

The Celery and the Ivy

by

Toby Frost

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spacecap [at] spacecaptainsmith.com

Professional inquires should be addressed to John Jarrold at:

j.jarrold [at] btinternet.com

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“Ah,” said Suruk the Slayer, opening his mandibles, “Christmas makes me hungry. Turkeys, stuffing, logs of Yule: no wonder Good King Wenceslas went out to feast on Stephen.” He crossed the sitting room and took down the advent calendar. “Now, what have we behind today’s door? Another little hole in the shape of a chocolate. This is becoming repetitive.”

“That *is* strange,” said Polly Carveth, turning to adjust the paper chain draped over the pair of Yullian war-axes mounted on the wall. The *John Pym* looked as festive as a haulage ship could be: stockings hung from the antennae of the stuffed Praetorian, and for once the shiny thing coming out of the air vent was tinsel instead of a marauding beast.

Suruk shook the advent calendar like an enemy’s throat. “Wait, the back of the calendar is loose! Someone has stolen -”

“Look, here’s the captain!” Carveth exclaimed, and Isambard Smith strolled into the room, followed by Rhianna Mitchell, Smith’s lady friend and the ship’s self-appointed guru.

“Morning, men!” Smith wore his red jacket and long coat. “Everyone ready? Have you got my package, Rhianna?”

Rhianna reached into the bag. Like many of her possessions, it was made of hemp. “It’s here,” she said, taking out a small, wrapped present. “But it seems kind of commercial. Isn’t there more to Christmas than just gifts? Like, say, meditation, and tofu.”

“Indeed!” Suruk declared. He pointed to a set of figures on the mantelpiece. “Behold the true and improved meaning of Christmas. With the addition of some genuine Middle-Eastern creatures, such as crocodiles, the nativity scene is complete. Though I am unsure about the chessmen, to be honest.”

“True,” said Smith. “Gifts aren’t everything. There’s also booze, and large dinners. But if I’d spent the last six years alone on a research station, I’d be grateful to have us drop by. Bearing this gift we four have travelled afar, just like the three kings, and... er... a spare king.”

“Excellent!” Suruk exclaimed. “Can I be Pestilence? He is my favourite king.”

Rain sluiced over the fields, the laboratories, over the rusted flanks of the *John Pym* as the crew trudged between rows of eight-foot plants.

“Look, men!” Isambard Smith angled his torch towards a sign by the side of the path. “‘Moreau V Biological Weaponry Research Facility and NAAFI Canteen’.”

“Good!” said Polly Carveth, wringing out her hat. “This place creeps me out. I’ve never felt so uncomfortable around food.”

Rhianna peered through the dim light at the rows of vegetation. “Don’t worry, Polly. You know, we can learn so much from plants -”

“Yes, like how to keep quiet,” Carveth replied.

Up ahead, the grey face of the research facility loomed out of the rain. As they trudged closer, the great doors rolled apart. Warily they stepped out of the rain, and as the lights flickered into life above their heads, the doors slammed shut behind them.

A man in white stood behind a sheet of glass. He was quite small, and his head was tilted back to assist him in sniffing the extractor fan.

“Professor Lewis?” Smith said.

“One moment, please.” Lewis had a very nasal voice. He looked down. “Good evening. May I help you?”

“I’m Captain Isambard Smith, and this is my crew: Suruk the Slayer, Rhianna Mitchell and Polly Carveth. We have been sent here by the British Government to bring you festive cheer. Look,” he said, as Rhianna flourished the parcel, “We’ve brought you a present.”

Professor Lewis stared at the present. “Up against the glass, please. No, not you. The gift.”

Smith put the present against the glass.

“Hmm... Would you be so good as to feel the corners? It’s a little difficult for me, you see.”

“Righto,” said Smith.

“I wasn’t addressing *you*,” Lewis said, and he looked at Carveth. For the first time yet, he blinked.

Professor Lewis watched Carveth feeling the present. He salivated lightly.

“It’s a book,” Carveth said.

“That was most enjoyable,” said the scientist. He pulled the French window open, plucked the parcel from Carveth’s hand and slid the window shut again. “A cookery book. Just the thing I need. How nice.”

Professor Lewis leafed through the book. Smith looked at the others. Carveth shrugged.

“He has not said thank-you,” Suruk said. “That hardly seems in keeping with the spirit of Christmas. Let us kill him and take his skull.”

“Hey, Professor!” Rhianna tapped the glass. “I chose your present. I thought being surrounded by plants you’d like a book about vegetarian cookery.”

“Enthralling,” said Lewis, flicking over a page.

“Look,” Rhianna added, “there’s a guy enjoying some tofu. And over the page are some people eating plants -”

Lewis glanced up. “People eating plants? That interests you, eh?” He reached forward and slid back the glass door. “Tell me, Captain Smith, would you care for a tour of the facilities?”

