him off. Three elves stood a little ways apart from the crowd. Their names were Ziggy, Mango and Stan.

Ziggy was a popular elf, who had recently been appointed Junior elf, first class. He always saw the good in everything. Indeed, Ziggy may well have been the single most optimistic life form on the planet. If someone showed him an empty water glass, he would comment, "well, it was half full once." Like most elves, he refused to eat his vegetables, but he always took care to clear his dishes afterward.

Mango was an old friend of his who had an affinity for all things mechanical. He was always inventing new toys that exhibited bizarre and unexpected behaviours.⁷ His most recent invention was the one which made him proudest. It was a working helicopter built entirely from scrap iron and other spare parts which he had found in the work shop. He had incorporated a number of unique and surprising features and was most anxious to show it off to his friends.

Stan was, well, he was just Stan. He seemed to have a way of finding something wrong with just about everything. Most of the elves regarded him as a miserable curmudgeon, but he was a talented toy maker and Ziggy and Mango had taken a liking to him.

Santa Claus shook his head. Things had sure changed in a year. He thought again, as he often did, of his old friends Iggy, Yugo and Sam. They were gone now and he did not expect that he would ever see them again. He dabbed a frozen tear from his cheek and concentrated on driving the sleigh.

"On Donner," he shouted, "On Prancer and Vixen...."

⁶ Legend has it that Santa Claus' sleigh is pulled by 'eight miniature reindeer.' This myth was put to rest in one of the earliest published articles after Santa Claus arrived in the South Pole: "*The Law of Gravity Reduced to a Guideline: The Aerodynamics of the Southern Reindeer in Flight.*" It is published in the journal *Nature*. (You can look it up.)

⁷ One example was a big rubber dinosaur named "Tickle Me Grumbo." When its stomach was tickled, it would bite the hand of the tickler with surprisingly sharp teeth. Needless to say, it did not find its way under too many Christmas trees.

THERE WAS A KNOCK ON IGGY'S DOOR. It slid aside silently before Iggy could answer it. A tall, six-eyed silver alien penguin walked into the room and left a tray at the end of Iggy's bed.

"Your breakfast, sir," said the penguin.

Iggy nodded. "Thanks Freegorm," he said. "I was just going to call on Yugo. Do you know if he's up yet?"



"Master Yugo is in the engine room again. I believe that Master Sam is still sleeping," replied Freegorm.

"I've little doubt about that," said Iggy with a smile.

Freegorm bowed and left the room. Iggy turned to his breakfast. A half grapefruit with a cherry in the middle with toast and bacon on the side. It was the same breakfast that he had eaten for one hundred and seventy five consecutive

days. During his first week on the spaceship he was asked what he would like for breakfast. He made the mistake then of requesting scrambled eggs. The alien penguins, each of whom had been hatched from an egg, blanched in horror. Iggy quickly realized his mistake and immediately changed his order to a half grapefruit with a cherry in the middle with toast and bacon on the side. He was afraid that anything else he ordered might cause further offence, so he just kept on requesting the same meal every morning.

Iggy finished his breakfast and stepped out into the hall. Several alien penguins passed him on other side, scuttling to their business and oblivious to his presence. "They're not very social creatures, these alien penguins," thought Iggy. It was true. They rarely said "Hello", or "Good Day", or even, "Get out of the way." Of course, what could he expect? Conquering races rarely had very good manners.

Iggy made his way to the engine room where he found Yugo crawling around under a piece of machinery roughly the size of a shopping mall.

"Yugo," he called, "what are you doing?"

"Oh hi, Iggy," said Yugo, sliding out from beneath the equipment and wiping some grease from his cheek. "I was just inspecting the framminstatter valves. Did you know that this ship has over three hundred of them?"

Iggy nodded. "I thought it might," he said, although of course, he had no idea what a framminstatter valve was. He helped Yugo to his feet and they walked together to one of the large windows in the engine room.

The window was filled with a single planet that had grown bigger over the last two days as thre drew nearer to it. It was an ugly gray planet. As they had approached it they could see that it was nearly covered with streets and buildings. There were no forests or prairies or mountains to be seen. Just a single endless city.

"Is Sam awake yet?" asked Yugo.

"No," said Iggy. Since they left, Sam had taken to sleeping in very late. The week before, he had slept in until Thursday.

"I think that we had better go and get him up," said Yugo.

"Why is that?" asked Iggy.

At that moment Dipstil, who had been standing behind them for several minutes, silent and unnoticed, spoke. "Because, we have arrived," he said. He swept a wing towards the window. "Welcome to the centre of the galaxy. Welcome to Drackon. Welcome to your new home."

IN THE SOUTHERN PART OF THE Indian Ocean a pirate ship bobbed gently. It was an old wooden galleon that creaked loudly as it rode up and down each wave. Dirty grey sails sagged from each mast. From the tallest of these, a tattered black and white Jolly Roger flapped limply in the breeze.

Six pirates lived on the ship. They spent their days drinking rum, playing cards and marauding other vessels throughout the ocean in their endless quest for pirate treasure. The crew included some of the most villainous scoundrels that ever sailed the high seas. Among them was Shark Tooth Pete, so-called because like a shark, he never brushed his teeth. And like a shark, a good number of his teeth had fallen out. Beside him stood Bad Brad, a foul mouthed, foul tempered, foul breathed scoundrel. He wore a dirty red bandanna on his head; a ridiculously large gold earring hung from each ear, or at least those parts of his ears that remained. At the back of the ship, Peg Leg Johnson spun on his wooden leg. He boasted that he had lost his leg hunting sharks. This was only partly true. While he had been hunting sharks, he had accidentally shot his own leg off with a musket long before he saw any sharks.

