

We Tree Kings

A Space Captain Smith Christmas Story

By

Toby Frost

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Should you, loyal fan and denizen of the British Space Empire, wish to get hold of Toby, then he can be contacted at spacecap [at] spacecaptainsmith.com

“Ah,” said Suruk the Slayer, as he admired the decorations, “Christmas is upon us once again: as shiny as a sharpened blade, and as inevitable as death. The wine is mulling it over and the pies are mincing about. Most satisfactory.”

“Hey,” Rhianna Mitchell replied, “You’re right.” She looked down the length of the hold of the *John Pym* and took a thoughtful drag on her herbal cigarette. The dangling tinsel obscured the worst of the rust, and the smell of mulled things blotted out the lingering aroma of spaceship oil and quanbeast dung. “I think Christmas is like, way too commercialised, but I do like all the lights. Sometimes I could just stare at them and... what was I talking about again?”

“Indeed,” said Suruk, “it would be sad if rampant commercialism obscured whatever this holiday is all supposed to be about. Something to do with Oliver Cromwell, I gather.”

“Umm.” Rhianna searched her mind, and Suruk watched her searching it. Even now, after so many adventures, she was something of a mystery to him. “Actually, I think the roundheads tried to ban it.”

“Then they were clearly fools. Had I been alive then, I would have put the skulls of the roundheads on my trophy shelf. And then they probably would have rolled off, but that is not the point.”

Rhianna scratched her head. “You know, I can’t help feeling that something’s missing. Like... not there.”

“Is it battle?” Suruk asked. “Because I have been feeling its absence. It has been two years since the close of hostilities, and I really think somebody should do something about that.”

“No, it’s not battle.”

“Mayhem? Warfare? The pleasant sounds of honourable carnage?” Suruk looked at her face, with its nose and bizarre lack of mandibles, and decided that she didn’t agree. “Ah, perhaps you

mean Polly Carveth and Isambard Smith. Carveth is putting the ponies in their shed. Mazuran is feeding the creatures on the nature reserve.”

“I’ve got an idea! Maybe I could use my psychic powers to work out what’s missing.” Rhianna closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to her temple. Then she opened them again. “No, I’m not sensing anything.”

“You are not sensing the thing that is not there? I find that unsurprising.”

There was a loud, ugly creak from behind. Suruk turned. The airlock slammed closed. Isambard Smith stood in the doorway, glimmering strangely. For a moment, Suruk wondered if Rhianna’s strange talk about auras was accurate. Then he realised that Smith was covered in some kind of shiny substance.

Smith brushed legs down. “You could have told me that the glitter-squid was having its mating season.”

“Apologies, Mazuran. I was somewhat distracted by my own work. However, Rhianna the seer and I cannot help but feel that something is missing in our Yuletide preparations.”

“You mean the nativity scene?” Smith asked. Polly Carveth had, once again, improvised, representing the various characters with bolts, fuses and other things that Smith was fairly sure the *John Pym* actually needed. That said, it had been a while since it had taken off. There was enough to deal with at the animal sanctuary without taking to the skies.

“Hey, Isambard,” Rhianna said. “I don’t think it’s the nativity.”

“Ah,” Smith replied. “I know what it is! We’re awake and yet none of us is drinking a cup of tea. I’ll put the kettle on.”

He turned, and a small figure stepped into the hold. Carveth was wearing a huge jumper over her usual pilot’s gear, along with a woolly hat and a striped scarf. She took a cardboard box from under her arm and held it out. “Anyone want a chocolate?”

Suruk shook his head. “No, thank you. They all taste the same to me.”

"I've told you before: you've got to take the paper off before you eat them."

"How are the ponies?" Smith asked.

"Fine, although Snuffles has a bit of a cold and Vargoth the Defecator wishes that Suruk didn't get involved in the naming process. Now, where's the tree?"

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"Right, chaps," Smith announced, "we've got a problem. Christmas is coming, and we don't have a tree."

They stood around the dining room table, drinking tea. It was just like the old days, Smith thought: there was a crisis, they were going to solve it, and more likely than not there would be explosions.

Suruk shrugged. "This planet has many trees. Why not use one of them?"

"Unfortunately, old chap, they're not the right sort. And they're not... what's the word?"

"Sustainable," Rhianna said.