The greenhouses were immense, scaled-up copies of the great metal lattices at Kew. Lewis led them on a path through the crops, through halls of tomatoes the size of cricket balls, past pocket-sized melons and a kumquat that could double as a boat.

“These are onion-and-apple hybrids,” Professor Lewis explained, pointing across the planting troughs. “They taste equally good with dinner or desert.”

“Terrible, I’d have thought,” Smith said.

“Exactly. The NAAFI has already commissioned several thousand.” Lewis looked Smith over. “You know, I’m beginning to think you might be a man of good taste, Captain Smith. But we’ll soon find out, when you meet the celids.”

“Celids?”

“Of course. Genetically modified celery, designed for meeting the army’s culinary needs. To accelerate growth we spliced the DNA of the original celery with that of other creatures.”

“What sort of DNA have these, er, celids got?” Smith inquired.

“Celery, sharks and wolverines.”

Carveth raised a hand. “Um, isn’t that a bit dangerous?”

“Quite,” said Smith. “One of my great-aunts once choked on some celery. Nearly killed the old girl. Still, she did quieten down for a bit.”

“Captain, please!” Professor Lewis rasped. “The greatness of your aunt is as nothing compared to the greatness of my discovery. Ladies and gentlemen,” he added, gripping the lever beside the airlock doors, “I give you – celery!”

The doors rolled back with a squeal of rust and they looked into the next hall down. A narrow path ran between two rows of eight-foot plants: thick ridged stalks topped with bushy plumes of vegetation.

“It is indeed celery,” Suruk said.

Slowly, stems wobbling, the celids turned towards him.

Lewis flicked a switch on the wall, and piano music floated across the greenhouse. “Bach,” he explained. “It keeps them happy. I used to play them jazz, but when you’ve seen one mutant celeriac attempt the Charleston, you’ve probably seen them all.”

The celids rustled: one lurched forward suddenly, bumping against the rail at the edge of the path. Carveth flinched. “Come,” Lewis said, stepping between the rows, “they’re entirely safe.”

“Yeah, but what about us?” Carveth muttered, but Lewis seemed not to hear.

Cautiously, Smith led the others between the celery. He looked down: at the base of each plant, the stem split into four stumpy legs, brown and lumpy like roots. They *were* roots, Smith realised – or at least they had started that way.

“As you can see, they have limited locomotion,” Lewis explained. “I intend to train them to walk to the pot. Perfect for vegetarians.”

Rhianna looked unconvinced.

“Now then,” Lewis said, turning his unblinking eyes on Carveth, “who would like a Christmas present, then?”

Carveth frowned. “It doesn’t involve vegetables, does it?”

“How did you guess?”

Rhianna was looking away. “Look, guys,” she said, pointing down the path, “the celids are moving together.”

And so they were, Smith saw: like corn in the wind, the rustling foliage rocked back, then forward. They reminded him of waving hands, or swaying citizens at the last night of the Proms. Except nobody rubbed quite so hard against the railing, even during Land of Hope and Glory...

“Lewis!” Smith barked. “The fence is giving way!”

“All is fine, Captain Smith,” the professor replied. “They obey my every-”

The railing broke and he was buried in a heap of giant, toppling celery. Like green skittles the celids flopped onto their creator, and in a rumble of stalks he was lost to view. “Quick!” cried Smith, and he grabbed the nearest plant and heaved it off. Suruk waded in, tossing salad left and right, and Lewis lay before them, his white shirt mottled with red.

“Run!” he gasped.

“No!” Smith replied. “You’re coming with us!”

The celids pressed in. “Look!” Rhianna cried, and behind them the other barrier gave way.

“Save yourself!” Lewis hissed. “I can control the celids!” he cried.

“Lewis, come on!”

Like a green curtain the celids pressed around him, and the scientist disappeared. Smith heard Lewis cry out: “I made you, you ungrateful buggers!” and the professor’s voice was lost as stem after stem thumped down upon him.

“They squashed him!” Carveth cried.

Then Smith saw the crowning horror: where Lewis had fallen, the celids were wriggling, and slowly, from the bottom up, their stems were turning red...

He glanced back down the path: the barrier was gone behind shambling foliage.

“They’re coming straight at us!” Rhianna exclaimed, pointing at the shuffling horde. “Gradually!”

“Do something, Rhianna!” Carveth cried. “You’re a vegetarian!”

“I can’t eat *all* of them! Besides, I don’t eat GM food. Can’t we reason with them?”

“You can’t reason with celery! This is no time for non-violence! Stick a rifle in the end of its flower!”

Smith drew his sword. “With me, men!”

Suruk growled as he pulled a machete from his belt. “Accursed legumes, it is *I* who am deadly and green! Prepare to be pruned!”

They ran for the far end of the greenhouse, down an ever-closing avenue of lurching vegetation. The celids lumbered closer, but not fast enough, and they slipped through. “This way!” cried Smith, as a massive celid flopped across their path like a sawn tree. He saw a doorway, pulled the door open, and they darted inside.