The first mate, Mr. Smeg, strode onto the deck. Mr. Smeg was a rotund man who looked like he was made entirely of beach balls. His dirty grey hair pointed in all directions (and that was just the hair in his nose). He was an ill-tempered, ill-kept, ill-mannered, ill-humoured, illiterate, illegitimate reprobate of the worst order.

The last, and undoubtedly least member of the crew was Little Johnny, the dirty faced cabin boy.⁸ Little Johnny had always dreamed of being a pirate and had stowed away on the ship when he was only six. He was always quick to shout out "Yo ho!" and fetch the men a bottle of rum. The rest of the crew though that he was a tremendous nuisance. Except for the rum.

But the meanest pirate of them all was the tall man with the tidy pointed black beard staring into the sky through an old brass telescope. The other eye was covered with a faded black patch. He wore a stained puffy shirt and a faded red and black kilt. A musket was tucked in his belt on one side and a sabre in the other. His name was Black Mac MacTavish and he was the most feared pirate in the Southern Hemisphere.

Black Mac MacTavish tracked the sky with his telescope and then stopped and stared. "Ahoy, Mr. Smeg," he said, raising his left arm and pointing his tarnished hook into the air. "There it be! There be the treasure I've been searching for all me life! Make ready the cannon!"

"Aye aye Cap'n," said Mr. Smeg. He turned and shouted to pirates on the the deck below. "Yo Ho! Make ready the starboard cannon."

The bedraggled crew scampered about the deck and pulled the cover off of a large cannon. After a few more barked orders from Mr. Smeg, they aimed the cannon high into the early morning sky.

"Fire on my mark, Mr. Smeg," said Black Mac MacTavish.

Mr. Smeg looked confused. "Who's Mark? There is no Mark on the ship," he said, rubbing his greasy gray hair.

Black Mac MacTavish glared at the portly pirate. "Just fire when I tell you to," he sneered. He raised the telescope to his eye again and smiled. His yellow teeth showed from beneath his moustache. "Now," Mr. Smeg," he barked. "Fire at will!"

"Who's Will?" asked Mr. Smeg.

Black Mac MacTavish threw his telescope at Mr. Smeg, striking him hard on the back of his head. "Now!" he screamed, jumping up and down.⁹ "Fire right now!"

⁸ You know the type. In the movies, they are usually played by precocious British child actors. The same cute children who inevitably grow up to become serial killers.

⁹ This was a bit of a trick with a wooden leg, but Black Mac MacTavish, old sea dog that he was, managed to pull it off (that made it a lot easier, because then he could just jump on his good leg).

The heavy black cannon fired once. A dark, rusted iron ball rose into the sky and disappeared from sight. There was a soft pop in the distance. A faint scream was heard that sounded something like, "Hooooooo, Hooooooo, Hooooooo." The scream rose in volume and a large red object came into sight. It plunged into the sea a few metres from the starboard bow.

Black Mac MacTavish clenched his fist in triumph and pumped it in the air. His face drew into a frightening grin. "It's ours Mr. Smeg." he said. "The greatest treasure in the world. The Treasure of the Claus!"

"Yo Ho men," shouted Mr. Smeg, still rubbing the back of his head. "Reel 'im in, men. Reel 'im in!"

AT THAT VERY MOMENT AT SANTA CLAUS' Headquarters at the South Pole, Mango turned to Ziggy and Stan and said, "Well, it's time."

He had promised them both a ride in his new helicopter on Christmas morning. Ziggy had been looking forward to the trip for weeks, but Stan (who was a very nervous flyer) had been quietly dreading it.

"Do we have to?" whined Stan. "I mean, are you sure that it is safe?"

"Of course," answered Mango. "I built it myself. I've even added a few special modifications of my own." He went on to describe the reclining passenger seats, the lumbar support pads, quadraphonic digital audio tape sound system, air-conditioning, anti-lock brakes and, of course, the air to surface missiles.

"Are you sure those are really necessary?" asked Ziggy.

"It's a dangerous world out there," answered Mango. "You never know when you might run into trouble."

The sun rose early that Christmas morning. Actually, it had risen sometime in November and had still not set. Mango led Ziggy and Stan down to the garage where he had spent the last few weeks putting the finishing touches on his helicopter. It was parked at the back of the garage and was covered with a large grey sheet. Mango pulled the sheet away with a flourish.

Ziggy gasped. Stan groaned. Beneath the sheet was a gleaming blue miniature helicopter. It looked like no helicopter either of them had ever seen before. It was the size of a small sports car with green pinstripes running in parallel lines down each side. But the thing that set it apart from every other helicopter in the world was that it had at least thirty propellers, of various sizes and shapes, which protruded in all directions. They made the helicopter look something like a giant metal hedgehog on steroids.

"Why all the propellers?" asked Ziggy.

Mango winced. "I was having some problems with stability in my first few test flights," he said. "So I added another propeller on the back. That helped level it out, but it started to rock from side to side, so I added some small propellers on the sides. Then, one problem led to another and here we are. It flies like a dream now."

Stan stared at the big stainless steel propeller in front of the smoked glass windshield. "How do you see out?" he asked.

"Once the propellers are spinning," explained Mango, "visibility is no problem." He pressed a red button on the side of the helicopter and a small door with a propeller on it eased slowly open. He motioned for Ziggy and Stan to step inside. Ziggy hopped in immediately, but Stan could not be persuaded to enter the machine until Mango promised to buy him lunch for the rest of the week.