"Exactly. The trees around here are deciduous. It's got to be the sort that has needles."

Suruk frowned. "We could get a porcupine. They have needles."

Carveth sighed. "No we couldn't. A porcupine's not a tree. And we can't put presents under a porcupine. For one thing it'll walk off, and for another I don't want a pair of socks covered in the musk of a souped-up hedgehog."

"Well then," said Suruk, "if we must place the presents under something wooden, why not put them beneath this very table? It would be very convenient, since you spend most of the festive time under the table anyhow."

"That's completely untrue," Carveth protested. "Last year I got drunk in lots of rooms, not just here."

“Guys.” Rhianna raised her palms placatingly. After some years of living with her, Smith recognised this gesture as capable of irritating almost anyone. “Chill. We don’t necessarily have to get a tree. We could do something different. After all, Christmas is an appropriation of an ancient pagan festival, involving –”

“A tree,” Carveth said. “Look, either we get a tree or I go on strike and someone else can muck out the ponies. And mark my words, Donkey Hotey, Charley-Mane the Great and J Edgar Hooves can dump for England.”

Smith frowned. It was not a pleasant prospect. He looked around the table and felt that it was time to take charge, before Suruk and Carveth began squabbling and Rhianna became even more confused. “Chaps,” he announced, “I know where we can get a tree.”

They turned to look at him. “Where’s that?” Rhianna asked.

“New Dundee,” Smith replied. “We’ve been there before.”

Rhianna pushed her finger between her dreadlocks and scratched her head. Carveth said, “We have?”

Suruk smiled. “Ah,” he said. “The planet where Major Wainscott lives! An excellent idea, Mazuran!”

Carveth backed away from the table like a vampire confronted with a crucifix. “Wainscott? Oh no. I’m not going anywhere near him. For one thing, he’s a raving lunatic, and for another, why do I need to come up with another thing when he’s already a raving lunatic?”

Smith folded his arms. “But he does have a tree. Quite a lot of them, in fact.”

“I don’t care if he’s got a magic rainbow up his bum. I’m not going.”

Rhianna put her hand on Carveth’s arm. “Now, Polly. I’m sure it won’t be that bad. And if he gets us a tree, you’ll have a lot of space for storing presents, at least some of which will be made of chocolate or eggnog.”

Carveth frowned. “Any chance of both?”

“Only if it’s organic chocolate.”

“Fine then!” She scowled. “I suppose I was the one who mentioned it, after all. We’ll have to fire the ship up, though. It’s been a long time since the *John Pym* took off.”

Smith said, “Will it be able to fly?”

“Oh, I’m not worried about the flying. It’s how and when we *stop* flying that worries me. And I want the ponies looked after while we’re gone.”

“Rick Dreckitt knows some people, doesn’t he? Or is that just as far as crime-fighting is concerned?”

Carveth nodded. “Rick knows the right people. Who also tend to be the wrong ones. He’s good like that. Or do I mean bad?”

Smith retired to his armchair at the far end of the sitting room. On the wall above him, the stuffed Praetorian’s head was looking fairly merry, for a dead alien soldier ant: Suruk had done a good job of winding tinsel around its antennae. The hideous thing made him feel slightly nostalgic. Then he remembered the bloodthirsty fight in which he had acquired it, and reflected that nostalgia was overrated.

It was strange to think that the war against the Tripartite Pact was over. The world – in fact, the entire galaxy – had moved on. The Ghast Empire lay in ruins, the Divine Migration of the lemming men had been stopped dead (literally) and the Democratic Republic of New Eden was in genuine danger of becoming a democratic republic. On the news, the galaxy’s worst criminals were on trial. Today, the foul Criminarch of Radishia had been denying his evil deeds. Apparently, he was entirely decent and moral, and so were all his daughterwives.

Life was quite good. Running an animal sanctuary wasn’t bad, really, even when Suruk and Carveth chose what to look after. The animals were either very fluffy or completely lethal, with the exception of the Bouncing Trobbles, who were both.

Smith sipped his tea and looked over the row of Christmas cards on the mantelpiece. The Secret Service had sent one showing everybody in the office, smiling and waving. Unfortunately, the faces were obscured with marker pen and the handwriting was computer-encoded, giving it the look of an unusually festive ransom demand. It was nice to have friends.