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A rustle, then a dull thud as the celids bashed against the door. Rhianna pulled a chair over and wedged it under the handle as Carveth flicked a switch on the wall. Strip-lights crackled into life above them.

The room was small and, Smith noticed, without another exit. Levers and dials protruded from the walls, and he could smell grease as well as leaves.

Smith looked around the room. “My God,” he said softly. “There’s no way out.” He swallowed. “Men, I have bad news. We are surrounded. That can mean only one thing: Father Christmas will not be able to bring us any presents.”

“But I wanted a pony!” Carveth cried. Quietly, Rhianna put her arm around Carveth’s shoulders.

Suruk wiped sap from his blade. “Curse it, this is no Christmas for a warrior! The last mutant plants I slaughtered at least had heads to snip off.” He sighed. “This celery is impossible to finish off!”

“You should try eating it,” Carveth said morosely. “That’s even worse.”

There was an observation window set into the wall: a celid flopped up against it, shaking the pane. A second lumbered straight into the glass, its ridged trunk flat against it.

“Well,” said Smith, “it seems that this celery business has turned into a right dog’s dinner.”

“Or a dinner for your girlfriend,” Suruk said helpfully. “She being a vegetarian, as opposed to a dog.”

“That’s not very constructive, Suruk,” Rhianna observed. “Isn’t there something we could do to distract them?”

“Like what?” Smith pulled the chair out from the desk and sat down. There was a portable melodiatron on the desk: its funnel looked mockingly like a flower.

“Well, what about this?” Rhianna lifted a slim book from the desktop and flicked through the pages. “It’s Professor Lewis’ diary.”

“Don’t be absurd, Rhianna: plants can’t read. Wait a moment: what does it say?”

“Okay... It starts by discussing how Lewis’ work-play balance is out of equilibrium, and he’s worried about it making him a dull boy... in fact, there’s quite a lot of that. Hey, guys, listen: *Fitting vocal cords to the tubers was a bad idea. Only music seems to silence the yams...*”

“Yams!” cried Smith. “Of course! Look, everyone. Lewis calmed the celids down by playing them music. We’ve got a record player here. All we need do is fire it up and run the other way while they’re preoccupied.”

Carveth looked at the window. The celids were crammed against the plexi-glass, their stems thumping against the pane. Grimly, she reflected that it would only be a matter of time before they forced their way inside and thumped her.

“Well,” she said, “It’s a rubbish plan, but other than cowering and screaming I can’t think of anything better. If you ask me, playing music to mutant vegetables is insane – but if music be the love of food, play on.”

“Right then,” said Smith, “what was it Lewis played them?”

“It sounded kind of classical,” Rhianna replied.

“Of course! Bach for plants!” Smith’s eyes gleamed. “Rhianna, try to find some more music they might enjoy. Carveth, find the map and work out the best way back to the ship. Suruk – how far could you throw this melodiatron?”

*

“Well,” said Smith, as he lowered the binoculars, “all seems to have gone well. The celids have retreated, and nature is back where it belongs – on the dinner table.”

He stood on the hull of the *John Pym*, Rhianna by his side. As night set in, he reached out and patted her on the shoulder, and she put her arm round his waist. “Good choice of records, old girl.”

Distantly, they could hear music from the research compound. The celids stood in their fields, bobbing in time as they worked through Professor Lewis’ music collection. They had finished *The Roots of Reggae* and were now on *The Best of Robert Plant*.

“You know,” Rhianna said, “I can’t help feel that the celids are having a really good time. I kind of regret not keeping some of those records.”

“True,” said Smith. “For things that were not meant to be, they certainly can dance. But don’t worry about the festive music: after all, we’ve got Slade.”

“Many things have got slayed!” Suruk’s head poked into view through the emergency hatch. “Come and see!”

Smith followed Rhianna back into the ship. Suruk and Carveth were waiting below.

Suruk smelt of sage and onion. There were long cuts on his forearms and a nasty gash across his brow. “By the ancestors, stuffing a turkey is difficult work!”

“You’re supposed to kill it first,” Carveth said. She shuddered and took a deep swig of eggnog from the pint glass she held.

“Hey,” Rhianna said, “I thought we were having tofu this year?”

Carveth shrugged. “Slight change of plan. Suruk’s found a turkey.”

“Indeed!” Suruk beamed. “Professor Lewis’ notes said that it would be large enough to feed us all.”

“Excellent!” Smith replied. “Jolly good work, men. Tomorrow we shall dine in true Christmas fashion: excessively. Soon we’ll be enjoying carols on the radio and crackers in space.” He frowned. “So, Suruk, where is Professor Lewis’ turkey, then?”

The floor rumbled. Carveth looked into her tankard: ripples were forming in the eggnog. *Boom.*

“I left it outside,” Suruk explained. “Do not worry: it will be here very soon.”