Once inside, Mango instructed them to fasten their seatbelts. Then he flipped a flashing green switch and thirty propellers began spinning; slowly at first and then faster until the helicopter shook erratically. Mango released the parking brake and the helicopter rose gently, though unsteadily, into the air.

Mango guided the helicopter, a blurred blue smudge behind its many whirling propeller blades, out of the garage and into the weak Antarctic sunshine. It wobbled gracelessly a hundred metres above the ground.

"Ha Ha!" shouted Mango. "What do you think of that?"

Ziggy smiled weakly in reply. Stan just looked like he was going to faint.

"Let's see what she can do," said Mango. He pressed hard on the gas pedal and the little helicopter sped over the snow dunes and higher into the pale blue sky. They flew some distance then Mango said, "How about some tunes?"

He twirled a black dial and the cockpit was filled with a burst of crackling static. He fiddled with the dial some more until a faint voice could be heard.

"And this just in," crackled the voice, "The New Guinea Coast Guard reports this morning that Santa Claus is missing. He disappeared from radar early this morning over the Indian Ocean, apparently while returning to his new headquarters in the South Pole. The Australian and Indonesian Navies have deployed a dozen ships to locate him, but so far there they have found no sign of him. Naval authorities fear the worst." The crackly broadcast ended suddenly.

Ziggy, Mango and Stan stared at each other in horror. "What are we going to do," asked Ziggy.

Mango turned his little steering wheel hard and the helicopter lurched about. "I'll tell you what we are going to do," he said, "we are going to find Santa Claus."

Stan stared queasily at the bleak white landscape that flashed by beneath them. His stomach growled loudly. "Couldn't we stop for lunch first?"

AT THE CENTRE OF THE GALAXY, Iggy, Yugo and Sam walked with Dipstil down a long brick street towards an enormous green palace. A few penguins lined the street, staring curiously at the elves.¹⁰

There were no trees. Trees had been extinct on Drackon for centuries. They had all been cut down to make room for the expanding cities. Without trees, the air had become foul with pollution.

Iggy's eyes watered and he coughed as he walked down the street. It was little wonder that the alien penguins¹¹ were trying to conquer the galaxy; their own world was ruined.

The palace might have been grand once. It was enormous, spanning the horizon from side to side. As the elves approached, some of its details became more apparent. For example, each brick had been carefully molded to fit precisely without any mortar. Each of the thick marble columns that surrounded it on all sides and towered above the elves had been carved to resemble leaders of the past.

Though these details were apparent, the beauty of the palace, its brick work and carvings had been eroded by the acid in the air. Grease and grime stained the marble facade. Black smoke churned into the air from tall smokestacks on either side of the palace

The elves walked up the steps towards the tall golden doors that led into the palace. The doors themselves were covered with intricate carvings depicting the conquest of numerous other planets. Iggy thought he heard a drum beating somewhere in the distance, then shivered as he realized it was his own heart. The doors parted and the elves stepped inside.

Once inside, they marched down a long wide hall and then into a narrower hall. From there, they were led to a much narrower hall and then into an even narrower hall still. They were traveling in single file by the time Dipstil stopped in front of an antique wooden door and knocked twice. The door opened slowly and the elves stepped into a large round chamber.

In the middle of the chamber, seated atop a pile of red velvet was the largest alien penguin they had yet encountered. Though he was the same height as Dipstil, he must have

¹⁰ To see actual living, breathing elves was a real treat. The experience of most alien penguins respecting Christmas elves is limited to a delightful dish known as *'elf a l'orange'*.

¹¹ It is not strictly correct to refer to the Drackonians as 'alien penguins' on their home world. Proper usage dictates that they now be referred to as 'domestic penguins' and that Iggy, Yugo and Sam be described collectively as the 'alien elves'. However, to avoid confusion, the writer will continue to refer to the Drackonians simply as the 'alien penguins'.

weighed ten times as much. He was the fattest thing any of them had ever seen. His skin, much paler than any other penguins, was coated in a thin gray slime, which was carefully blotted by an attendant. Barely visible between the thick folds of his neck was a gold chain with a sparkling green medallion.

A group of alien penguins were arrayed before Arbon, each holding a tray filled with some exotic dish. The porcine penguin reached casually to one of the trays and removed a squirming object, which was dripping with sauce. He flipped it into his gnarled beak, swallowed it whole and belched grotesquely.

Dipstil knelt. He spread his wings out before him and bowed his head. "Hail Arbon, High Lord of the Drackonian Galactic Empire and all of its Dominions. Hail Arbon, Destroyer of Races and Ruler of Ten Thousand Worlds. I bring you greetings."

Arbon leaned forward, a thick stream of drool spilling from the edge of his beak. He made another loud, wet belch. "Get up, Dipstil," he grunted in his deep gravelly voice. He pointed to the elves. "What is this you have brought me? They look delicious"

Dipstil rose and coughed nervously. "These are ambassadors, High Lord. From the planet Earth," he said. "They have come to speak to you of Christmas."

Arbon grunted again. "Planet Earth, eh. Must be a strange planet to be named after dirt." He chuckled and his entire bulk moved in a hideous, though undeniably hypnotic, manner. Iggy, Yugo and Sam could not stop staring at him.

Arbon gestured for them to come forward. The alien penguins holding the great trays of food parted to allow them to pass.

"So," growled Arbon, "Dipstil says that you want to tell me about Christmas. Get on with it." Arbon lay back and an attending penguin poured a bowl of small red fruit into his open mouth.

