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NOT YOUR USUAL CHRISTMAS

For Macro the day was like any other, although it never seemed truly day time, not outside for sure. The odd occasions when he was summoned to the bridge of the spaceship by the Commander he took the opportunity to look through the curved observation window. Even though he was told that there was a whole Universe out there, all he had ever seen was just darkness with a mass of white dots that were said to be distant suns. The panel before him slid open and he stepped through. "Ah, Macro," said Commander Amander, noticing her Engineer entering. "A message from the Admiral – we are nearing Antoc 7, a galaxy that is reputed to have a number of habitable planets. The first batch of colonists is ready to go and the service pods are fully stocked, except for one. I would like it prepared as a backup."

"6SP has a few technical problems," said Macro, shifting nervously when he noticed a scowl building on the Commander's face.

She looked doubtfully at the badges on Macro's uniform. "I see you're only an Engineer third class: would you be able to handle it?"

"Well," said Macro uncertainly, "I suppose I could try sorting the repairs while the supplies are loaded."

"Tell Umm to use the new recruits for that," said Amander. "It's about time they started to earn their keep."

A short time later, a small procession was weaving its way through the maze of corridors guiding three electro-trolleys piled high with crates and boxes. "When we signed up as Space Dogs I thought it would be exciting," said Gladys, one of the recruits.

"You're not Dogs yet," advised Umm with a chuckle, "Just Pups until you, learn the job."

"What, stacking shelves?" snorted Betty. "We already know how to do that. It's no different to working at the supermarket back on Earth - boring, boring. Mind you, it is quite fun at this time of year getting ready for Christmas. Well," she paused to add gloomily: "It would have been if we were still there. I'm going to miss Christmas."

"Oh, we do Christmas," Umm informed the two recruits. "We've already started putting up the decorations; and in three days time on Christmas Eve the Admiral visits all of the spaceships delivering presents for everyone. Plus..." he said with a big grin and a sparkle in his eyes, "There's Christmas dinner."

"I bet that'll be wonderful," sneered Gladys, "Plastic plum pudding with a tube of custard."

"No, no," said Umm. "Christmas is one day of the year they serve up proper food." Reaching the end of the corridor, he pushed a button on the wall and a door slid open. "We're here," he declared, steering his trolley through. The small convoy rolled into a large chamber. "This is the Pod hanger," he informed them and pointed at a line of strange, lumpy-looking craft lined up along the far wall. "And those are the Pods, obviously. We're here to stock the one on the end." The hatch of Pod 6SP was open and as they approached, a man in work clothes climbed out. "Hello Macro," Umm called and gave him a wave.

The engineer waved back. "I'll carry on with the outside repairs – then I won't be in your way while you unload. Make sure the newbies put the stuff in the right places."

"No worries," said Umm and he turned to face the two Pups. "Now, there's not much room inside, so we'll have to empty one trolley at a time."

He was right about the lack of space inside the Pod, and it wasn't easy to take the boxes and crates off the trolley without bumping into each other. Having pushed box KE4-pap onto the shelf with the same name, Gladys looked around. "There aren't any seats," she observed. "Where are people supposed to sit?"

Umm gave a chuckle. "This is just a service pod. The supplies we're loading are for the new colonists who will be taken to the planet by a separate space shuttle."

Betty frowned. "What about the crew, or at least a pilot? Surely the Pod can't fly itself?"

"Not quite," said Umm. "But almost. Everything's automatic and controlled from up here – the launch, the flight and the landing."

After much shuffling and side-stepping, the last of the trollies was being off-loaded. Everyone had to bunch up as Macro squeezed in. "Sorry, but I've got some trouble with the launch assembly and I think the problem's inside. Won't be a minute." Using a sonic screwdriver he had the cover panel undone in less than a minute. His hands went into the cavity and fumbled around for a bit. "Ah, I think I see what's..." And that's when things went horribly wrong.

First there was a flash inside the cavity. Uttering a gasping "Ouch!" the engineer jerked his hands clear. Next, a door slid across closing the entry port. This seemed to set off a hissing rumble and they felt a jerk as the Pod started moving. "Oh, no," grated Macro. "We've gone into launch mode."

"Can you stop it?" asked a worried Umm.

Macro didn't answer. His hands went into the cavity again, fiddled with something, then he withdrew them and said apologetically: "In a word, no. And control can't either – I disconnected the transmitter, and I'm afraid it can only be reconnected on the outside."

"So, what happens now?" asked Gladys.