That afternoon, Rick Dreckitt arrived in a jeep. Three robots climbed out behind him; one looked as if it had been built from a small digger, another was bright silver, and the third resembled a postbox with a Stetson hat.

Smith and Carveth hurried out to meet Dreckitt. "Hey, Polly," he said. "Captain Smith. I thought you might need some muscle, so I brought these guys to help out. They used to work in the Texas Dinosaur Ranch, but they aren't needed anymore."

"What happened?" Smith inquired. "Did they get replaced with newer models?"

Dreckitt shook his head. "Nix, pal. All the dinosaurs escaped. But that ain't nothing from nothing." He nodded at the row of robots. "The one with the hat is Wired Earp, the yellow guy with tracks is Butch Casio, and that silver gungel is the Chrome Ranger. I also rang Davy Sprocket, but he's busy."

Smith beckoned for Dreckitt to step aside, and he lowered his voice. "Look, old chap, I don't know about these theme park robots. They have a nasty habit of rising up and doing mad things to people, you know. Just think of those poor people at Westwingworld, forced to talk about politics in a corridor when the robot staff malfunctioned."

"I hear you, pal," Dreckitt replied. "I can feed the animals myself. I'll just have these guys watch the fence. If anyone tries to bust the joint, my guys will hand out some chin music."

With a squeal of treads, Butch Casio rolled over. "Howdy, partner," he grated. "We are ready to commence moseying around the perimeter."

"Hm," said Carveth. "Just be careful with my ponies."

"I sure will, ma'am!" Casio replied, waving his pincers. "Destroy all rustlers! Destroy all rustlers!"

"Searching for varmints!" cried Wired Earp.

Smith watched the robots clank away. "Thanks, Dreckitt."

"No problem, buddy. Just remember: if the grift goes screwy, cheese it."

"Thanks," Smith replied. "I'll remember that. Erm... what does it mean, exactly?"

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The *John Pym* skimmed over the treetops of New Dundee. Smith sat in the captain's chair. It was good to be flying again, especially on a mission as important as this. There certainly were enough conifers on Wainscott's homeworld, although the major had given them co-ordinates to one specific area. Smith crossed his legs and leaned back. The *John Pym* was unique, perhaps fortunately. It had its own style, its own odour, its own particular way of not-quite collapsing when it touched down. Being in the captain's chair again was like meeting an old friend, and then worrying that you'd have to carry him home when he got drunk.

"It's just ahead," Carveth said.

The trees opened out, and they were above a square of empty tarmac. Smith saw a barricade and a little shed like a sentry's hut, and realised that they were landing in a car park. The *John Pym* descended smoothly and touched down. Smith waited a moment, and one of the landing-legs buckled slightly.

"Right then." Smith got up and headed for the door. Behind him, Carveth leaned over to check the ship's hamster.

Suruk and Rhianna were waiting by the airlock. Smith took a deep breath. He felt as if he was about to meet a part of his life that he had considered gone, as if Wainscott carried some of the

Galactic War with him. Smith pressed the button and the airlock opened. He stepped forward, then remembered to press the other button that deployed the steps.

The air was crisp, the sun bright. A small figure hurried out of the undergrowth, waving. Smith took a moment to recognise the man: Major Wainscott had not only tidied his beard, but was wearing something between his shirt and boots. Smith wondered whether the major had turned a new leaf or, more likely, his sister had dressed him.

“Hello there!” Smith called. “How are you?”

“Not bad, not bad,” Wainscott replied. “I’m in good health, I’m pleased to say. Although I must admit that I’ve got a peculiar sensation in my knees.”

“That might be because you’re wearing trousers,” Smith replied.

“Ah,” said Wainscott, “Good point. I suppose I must look a bit different. You don’t often see me in civvies, do you?”

“Or indeed any clothes,” Carveth muttered.

“It’s important to fit in,” the major replied. “That’s what Susan used to say, back in the days. Besides, this is a family venue. Can’t scare the locals walking around in the nip. It alarms people. I used to wear a festive hat to look more cheerful, but I tend to find that it just draws attention.”

“What is this place?” Rhianna asked. She descended elegantly, her dress and oversized cardigan wafting like fronds in a tide.