Iggy stepped forward. He had been rehearsing his speech for six months and he delivered it marvelously. He spoke of loving and caring and giving and sharing. He spoke of Christmas mornings with frost on the trees and snowflakes in the air. But it was clear, except for his discussion of Christmas dinner, that Arbon had little interest in what he was saying.

He was nearing the end of his address when Arbon silenced him with a wave of his flabby wing. "Enough!" he snarled. "I've heard enough. I've no time for this Christmas of yours." He gestured to one of his assistants. "Take them to the dungeons and torture them for a while." He leaned forward and looked at Iggy. "I find that tortured meat is so much more tender, don't you?" He laughed and Iggy smiled back weakly.

Three alien penguins grabbed them roughly from behind and started to pull them away. Arbon looked over to Sam. "Pass me that drumstick," he demanded.

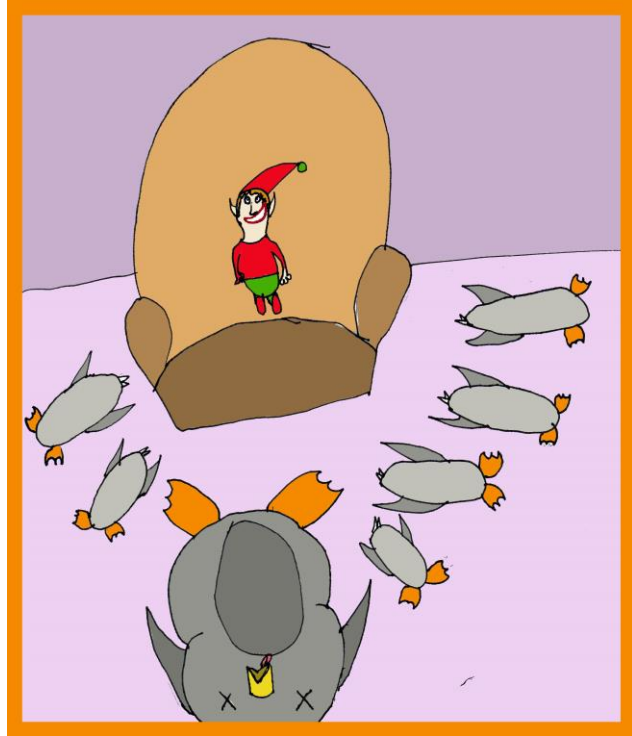
Sam stared back at him. One of the alien penguins shoved him roughly. Sam reached onto one of the platters and lifted a huge joint of meat. It looked like it might have been an elephant's thigh. He passed it up to Arbon.

Arbon bit into the meat greedily and swallowed it in enormous gulps. The elves watched in disgust as his neck expanded with each bite. Then Arbon stopped. He started to choke and gag. He stood up, blue in the face and then fell over. He twitched gruesomely and then lay still.

Two alien penguins rushed to him. They lifted one of the heavy wings and felt along it carefully. Then they laid it gently against Arbon's side.

"He's dead," said one of the penguins.

The elves looked around at the dozens of alien penguins in terror. Then, one by one, each of the alien penguins in the room slowly bowed down on one knee.



ON THE DECK OF THE PIRATE SHIP, Shark Tooth Pete and Bad Brad struggled to pull their sinking booty up over the ship's railing and on to the deck.

"He's even heavier than I thought," said Bad Brad, yanking on his thick rope.

"Shut up and pull," grunted Shark Tooth Pete. The two pirates gave another loud grunt and the big red object flipped over the ship's railing and landed on the deck with a dull thud.

It was a large red sled, its hitch shattered by the pirates' cannonball. Bad Brad tipped it over and water spilled out. A large fat man in a soaking wet red wool jacket fell onto the deck.

"Just what is the meaning of this?" demanded the fat man as he struggled to his feet.

Black Mac MacTavish strode forward gracefully and bowed deeply. "Santa Claus, I presume? Or do you prefer to be called St. Nicholas?" he said.

Santa Claus glared at the pirate. "Black Mac MacTavish. I should have guessed. What do you want?"

"What do I want?" asked Black Mac MacTavish. "What does any fun loving pirate want?" Peg Leg Johnson laughed and Shark Tooth Pete smiled his easygoing toothless grin.

"Treasure, fat man," said Black Mac MacTavish. "We want yer treasure. We want the Treasure of the Claus. And we'll have it now, or ye'll walk the plank."

"What treasure?" asked Santa Claus. "I don't have any treasure."

"Oh, I beg to differ," replied Black Mac MacTavish smoothly. "Ye are the owner of the biggest bag of toys and loot in all the world. That's what we want. That's the Treasure of the Claus."

Santa Claus placed his hands against his broad belly and laughed out loud. "Ho ho ho," he chortled. "Ho, ho, ho," he leaned forward, laughing uncontrollably. He stood up, his sides still shaking. "You're too late, pirate," he said, putting a finger aside of his nose to wipe away a tear. "I've finished all of my deliveries." He held up a dripping wet and obviously empty red velvet bag. "See for yourself."

Black Mac MacTavish's sneering grin turned to a frown. He swaggered up to Santa Claus and snatched the sack from his hand. He looked into it. Then he stuck his arm into it and rooted around. He smiled and pulled out his arm. Clutched in his hand was a wriggling fish.

"Baaa!" shouted Black Mac MacTavish as he threw the fish over the ship's railing. He walked over to the sled and looked inside. It, too, was empty.

"Johnny," he barked.

The dirty faced little cabin boy ran over to Black Mac. "Yo ho sir," he said.

"Rum, Johnny, bring me rum."