"If we're lucky we'll hopefully land safely on the closest planet," said Macro, "If not, I suppose we'll carry on cruising forever." A shuddering could be felt through their feet. "We're on the launch ramp," he said. "Take-off in two minutes. Best get down on the floor."

It seemed to take an age, but the journey wasn't really all that long; although the four passengers huddled in the tight space had to put up with much shaking and strange, whirring noises. Then nothing – no movement or sound. "I'd say we've landed," said Macro.

"What now?" asked Umm. "Is it safe to go outside, and if it is, how do we open the door?"

"Not sure," returned the engineer, "I'm pretty new to this, but the droid would know."

"We've got a droid?" queried Betty, and she looked around the cramped interior. "Where?"

Macro pointed at a tall panel. "In there. Just pull the lever down."

Betty shuffled to the panel and pulled the lever. With a hiss, the panel slid aside to reveal a shiny metal robot standing in a recess. It just stood there for a moment; then two eyes lit up and a mouth in its head opened as it spoke: "Good morning campers. What can I do you for?"

"We would like the exit door opened," said Macro.

"But first," added Umm, "We need to know if it's safe to go outside."

"No probs," said the droid in a sing-song voice. "I'm Polyjollyanterimalus the third, by the way."

"That's a bit of a mouthful," remarked Betty.

"Tell you what," sang the robot. "You can call me AI. Now..." AI climbed out of his cupboard and shuffled over to a panel with a lot of switches, buttons and little screens. Reaching forward with his metallic hand, he poked a finger into a hole. Lights on the panel started to flash and a humming sound could be heard. "Right," said AI, withdrawing his finger. "The air outside is the same as Earth, a bit cold, but. Shall I open the door?"

“Yes please,” said Umm. They waited as Al flicked a switch on the panel. The door of the hatch slid open. A gust of wind blew into the Pod, bringing with it some snowflakes. Umm smiled. “Looks like you might get a really Earth-type Christmas, Betty.”

It was as Al said – very chilly, but after the cramped conditions of the Pod they were all glad to be able to stretch their legs. Macro was looking around. “Not much shelter out here,” he said, and shivered. “How soon can we expect to be rescued, Al?”

“Maybe quite soon,” replied the droid cheerfully, “According to a message I’ve just received there’s a shuttle on its way.” He looked up and scanned the sky. “It should be breaking through the cloud right about... now. Ah...” Something did, but it was nothing like a space shuttle. A small cylinder hanging from a parachute floated down and came to rest close by. “Got another message,” he announced, “It’s from the Admiral. He says: *‘Back to pick you up in about a year. Meanwhile - Merry Christmas, Ho, Ho, Ho.’* I hate to say it,” continued Al gingerly, “But looks like we’ll have to muddle along on our own for a while. Still, it could be worse. The Pod has all we need, and I reckon the Admiral’s sent us some goodies. Let’s check out the tin can.”

Once the cylinder was open they all stared at the contents. “Seems to be our Christmas dinner,” said Umm, “Pumpkin pie, and plum pudding for afters. At least it’s real food.”

“With a tube of custard,” grumbled Gladys. “What’s in the box?”

Betty reached in, took out the box and opened it. “A little plastic Christmas tree,” she declared. “Bet it hasn’t got lights.”

“I can fix that,” said Al with confidence. “Let me have it.” Betty passed the little tree across. Turning it upside down, he stuck a finger into the base. In a second, coloured lights dotted around the tree started to blink on and off. In another second there was a brighter flash and the tree caught light. Al dropped it and they all watched it burn until just a blackened, smoking lump remained. “Er... sorry about that,” muttered the robot, “But there is still a bag of decorations.”

“Which would be good if we had somewhere to hang them,” said Gladys.

“Oh, we most certainly do,” said Al. “That was to be my next trick. Now stand clear.” Walking to the Pod he stuck two fingers in holes beside one of the big lumps, withdrew them and quickly stepped back. With a clack and a whirl the lump swung open and something rolled out. “Lo and behold the kitchen,” said Al.

“A barbecue?!!” sneered Macro. “I hope someone knows how to use it.” He raised his eyebrows and looked pointedly at the robot.

Al grinned widely. “I graduated in cooking. Only managed a B minus, but that’s probably because I burnt the toast - the baked beans were okay, though.”

“Baked beans on toast every day for a year is going to be wonderful,” moaned Betty.

“That’s not all I can do,” said Al. “How does vegie pasta and chocolate sauce sound?”

“Absolutely gross,” said Gladys. “Forget the food; what about where to live and sleep?”

