

Ares For Christmas

(By Robert Bee)

The inaugural Christmas Day was shaping to be an unmitigated disaster. The mistletoe, imported at energy-consuming expense, hung wilting beneath the mess hall lintel, doomed never to bless a stolen kiss. The festive tree, crafted from beaten aluminium foil, glowed an unholy and unseasonal purple, and the turkey, freshly defrosted and richly marinated, was a masterpiece of cordon black at the bottom of a smoking baking dish.

After all the organisation, project management, mega-budget expense and sheer gutsy determination to be where they were at all, the impending inevitable failure of a simple birthday celebration was absolutely galling.

“Cheer up Peter, it’s not that bad.” Valerie Sharpe, the project’s Medical Officer, tried her professional best to soothe the team leader’s mounting depression, while desperately fighting back a case of the giggles.

“Isn’t it?” Peter Davids turned from the fluorescing tree, tendrils of corona crackling from the wings of the tinselled angel perched on its apex. “My people are as far from home as one can hope to be. The very least I can do as their leader is give them a sense of Christmas. It will anchor them to their origins, make home...and family...closer.” He cast a despairing look at the turkey ashes. “And it’s a nightmare.”

“Peter, it’s not as if most of the team hold your same sentiment for Christmas.” Sharpe tentatively reached a hand out towards the tree, but the eerie rising of the down on her arm doused her curiosity. “Face it. They are all scientists. I’m sure they won’t be as disappointed as you fear.”

“You think so, do you?”

The M.O. ticked off her still tingling fingers. “Boole is a mathematician who published a book called ‘The Statistical Improbability of God’. Our biologist Verrier is Vice President of the Communist League Francaise. Smirnoff is... Smirnoff and never let’s us forget it, and I’m, at best, an agnostic on a good day. The other three Areologists are so absorbed in their experiments I doubt they know what month it is, let alone what day.” She tried a confident smile. “I really doubt that the birthday of baby Jesus will rate highly on their personal priorities.”

Peter Davids turned to gaze out the triple thickness glass of the accommodation module, past the nuclear power plant, the laboratory, the air scrubber unit and the communications pod with its five metre dish aimed at an invisible point in the pink sky. “Davids’ Town” one of them...he thought it was Smirnoff...had dubbed it on its completion Lord only knew how many months ago.

The barren red rock strewn landscape that spread for kilometres to the horizon...a horizon dominated by the monster volcano which was incredibly two hundred kilometers over that horizon...had never seemed so alien as at that very moment. He thought about his team and his abortive attempts to give them a Christmas they probably didn’t want.

Suddenly he felt alone. Perhaps, he mused ironically, life on Mars was finally getting to him.

It was a nameless barn sized chunk of dirty snow, hurtling erratically from between Saturn and Jupiter like a hapless pinball bouncing off invisible cushions. Smirnoff saw it first, to no-one’s surprise, and commented on how it appeared to approach and then hang motionless over the colony. “But then”, he added bluntly, “that won’t last. At 60,000 kilometres per hour, it’ll soon be gone towards Earth to be named Comet Blah Blah by some lucky astronomer.”

With nothing better to do that night, the protein concentrates that substituted for the cremated turkey making a poor dinner to linger over, all eight donned their suits and ventured into the sub-zero temperature and cruelly thin atmosphere to watch the star shining over Davids’ City.

But Smirnoff was wrong. As they watched in astonishment, the comet blazed brighter and brighter, casting eerie shadows amongst the complex of buildings, and they were all suddenly afraid. While they silently contemplated the option, and then futility, of trying to run for shelter, the comet plummeted into Mars’ thin but effective upper atmosphere, boiling off as it went until, finally, it was a comet no more.

Valerie Sharpe sobbed quietly in relief as the twenty kilometer wide cloud from the melted comet rained down on them. Literally. But as the comet’s atomised debris approached the barren ground, the sub-zero temperature snap froze the water vapour into bizarre icy flakes, a reincarnation of its original muddy crud.

And so it snowed that Christmas eve, and eight worldly, lonely scientists watched in awed silence.

Inevitably, scientific curiosity stirred the group and Verrier led the rush to fetch containers to capture comet samples for future testing. History would be made this day. Valerie Sharpe and Peter Davids were the last to move, reluctant to turn away from the white blanket slowly settling on the ground like icing sugar over a cake.

“Don’t get too carried away with the symbolism, Peter,” Valerie warned as they headed for the laboratory module. “Remember what I said earlier about your team members’ indifference to Christmas.”

But Peter’s mind was too far away to hear or heed.

It was a busy morning collecting comet snow and a tired but happy team fell gratefully into their beds as the Sun rose on Christmas Day over Olympus Mons.

Peter was the last to retire. Preparing for bed, he smiled in the dark as he suddenly remembered Valerie’s words of warning. But his smile, if anyone could have seen it, was tempered with a frown of concern. His leadership was about to be sorely tested. Did he dare drink the concoction that Smirnoff had left with the dehydrated carrot on the mess table, and what on Mars was he going to put in those seven socks he’d found hanging over the space heater?