Little Johnny scampered into the hold, returning a moment later with a large silver flagon filled to the rim with a frothy amber liquid. Black Mac MacTavish took a long pull from the cup and rubbed his beard thoughtfully. He turned to Santa Claus and stared at him for a moment with his single bloodshot eye.

"If ye've got no treasure, I've got no use for ye," he sighed "Brad, Pete, make ready the plank!"

SAM STARED IN AWE AT THE ALIEN PENGUINS who were bowing before him. "What ..." he said.

Dipstil approached him, still averting his gaze. "Hail to Sam, High Lord of the Drackonian Galactic Empire and all of its Dominions."

"... the ..." said Sam

"All Hail Sam, Destroyer of Races and Ruler of Ten Thousand Worlds" chanted the other alien penguins in chorus.

"... heck? ..." said Sam.

Dipstil crawled a few metres closer. "May I speak O High Lord?" he asked obsequiously.

Sam turned and looked over his shoulder to see to whom Dipstil could possibly be speaking. There was no one there except a group of alien penguins, all kneeling respectfully with their heads bowed. He turned back to Dipstil. "Are you talking to me?" he asked.

"Yes, my Lord," answered Dipstil.

"Uh, yes," said Sam, "you may speak. Perhaps you can start by telling me what is going on."

"Of course, High Lord," said Dipstil. "According to our most ancient customs, he who slays the Emperor becomes Emperor himself. You have slain Arbon, our former ruler; may the Gods revere him; and now you have assumed his position. You are the Emperor of the Galaxy."

Sam snorted so hard that stuff came out of his nose. "Get out of here!" he exclaimed.

"No, it's true," said Dipstil. "You are now the ruler here. Your people will do anything you ask."

"Oh really," said Sam. He crawled up onto the cushions and rolled Arbon onto the floor. "Well, first, you can remove this trash," he said, pointing to Arbon's bloated corpse. Six alien penguins immediately waddled across the room and carried Arbon away. "Next, you can release my friends."

The alien penguins who were still carrying Iggy and Yugo away to be tortured dropped them on the floor.

"I was wondering when you were going to get around to us," said Yugo, standing up and wiping the dust from his trousers.

"Now," said Sam, leaning forward, "you can bring me some breakfast. I'm starving."

"At once High Lord," answered Dipstil.

"Uh, Sam," said Iggy.

Sam made no sign that he had heard him. Iggy repeated, "Sam?" Still no recognition. Iggy scratched his head.

Yugo touched Iggy's sleeve. "Allow me," he said. Yugo turned to Sam. "Oh, High Lord ..."

Sam turned to Yugo and nodded.

"Hadn't we best be going home?" asked Yugo.

"I'm in no hurry," answered Sam. "In fact, I think I'm beginning to like it here. I could get used to being the Emperor of the Galaxy. In fact, I'm already used to it." He leaned back into the cushions and popped a few peeled grapes into his mouth.

THREE HUNDRED METRES ABOVE THE ocean surface, Mango studied the array of dials and digital displays on his control panel. "I'm picking up something," he said.

"Santa Claus?" asked Ziggy optimistically.

"I doubt it," grumbled Stan. "All we've found so far are seagulls and fish."

"I'm not sure what it is," said Mango, adjusting the picture on his video display. "I have a read on it, though. It looks like eight life forms."

"Life forms?" growled Mango. "You have a thingamajigger that detects life forms?"

"Well," replied Mango, "not exactly. But usually anything that is this high in the air is a life form. And there are definitely eight of them." He pointed out the front window.

Through the swirling front propeller Ziggy could see eight brown shapes bobbing in the afternoon sky. "Hey," he shouted, "it's Santa's reindeer!"

And so it was. Mango brought the helicopter alongside them. They were still hitched together, but the sleigh was nowhere to be seen. The poor beasts seemed hopelessly confused and disoriented.

Mango pulled on a blue lever and a long white rod extended from the side of the helicopter.¹² It had a pincer on the end which Mango hooked onto the bridle of the lead reindeer. "Come on fellows," he said. "Let's get you home."

¹²Mango had planned to call this device the "Canadarm", after his girlfriend, Canadar. But since that name had already been taken, he referred to it with the less catchy, but rather more descriptive, name :

"Well, this is a good sign," said Ziggy. "We've found the reindeer. Can Santa Claus be too far away?"

THREE HUNDRED METRES BELOW THEM, the pirate ship of Black Mac MacTavish crashed through the waves. Black Mac sat in his captain's chair across from Santa Claus, his faded black leather boots resting on the old wooden table between them.

"Well, old man," said Black Mac, waving his hook in the air. "What do ye think of me ship?"

Santa Claus looked up. "I knew I should have never brought you that toy boat you wanted for Christmas fifty years ago. Nothing good ever came of giving toy boats to nasty boys."

Black Mac MacTavish laughed out loud and took a long pull from the mug of rum in his hand. He set the mug down on the table and gestured to a similar mug in front of Santa Claus. "Drink up, old man," he said. "'Ye'll want the fortification of a good mug o' rum before ye walk the plank. We'll be at the Sharkstream soon."

The Sharkstream was part of the southern Indian Ocean. A current of cool sea water drifted up from the bottom of the sea there. It was the place that the biggest and fiercest sharks in the sea came to feed. It was where Black Mac MacTavish most liked to make his passengers walk the plank.

Santa Claus shuddered. "If only Iggy, Yugo and Sam were here," he thought sadly. "They'd surely find some way out of this mess. Oh, I wonder where they are now."