“Used to be a Christmas tree nursery,” the major said. “They had a winter wonderland for the kiddies, but it didn’t break even. Then some private company took over. Vegetable research or something. Now then, who wants to find a tree?”

“To be honest,” Smith replied, “I think Carveth here is our expert.”

“Are you now?” Wainscott turned to her and squatted down slightly, so that his face was level with and very close to her own. “Excited for Christmas, no doubt. Well, how about Polly Pilot and I go and choose a tree, and you fellows find the café and get us all some tea and cake?”

“An excellent plan,” Suruk said. “I am an expert tracker. No refreshment can escape the slayer.”

“Right!” Wainscott rubbed his hands together. “Smith, you people look for refreshments. You,” he added, glaring at Carveth, “follow me.”

Wainscott marched into the trees. For a small man, he had long strides, and Carveth had to hurry to keep up with him. “So,” the major barked at the air in front of his face, “how’s the animal sanctuary?”

“Fine thanks.” Carveth was surprised that Wainscott cared. Perhaps he was just being polite. “We’ve got a petting zoo. That’s my responsibility.”

“Excellent.”

“It’s not easy, though. You’ve got to watch your petting zoo carefully, especially when it’s surrounded by the weird monsters Suruk collects. One Procturan Ripper gets in and Watership Down turns to Slaughtership Now.”

“No doubt,” Wainscott said, striding forwards.

“And I take care of the equine side of things. We’ve got lots of ponies.”

“Good, good. I can ride, you know. Back in the Kaldathro campaign, when I was helping the beetle people, I used to ride every day.”

“You had a pony?”

“Certainly not.” Wainscott frowned, as if her reply was nonsense. “I rode a beetle person, of course. Whyever would I ride a pony? Susan said it was madness, but she said that about most things I did. Kept making my take all those pills. An excellent fighter, Susan, but she lacked vision. In fact, in all the time we worked together, I don’t think she had a single vision. I had loads. Especially after I took that axe to the head.” He sighed. “Happy days.”

They walked on in silence. Wainscott sniffed the air. The air was full of the smell of pine needles. The conifers were closely-packed, too large to fit into the *John Pym's* hold.

Carveth stopped and looked behind her. The trees had closed up, and she couldn't see the spaceship anymore. In fact, the whole car park was hidden.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" she asked.

Wainscott didn't slow down. "Right way? What do you mean, right way?"

She had forgotten how annoying he was without his men to translate his utterances into something resembling clarity. "Well, for a start, the way out of this bloody forest. Isn't there a shop we can get the tree from?"

"Ah," the major replied. "I see. You're approaching this like a civilian. Well, rest assured that every step we take is getting us closer to resolving this business."

"By getting lost and starving to death?"

"Starving to death is not a problem I generally encounter," Wainscott replied. "In the old days, Susan would have secreted a supply of Kendal Mint Cake about her person. Or my trained badgers would have brought me a squirrel. Squirrel tastes like bacon, you know. Unlike Kendal mint cake, which tastes like... Kendal, I suppose. Don't suppose you've got any on you, eh?"

Carveth wondered if he meant mint cake, bacon or trained badgers, and decided that it didn't much matter. "No." She squinted between the trees. "Did you just see something move?"

Wainscott stopped and turned around. He looked irritated. "Nope. Nothing."

Carveth shielded her eyes with her mitten and squinted. "I'm sure saw something... there! Did you see that? I think there's someone out there."

"Nonsense. There's nobody out there. All you saw were branches."

Fear began to rise inside Carveth, like excess prosecco towards the end of a Saturday night. "Wainscott, I think there's someone following us, between the trees."

The major shook his head. "You're wrong. There's nobody in the trees. It's the trees that are following us."

"What? What're you talking about?"

"I didn't want to tell you – didn't want to weaken unit morale, you see. We're being followed by what looks like a mobile tree. Maybe several. Best get going. Don't want to get surrounded."

"Surrounded by other trees? I hate to break this to you, but we are in a forest. We are surrounded by trees. That's what a forest is."

"Mmn. Good point. Our enemy is skilled in camouflage. But you know who else was skilled in hiding in the forest? The lemming men of Yullia. And where are they today? Stuffed, that's what. *They* won't be looking for a Christmas tree soon, I can tell you."