“Your wish is my command,” sang the robot. Moving round the pod, he activated two more of the lumps which each spat out a large crate. While the rest stood frowning, Al went to look at the labels on the boxes. “You’ve got a lounge room,” he announced, “Plus sleeping quarters with two compartments, each with double bunk beds. Well, they will be once we open the flat-packs and put them together...”

Al was right: all the bits and pieces they needed to build two rooms were in the crates. Needless to say the instructions were in a foreign language, which was no bother for Al who spoke over three thousand. So he instructed the others what to do. They were in the process of setting up the new rooms when Umm heard a noise and looked up. “Something’s coming,” he said, then added: “Or some-*one*.”

A way off in the distance a dark shape could be seen approaching. As it came closer, it was clearly a large group of people – little people who appeared sort-of human. Betty chuckled and commented: “They look like elves or pixies...” Then she had another thought, a worrying one: “What if they don’t want us to be here? They might attack us.”

“I’ll go and find out,” said Al, and he started walking toward the advancing crowd.

“Don’t forget to tell them we come in peace,” Macro called after the robot, to which AI waved an arm in the air and carried on walking. “That’s funny,” said the engineer. They’ve stopped. AI hasn’t though – he’s still going and... Well, just look at that!” He was meaning the actions of the little people who were all bowing in front of AI. “They’ve probably never seen a robot before, and if they were watching when he came down from the sky, I reckon they think AI’s a God.”

The robot spent some time with the little people who had gathered around him and seemed quite excited. Then AI was returning, while the elves, or whatever they were, had run off where they came from. “They were very friendly,” said the robot, “And they would like to meet you all.”

“That’s nice,” said Gladys. “So, do we go to them, or are they coming back?”

AI chuckled. “They’ll be here pretty soon, with a very neat welcome gift for us.”

Betty was unsure: “Are we going to like it?”

“Oh, yes,” declared AI, “Especially you, Betty.”

So they waited, each of them mulling over their own thoughts as to what the welcome gift would be. Never in their wildest dreams, though, could they have guessed what was soon to take place.

The little people were approaching again; many more of them this time; and they were all singing and dancing. Was this the neat welcome, the humans wondered? Perhaps it was, but only a small part of it. The main body of the advancing crowd spread apart leaving a wide gap between them to make room for something strange. “It’s got flashing lights,” said Betty, “And if I’m not mistaken, I can hear music playing and bells jingling.”

What was coming was truly spectacular – a big sleigh drawn by really shaggy animals that looked like yaks; and sitting high up on jewelled throne was a lady in a magnificent golden dress that shimmered like her long, golden hair.

“Here she is,” announced AI theatrically, “Fantonella, the Queen of Hollybalu,” and he went on to explain: “Hollybalu is both the name of this planet and their festival that’s the same as Christmas on Earth, except you don’t have to wait a whole year for it – here they have one every three months. And, if you haven’t already guessed, as well as being the Queen, Fantonella is a sort-of Mother Christmas.”

The sleigh had pulled to a stop and all of the little elves gathered around it. Fantonella rose up from her throne and spread her arms as she called out: “Heedy Hollybalu. Yardy, Yardy, Yar.”

“Does that mean what I think it does?” asked Umm.

“You’d better believe it, Pilgrim,” sang AI, “But needless to say, there’s more, much more...”

The elves set about preparing the area around the Pod for the Hollybalu party. They had brought along everything needed to make colourful shelters to keep the snow off, tables for huge amounts of food, and chairs for everyone. Queen Fantonella, of course, had a really fancy one, which was to be expected. All the time they were working, the elves were laughing and telling jokes which the humans didn’t understand because they couldn’t speak the language; but AI did, so when he laughed they did too.

The party eventually began and went on for the rest of the day and long into the night. By the time the elves and Fantonella had gone, our accidental colonists were so full that they could barely move. “I don’t know what that bongertash was,” said Umm, rubbing his stomach, “But it was streets ahead of baked beans.”

“And the roasted cummerbend was great,” declared Macro. He flopped back in his chair and gave a big sigh of satisfaction. “You know, I’m quite glad I messed up with the repairs on the Pod. I think I could get used to living here.” And the others thought so too.

“This is the best Christmas I’ve ever had,” said Betty, adding: “Seeing as we’ll have a Hollybalu every three months, I’m not sure I want to be rescued when the fleet comes back for us. Maybe AI should send them a message and tell them not to bother.”

And when everyone agreed that was the best idea yet, that’s exactly what AI did.