IN THE EMPEROR'S PALACE ON DRACKON, Sam leaned back in his throne, fingering the green medallion around his neck while an alien penguin flipped another grape into his mouth.

"Boy, this is really getting to his head," whispered Iggy.

"You're telling me," Yugo whispered back.

"What was that?" asked Sam, turning and glaring at Iggy and Yugo.

Iggy stammered, "Um, well, I, um," answered Iggy.

"Speak up," barked Sam.

"Well, Sam, it's been three weeks and I was wondering when we might be going home."

"Forget it," said Sam, lifting a big drumstick from the platter before him and biting into it greedily. "I like it too much here. I'm going to stay."

Iggy looked over at Yugo and shrugged his shoulders. "We're never going to get out of here," he said.

"Don't be so sure, Iggy," said Yugo. "I have an idea. He stepped up to Sam and said, "I was just thinking, High Lord, that now that you are Emperor and all, that you should probably chew your food more carefully. There may be more than a few penguins who would like to see you choke on a chicken leg."

"What do you mean?" asked Sam. "These guys love me." He lifted a large chocolate bonbon from a passing tray and swallowed it whole.

"Perhaps," replied Yugo. "But if you were to choke on say, a chocolate candy, the penguin who served it to you would become emperor himself."

"Ah," said Sam, gulping down his chocolate carefully. He looked about the room at the dozens of servants and retainers that surrounded him. He had always enjoyed their company, but now his naturally paranoid nature made them all look not just threatening, but absolutely terrifying. Sam gulped and dropped his chicken wing. He kicked it away just as an alien penguin bent down to pick it up.

"You make a good point, Yugo," he said. "Perhaps it is time to look into how my Empire is faring in the outer colonies." He looked down at the platters of food around him and shuddered. "Let's get out of here."

Sam shouted for Dipstil. The penguin captain rushed over to him. Sam beckoned him to come closer. He had gained over thirty pounds in the last three weeks, and was having some difficulty sitting up. "There has been a change of plans," he said. "Prepare your ship for our immediate departure."

Dipstil bowed and nodded. "As you wish, High Lord."

MANGO GUIDED HIS LITTLE HELICOPTER to a gentle landing on the beach. Since finding the reindeer team and returning them to the stables they had scoured the ocean for hours, but had seen no further sign of Santa Claus. They were tired and hungry and Stan finally persuaded them to stop for a rest.

They were on a small island covered with dense green foliage. The chatter of birds and monkeys filled the air. Ziggy walked up to a tree along the beach and pulled down a large bunch of bananas, which he shared with Mango and Stan.

"Where can he be?" asked Ziggy, "we must have looked everywhere."

"Hardly," replied Mango, as he chewed on his banana. "According to my navigational charts, we've covered scarcely one percent of the Southern oceans. It might take months to find him."

"I'm not spending a month in that death-trap," said Stan, gesturing at the little blue helicopter.

There was a rustle of branches and several short and very stout men stepped on to the beach. They were dressed in ragged loincloths and carried long spears in their arms. The tallest¹³ of them smiled when he saw the three elves. Each of his gleaming white teeth had been sharpened to a point.

Ziggy turned and looked over at the men. "Perhaps these fellows have seen something," he said. "Let's ask them." He stood and walked over to the strangers.

"Ziggy, I don't think that's a very good idea," said Stan. Stan was instinctively mistrustful of all strangers. He was especially mistrustful of spear wielding strangers with pointed teeth.

Ziggy waved him off. He shared none of Stan's pessimism. As far as he was concerned, these strangers were just new friends. He stood before them and introduced himself. Then he politely inquired whether they had seen a large man dressed in red driving a sled that morning. The strangers made no reply. They scarcely needed to as the tallest of them had pressed the point of his spear against Ziggy's throat.

"I guess that would be 'no', then," said Ziggy, stepping slowly backwards. The tallest of the strangers kept his spear pressed against Ziggy's Adam's apple. At that moment a dozen other men jumped out from the bushes, brandishing spears and other very nasty looking weapons.

Mango stood up, turned and ran towards his helicopter. He knew that once he reached it, he could escape and use the air to surface missiles to free Ziggy. He was just about at the door when he stepped on a very ordinary looking vine.

Unfortunately, the vine was not ordinary at all, but had been cunningly arranged to appear that way. The vine was actually the trigger mechanism for a wild animal trap. As soon as Mango stepped on it, the vine looped tightly around his ankle. A series of pulleys was engaged and Mango was flipped into the air, dangling upside down by his ankle.

¹³ This is a relative term. The tallest of them was only four foot six inches high. But that gave him a good eight inches on each of Ziggy, Mango and Stan.

Stan looked at Mango. Then he looked at Ziggy. He raised his arms and surrendered with a whimper.

The large group of islanders collected the elves, tied them up tightly with vines and led them into the jungle at spear point.

"Nice work, Ziggy," said Stan.

The three elves arrived in a clearing and were pushed onto the ground in front of an obese islander. While all of the islanders looked to be very well fed, their leader was twice as big as any of the others. He lay on a stack of thick cushions while a number of serving girls fed him. He grunted as the elves approached and gestured to the other side of the clearing.

Ziggy, Mango and Stan looked in that direction. At the edge of the clearing was a big barbecue built of old oil drums.

"Great," said Ziggy. "These fellows are just going to have us for dinner. See, I told you they were all right."

The fat chief lifted a mango from the serving tray and bit into it lustily. Mango winced. The chief pointed to him. "Pass me that drumstick," he demanded.

Mango stared back at him. One of the islanders poked him roughly with the business end of a spear. Mango reached onto one of the platters and lifted a huge drumstick that might have come from an ostrich. He passed it up to the chief.