There was a sudden rustle behind them. A tree burst out from the others as if pushed, wobbling as if children were fighting below the branches. Carveth cried out. It was smaller than those around it, greener too. "Come on!" Wainscott barked. "This way!"

He ran up the slope and Carveth followed, her arms stuck out to the sides in her heavy coat. Wainscott paused, looking back like a relay runner waiting for a baton. She caught up with him and he pointed. "In there!"

She saw buildings between the conifers, open doors and dark windows. Bark crunched and branches rustled behind them. Carveth put on a final spurt of energy and rushed up towards the buildings. Her legs felt too short, her arms useless. Her coat felt as if she'd been rolled up in a mattress. She burst out of the forest, saw a sign, and stomped across gravel. The door was wide open – no, she realised, there wasn't a door at all. She charged into the building, tripped, hit the opposite wall, bounced off and stood in the middle of a ruined entrance hall, panting for breath.

Wainscott stopped beside her and grinned like a wolf. "There," he said. "Can't be followed in here. Door's too small."

Carveth puffed. "Really?"

A mass of branches crashed up against the far window. It turned slowly, trying to get in. She stared at it, reminded of a roller in a car wash. “Ding dong bloody merrily on bloody high,” she declared.

“So,” said Smith, as he led Suruk and Rhianna across the car park, “we’ll find the café, get some tea, and wait for the others to return. Excellent.”

A small sign had been erected at the edge of the gravel. It read “Winter Wonderland This Way”.

Suruk had slung his spear over his shoulder. “Interesting,” he said. “Tell me, Mazuran. What will this ‘Winter Wonderland’ entail? Will there be elves?”

“Well, possibly,” Smith replied. “It’s hard to be sure.”

Rhianna folded her arms. “Suruk, it may not be very good. These things tend to be tacky and commercial.”

“Ah,” the alien replied. “That must be why Carveth keeps wanting to go to one. That and the eggnog.”

“Rhianna’s got a point, old chap,” Smith said. A set of concrete steps led up from the car park, between towering fir trees. “It’s less likely to be a magnificent celebration of the birth of Christ than a dog wearing some plastic antlers.”

“So no elves?” Suruk asked.

“Probably not.”

“How about orcs? Or dragons?”

“Unfortunately, I doubt it.”

A few steps on, Rhianna stopped. She turned around, as if looking for a thought that had drifted out of her head.

“Something’s bothering me,” Rhianna said.

“Have you got a stone in your flip-flops?”

“No, Isambard, it’s Polly. She’s been gone a long time. You don’t think she and Major Wainscott have found a tree, cut it down and are trying to carry it back to the ship, do you?”

Smith shook his head. “Carveth would never do that. Wainscott... probably wouldn’t. Not unless he could make it explode or something.” He paused. “You’re right. They have been a while. Let’s get this tea and head back.”

They climbed the steps. Smith could see a building between the trees. No lights shone at the windows, nobody moved inside.

The conifers thinned out and they were in front of a two-storey building. The windows were smashed, the doors wide open. Christmas decorations had been pulled down and trampled. A holographic Father Christmas flickered in and out of existence on the roof, like a hesitant ghost.

“Well,” said Smith, “so much for the winter wonderland.” He looked at the broken glass, the wrecked strings of lights. “They could have put a bit more effort in.”

Suruk crouched down. “I think there never was a winter wonderland, Mazuran. I see the signs of a struggle here.”

“Well, people do get a bit funny in the run-up to Christmas.”

“Guys?” Rhianna called. “Um, guys? Look.”

She pointed to a sign beside the door. It read “Magical Pines Christmas Tree Farm and Genetic Engineering and Weapons Development Facility”.

“Oh dear,” Smith said. He stepped through the doors, wishing that he’d brought a weapon. He was in a laboratory: it had been wrecked, as if by a whirlwind. He heard the others enter behind him.

Smith stepped over a broken chair. Glossy brochures lay scattered across the floor. Rhianna bent down and picked one up.

Smith walked to the rear of the room. He opened a door and stepped into the room beyond.

He was standing in a huge chamber full of waist-high objects. They were leathery, greenish-yellow, set out in rows. The air was warm and smelled of soil. A thin layer of mist covered the floor.

“Mazuran,” Suruk said from behind, “what have you found? Are they eggs?”