The fat pygmy ruler bit into the meat greedily and swallowed it in enormous gulps. The elves watched in disgust as his neck expanded with each bite. Then he stopped. He started to choke and gag. Then he swallowed hard and wiped his chin with the back of his hand. "A nice appetizer," he growled. "And now, for the main course."

"I think you're right," Stan said to Ziggy. "They certainly are going to have us for dinner." The fat chief laughed loudly while the other islanders pushed the three elves up onto the big barbecue grill and set about lighting the fire beneath it.

SAM, IGGY AND YUGO were once again on the bridge of Dipstil's mammoth spaceship. This time, Sam was seated in Dipstil's command chair, with Iggy and Yugo in card table chairs on either side of him. Dipstil approached Sam, his eyes averted. "We await your order to launch, High Lord," he said.

"Let's go then," said Sam.

"Uh, High Lord," said Yugo.

"Yes," answered Sam.

"It took us 50,000 years to get here," Yugo observed. "If we go home at the same speed we traveled when we came here, another 50, 000 years will pass on Earth."

"Good point," said Sam. He looked over at Iggy. "I guess we can't get back home again after all."

Iggy looked down at the master control panel. "There must be some way," he thought. He cast his eyes over the hundreds of little buttons and flashing lights. He stopped and stared hard at the small control rod with its old fashioned stick shift.

"Yugo," he said, "if we wanted to get back where and when we started, don't we just have to make the trip in reverse?" He pointed to the last symbol beside the stick shift, denoted by the letter **R**. "After all, the ship does have a reverse gear."

Yugo looked at the stick shift and twisted his mouth in thought. "It'll never work," he said. "It's impossible." He scratched his head. "Maybe not impossible; but it's a million to one shot. At least a million to one."

Yugo pondered a little longer. "But it just might work," he concluded.

"Of course it will work," said Sam. "Dipstil, please program a new course. We're going to make the trip in reverse."

"As you wish, High Lord," replied Dipstil.

MONTHS PASSED, AND SO DID another 50,000 years.

ZIGGY WIPED A BEAD OF SWEAT FROM HIS CHEEK. "Whew, sure is hot up here," he said.

Stan glared at him. "Of course it's hot," he shouted. "We're strapped to a giant barbecue grill!" He looked uneasily at their captors, who were stirring up a large pot of what smelled like barbecue sauce. "I knew that I should have never climbed into that stupid helicopter. Now I'm going to wind up as a steak sandwich for a tribe of overweight pygmy cannibals."

"Oh, I'm sure it will all work out for the best," said Ziggy. He winced as his sleeve caught fire.

One of the stout cannibals walked up to the grill and started smearing barbecue sauce on them with a big brush. "Easy with that," said Mango. "I'm allergic to tomatoes." He gave a tremendous sneeze, spraying barbecue sauce in the air.

"This is definitely the worst thing that's ever happened to me," said Stan. "I'm starting to get a blister."

"I have a good ointment for that at home," Ziggy offered helpfully. The stout pygmy cannibal stood back and dropped his brush into the bucket. Another pygmy cannibal walked over and began grinding pepper over the three elves.

"Oh dear," said Mango, "I'm going to sneeze again."

"I think I have a tissue," said Ziggy helpfully.

At that moment the ground began to rumble gently. A bright red object broke through the trees at the edge of the clearing and rolled up to the barbecue.

"What is it?" said Mango.

Ziggy squinted and stared hard at the object. "It's hard to see through all of this smoke," he said. "But it looks like a snowmobile."

"Oh sure," said Stan. "A snowmobile in the middle of a tropical island. I don't think so."

"But it is," said Ziggy excitedly. "And someone is getting out." Ziggy continued to peer through the smoke as the hydraulic door of the snowmobile slid slowly open. Iggy, Yugo and Sam stepped out and marched up to the barbecue.

"Let my friends go," Sam shouted at the fattest of the cannibals.

The obese pygmy leader rolled slowly and unsteadily to his feet. His legs were like rolled up sleeping bags. "And who are you to tell me what to do?" he asked.

"The Emperor of the Galaxy, that's who," answered Sam, rubbing his medallion. Then he snapped his fingers and a hundred alien penguins burst into the clearing, each one brandishing a dangerous looking ray gun.

It was all over in a minute. Once Dipstil disintegrated their chief, the rest of the pygmies fled into the jungle, with a dozen alien penguins in pursuit. It would be a long, long time before any of them tried to snack on Christmas elves again.

Iggy and Yugo helped Ziggy, Mango and Stan down from the grill.

"Wow," said Ziggy. "You arrived just in time. But where have you been?"

"And how did you know where to find us?" asked Mango.

Iggy smiled. "We just returned to Earth. We've been watching you for the last two days on our video monitors and once we saw the trouble that you were in we raced here as fast as we could. Fortunately, Yugo's snowmobile was still docked on the spaceship. But we don't have time to talk now; we've got to rescue Santa Claus."

Iggy, Yugo and Sam ran back to the red snowmobile and crawled inside. The snowmobile darted forward a short distance and then lifted itself into the air.

Ziggy, Mango and Stan watched it rise above the trees. Stan raised an arm to shield his eyes from the sun. He cleared his throat, and then gave voice to the question which all of them were silently pondering. "Sam's the Emperor of the Galaxy?"

SANTA CLAUS STOOD NEAR THE END OF a wooden plank suspended over the Sharkstream. He looked over the edge. Beneath the water he could see the swirling shapes of hundreds of sharks. Bad Brad prodded him forward with his sword.