Smith walked between the objects. “My God,” he whispered. “They’re giant sprouts.”

“This is insanity,” Suruk growled. “What evil could make a man want sprouts to be even larger than before?”

“Guys?” They turned: Rhianna stood at the door, the brochure open in her hands. “Look at this. They were trying to breed a tree that would never drop its needles. It looks as if they mixed conifer DNA with the DNA of something that doesn’t drop needles... a wolverine, from the looks of it.” Rhianna shook her head sadly. “What kind of person would interfere with nature?”

“I know this,” Suruk replied. “Is it rednecks?”

“That was rhetorical,” Rhianna said.

“No,” Suruk replied. “It’s definitely rednecks. They get arrested for it.”

“Blimey,” said Smith. “Who would have thought that such hubris would lead to a dangerous escape and multiple deaths?” He wondered how the robot cowboys were doing looking after his park full of monsters, and turned his mind back to the task at hand. “It reminds me of that time we fought mutant celery. Chaps, we must hurry and find Wainscott and Carveth. Suruk, can you find this monstrous tree before it’s too late?”

The alien frowned, thinking. “Well, fortunately for us, it drops needles. Less fortunately, it drops them in a forest full of pine trees. However, I can locate Carveth easily. It is the odour,” he added. “Ponies and cake.”

“Well,” said Carveth, “now what?”

They stood in the wreckage of what had once been an office. Wainscott had lapsed into a gloomy silence, his eyes moving around the room as if he didn't trust the walls to stay upright. Outside, a Christmas tree stood on the open ground in front of the building, waiting.

"We'll set up a defensive perimeter," Wainscott growled. "You cover the area with heavy weapons while I test the enemy defenses. Then we'll attack in full force, preferably with explosives _"

"We don't have any. Or any heavy weapons. Or weapons at all, actually." Carveth folded her arms and shoved her hands into her armpits to keep them warm. "You know, this is not how I wanted to spend Christmas. I should be at home, on the sofa, watching a Hallmark Christmas film about two computer programmes that write Hallmark Christmas films that unexpectedly find themselves sharing the same hard drive. Instead, I'm being menaced by a bloody mutant tree. What next, getting rolled to death by a runaway bauble?"

"Damn shame Susan and the others aren't here," Wainscott said.

Carveth nodded. "I wish Suruk was with us. He's good at surviving."

"Huh. So am I."

"Yes, but he's nice. Well, sort of."

Wainscott looked hurt. "I *am* nice," he replied. "Everyone who meets me and survives says that I'm an excellent fellow. I bet Suruk can't say that."

"Hmm... you might be right about that."

"Maybe we could use a disguise. Make ourselves look like trees. Infiltrate the enemy ranks, you see. That's what we did back in the war, on Argoth Prime. It was a masterful piece of subterfuge," Wainscott added. "Susan was dressed as a Ghastist officer, and I was dressed as Susan. Nobody expected that. Even Susan. You've got to take command of the situation, you see. This tree monster needs to understand that I'm not in the mood for any bollocks."

“Well,” said Carveth, “given that it doesn’t speak English and has no genitals, I think you might have your work cut out there. Oh, and it doesn’t have any ears. Unless it’s part corn. Otherwise, great idea.”

The major scowled. “Are you talking back to me? I won’t have that in my unit.”

“I’m not in your unit, Wainscott. This isn’t a unit. It’s you and me, stuck in a room, with a crazy plant waiting for us to come out so it can murder us both. Look,” Carveth added, “the war’s over, you know. You’re not my commanding officer. We don’t have any guns, we can’t blow anything up –”

“That’s enough. I don’t want to hear that sort of defeatist talk.”

“It’s not defeatist talk! We won! The war has stopped!”

Wainscott froze. For a mad, frightening moment, Carveth thought he was going to throw himself through the window. He glowered into his beard. Then, his voice shaking, he said, “Well, you’re right about one thing. I’m not your commanding officer – and you’re bloody well not Susan!”

Wainscott turned and strode away, into the offices at the back of the building. Outside, the tree flexed its roots.

Carveth stood up, took a deep breath, and stepped away from the front door. “Wainscott? Major Wainscott?”

His voice was quieter now. “What now?”

She followed the sound into one of the offices. He was sitting in a swivel chair, his legs sticking out before him. It still seemed very strange to see him in jeans. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Wainscott replied. “I don’t want to talk about it. Because I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

He turned to look out of the window. “It’s not easy, you know. Not blowing things up. Difficult business. We had some fun in the old days. Back then, it was ‘winning the war’. Now, it’s

'robbing a bank', or 'gross indecency' or some nonsense like that. A man is like a blade," Wainscott explained. "To avoid getting rusty, he needs to keep himself sharp – and well-oiled."

"I hope you're referring to hard liquor."

"I at least thought," Wainscott said, "that if I ended up fighting a bunch of mutant plant monsters, I'd have some help."

"You've got me. And I've learned from the best."

He looked around, as if he'd only just realised that she was there. "Really? You mean that?"

Carveth shrugged. "Well, Suruk's not really the best so much as the craziest, but yeah..."

"What about me?"

"Oh, I see! Yes, I learned from you too. Quite a lot, in fact."

Wainscott leaped to his feet. "Right! Damned right! We're going to work together, you and I, and get out of here. First up, do you see that desk by the far wall?"

"Yes, I –"

"That will serve as a workbench. Now we can assemble ingenious devices to get us out of this mess. This is where you come in, short stuff. I'll need a bag of sugar, a roll of duct tape, and some kind of bladed item. Half a pair of scissors should suffice. Think you can do that?"

"I'll try," Carveth replied.

The major glared at her. "'Try' isn't enough, damn it. Susan would have... well, anyhow, see what you can do."

Carveth crept down the corridor. The sound of rustling came from outside, faint and yet unmistakable. She had always associated rustling with wrapping paper and trees that didn't want to murder her; now it sounded alien and sinister.

A small room to the side of the corridor had been used as a kitchen by the staff. To her surprise, she discovered a bag of castor sugar and a pair of scissors in the cabinets. After some rummaging in the kitchen drawers, she found not just a roll of sticky tape, but the end of it.

Wainscott was waiting by the workbench, making some kind of map. "Good stuff," he said, taking the objects from her. Now then..." He turned and she heard tape being pulled and wrapped around something. Wainscott turned back to her, holding a bulky object in his hand. He grinned like a ferret eyeing up a fat rabbit. "Look at this!"

She looked. It was, quite clearly, a bag of castor sugar with a pair of scissors taped to the front. "Um," she said, "not wanting to gob in your icing or anything, but what is that supposed to be?"

"Exactly!" Wainscott's eyes glistened. "You don't know, I don't know, but most importantly, our enemy doesn't know either. Watch."

He squatted down and gently tossed the object onto the floor in the centre of the room. It did exactly what Carveth would have expected it to do: nothing.

"To defeat an opponent, you must get inside his head," the major explained. "Of course, a tree doesn't have a head, which is a problem. This device gets to the root of that problem - and our enemy *does* have roots. Now, imagine I'm a strange abomination, a walking crime against nature. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"I approach, thirsty for human blood. I see - well, I perceive - this object on the floor. What is it? Will it explode? I have two choices: to circumvent the item, or put it out of action. I am, aptly, left in a cleft stick. And it is that hesitation which we will use to our advantage, giving us precious seconds to move to higher ground and regroup."

"Does that mean 'run away'?"

"In layman's terms, yes. Before coming back with a bloody great bomb."

Carveth said, "Then I'm in."

“Good show!” Wainscott put his hands on his hips and nodded several times. “You know, you’re not all bad. With a bit of work, you could be like the daughter I never had and would probably ignore if I had done.”

“Er, great?” she replied. “Let’s get going.”

The major raised a hand. “Just one more thing before we put this plan into action. Do I really look good in these trousers?”

“Yes,” said Carveth. “Better than the alternative, anyway.”

Carveth crept out of the front of the building. Gravel crunched softly under her boots. A breeze stirred the tree, and it rustled menacingly.

Wainscott followed. He was crouched down almost to a squat, and the strange device he’d constructed was wedged under his arm. He tapped Carveth’s sleeve, pointed to the object and nodded to the right side. Then he mimed walking to the left.

Carveth nodded. Wainscott drew his arm back and tossed the doctored bag of sugar across the ground. It landed with a soft, heavy thump.