"Come on Fat Man," he snarled. "Jump!"

Santa Claus looked back at Bad Brad. He stepped closer to the edge of the plank.

"Jump!" shouted Shark Tooth Pete.

Santa Claus took another look over the edge of the plank. He smiled. He gave a small wave to Black Mac MacTavish and his pirate crew and stepped off the plank.

"Yo Ho!" shouted Mr. Smeg.

"He did it! I can't believe that he really did it!" shouted Peg Leg Johnson.

"Yo Ho!" shouted Shark Tooth Pete, raising a cup of rum to his lips. A considerable amount spilled onto the deck and little Johnny rushed over to mop it up.

Black Mac MacTavish raised his hand. "There was no splash," he said.

The other pirates grew silent. Black Mac MacTavish was right. There should have been a splash, followed by the chaotic racket of a shark feast. But there was no splash. Just a hollow thud like the sound of someone falling onto the hood of a car. Or a truck.

Or a flying snowmobile.

The pirates walked to the railing at the edge of the deck. They looked over and saw Santa Claus slowly rise into the air. He was standing on the hood of an oversized red

snowmobile that hovered in the air right before them. A little ways behind it what looked to be a large blue flying hedgehog floated unsteadily.

Santa Claus leaned forward and pointed his pudgy index finger at the pirates.

"Blackburn MacKenzie MacTavish," he said to Black Mac. The other pirates snickered to hear Black Mac's full name. The pirate captain silenced them with a malevolent glare. "I never really thought you would amount to much," Santa Claus continued. "But every year I came to see you anyway because I hoped that there might be some good in you. But this is the last straw. I'm putting you, and all your crew, on my naughty list."

Santa Claus pulled a small computer organiser from his pocket and quickly typed on the keyboard. A little pip sounded with each key stroke.

"Peter Reginald Sinclair Toothman -- naughty," said Santa Claus, typing as he spoke. "Bradley Dillingham Badham -- naughty. Peggy Legitus Johnson -- naughty. Smedley Smeg -- naughty. And Little Johnny¹⁴ -- naughty. All naughty. And no more presents for any of you until further notice."

"No Santa, No," shouted Bad Brad. He fell to his knees and clasped his hands together in front of his face.

"We can be good!" cried Shark Tooth Pete, falling to his knees and begging as well.

"Give us another chance, Santa," Peg Leg Johnson pleaded.

"Please?" begged Mr. Smeg.

"Naughty, naughty, naughty," replied Santa Claus pointing to each pirate in turn. "No more presents until further notice." Santa Claus looked down at the front window of the snowmobile. "All right, boys," he said. "Take me home."

The snowmobile rose slowly into the air, turned south and flew away.

Black Mac MacTavish and Little Johnny stared at the snowmobile as it flew out of sight. "We've really done it this time, Johnny," said Black Mac. "I guess it's time we changed our ways..."

"Yo Ho, sir," said Little Johnny. "More rum?"

¹⁴ Yes, that is his real name.

THINGS RETURNED TO NORMAL PRETTY QUICKLY. Sam instructed Dipstil to use the spaceship's teleportation equipment to return the workshop and all of the other buildings to the North Pole. Iggy and Yugo returned to their old work stations at the end of workbench seven. The Antarctic scientists returned to their studies of wind chill and icicles. The only change at the North Pole was the 20 acre marble palace which the alien penguins built for Sam before they left.

Sam stood on the steps of his new palace with Dipstil. The penguin commander was anxious to return to Drackon. Sam, while he enjoyed being an emperor, decided that he really belonged at the North Pole after all. But just before he draped his green medallion over Dipstil's neck, he declared December 25th to be a holiday throughout the galaxy, ordered the Drackonians to give up their dreams of galactic conquest and freed the planets over which he ruled.

Dipstil rubbed the medallion gently. "I never really liked conquering planets that much, anyway," he said. They shook hands, or wings, or whatever. Then Dipstil faded away into the teleporter beam and was gone.

Iggy and Yugo walked up to Sam. "Come on, old buddy," said Iggy, placing his arm around Sam's shoulders. "It's time to get to work. Only eleven more months until Christmas."

Sam stared straight ahead as if he had not heard Iggy.

"Sam," repeated Iggy.

Yugo touched his arm. "Allow me," he said. He turned to Sam. "Oh High Lord?"

Sam looked over at Yugo. "Time to get to work," said Yugo. "Only eleven more months until Christmas."

Sam nodded and walked with them together towards the Santa Claus Tower.

EPILOGUE

SOMEWHERE ON THE HIGH SEAS, at this very moment, sails the galleon of Black Mac MacTavish and his pirate crew. Crisp white sails hang from every mast. From the tallest of these a bright red and green flag festooned with holly and mistletoe snaps crisply in the breeze. The crew marauds no more. Rather, they sail the seas doing only good works: helping ships in distress, freeing dolphins from tuna nets and doing other good deeds too numerous to mention.

Black Mac MacTavish finally found his treasure. He learned that real treasure does not come from a red velvet sack, it comes from within. The Treasure of the Claus grows richer with each good deed done.

Black Mac MacTavish (who now prefers the name Jolly Mac MacTavish) did it all, and infinitely more; and to Little Johnny, who did NOT become a pirate, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, as good a man, as the good old sea ever knew. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their share of laughter at the outset. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

It was always said of him afterwards, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!

And so, as Little Johnny so often observed, "Ho Ho Ho, a bottle of rum and a Merry Christmas, everyone!"

MERRY CHRISTMAS