The tree stirred. It didn’t turn – after all, it didn’t seem to have a front end – but it immediately moved towards the bag of sugar, wobbling dramatically. Carveth glimpsed roots pulling it forward, like an octopus on land. “Go,” Wainscott hissed. “Go.”

She crept out. Wainscott was just behind her. They headed left, keeping as far from the monster as the edge of the forest would allow. The mutant tree reached Wainscott’s device and, to Carveth’s surprise, actually stopped to examine it. They passed the tree and sneaked onwards, towards the path that would allow them to escape.

“Almost there,” Wainscott whispered. “Just stay quiet and keep moving.”

The trees in front of them burst open. Isambard Smith stepped out. “You there, shrub monster!” he cried. “Put your fronds up and no fast moves! Drop everything except your needles!”

The tree scurried towards him.

For a vegetable, Carveth thought, it was alarmingly rapid. Broccoli tended to go through her system pretty quickly, but it had nothing on a genetically engineered Christmas tree. The game was up: she jumped upright and ran for the forest.

“Look out!” Smith called, and Carveth saw that there was a rope trailing from his hands, a green plastic line like the end of a net. Smith pulled the line up, and, thirty feet to the right, Rhianna and Suruk emerged from hiding, holding the other end.

Wainscott ran to the middle of the line, equidistant between Suruk and Smith. “Over here!” he shouted.

The tree rushed him. Wainscott ducked under the line and Smith ran forward. Suruk and Rhianna dashed in from the other side. They rushed past the tree, wrapping the line around it, snaring it and pinning its branches to its trunk. Like maypole dancers, they crossed each other, wrapping the line around the tree once again. Tethered and pinioned, all it could do was wobble in the breeze.

“We’ve got it!” Smith called. “Rhianna, hit the switch!”

She ducked down, out of sight. A moment later, hundreds of small, gaudy lights lit up along the line. “Jolly good,” said Smith. “That looks super. Let’s get it loaded into the ship.”

Suruk began to pull on the line. “Wait!” Carveth said.

“What is it?”

She lowered her voice. “Boss, it’s Wainscott. I don’t think we should leave him here. It would be wrong for him to be all alone this Christmas. He needs supervising. Stuff might explode otherwise.”

“An excellent point. Wainscott, would you care to join us for Christmas dinner? We’ve certainly got enough sprouts to go around.”

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It was evening. As Smith strolled out of the *John Pym*, Wired Earp rolled into view. The robot extended a telescopic arm and tipped his Stetson. "Howdy, partner. Welcome back to the ranch."

"Hello," said Smith. "How was everything?"

"Quiet as a prairie grave. We've seen less action than a whiskey bottle in a temperance meetin'. I ain't seen hide nor hair of any varmints, and your beasts are happier than a coyote under a new moon."

"Erm, good, I suppose. Thanks."

"Our work here is done. Requesting permission to get rowdy."

"Of course," Smith replied.

"Thank you kindly, pardner. Commencing rooting and tooting!" Wired Earp turned on his caterpillar tracks and rolled away into the night, whistling from his speakers.

Smith walked to the fence and leaned on the wooden railing. The evening was warm, and he felt slightly drunk. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and for now, he could rest.

"Hey, Isambard." Rhianna walked down from the ship, holding two steaming mugs. "Do you want some of this mulled drink?"

"What sort is it?"

She shrugged. "Just... mulled, I guess."

Smith took a sip. Rhianna was right: it was warm and tasted of mulled. "How are the others?"

"Oh, they're okay. Suruk's practicing to carve the turkey tomorrow. Polly and Rick Dreckitt are doing something with chipolatas."

"Blimey. How's Wainscott?"

“He’s helping out. He said the crackers needed improving.”

“Hmm,” said Smith. “So long as he stays away from the turkey, I don’t mind. He’d probably stuff it with a stick of dynamite.”

Out in the field, a hundred tiny lights twinkled. Rhianna leaned on the fence and took a long drag on her home-made festive cigarette.

“You know,” she said thoughtfully, “I always thought there was going to be a green revolution. But I didn’t think it would, like, literally involve plants rising up.”

Smith stared into the night. Slowly, their Christmas tree ambled around the field, festooned with lights. “On balance,” he said, “I think we’re going to have trouble getting the presents under that.”