
Zwarte Piet's Tale

by Allen M. Steele

Science Fiction

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People often speak of Christmas as being a season of miracles. Indeed, it sometimes seems that's all you hear about during the holiday season; download the daily newsfeed, and you're sure to find at least one doe-eyed story about a lost child reunited with his parents, a stray pet finding his way home, a maglev train that barely avoids colliding with another, a house burning down without anyone being killed. These things can happen at any time, and often do, but when they occur at Christmas, a special significance is attached to them, as if an arbitrary date on the Gregorian calendar somehow has a magical portent.

That sort of thing may go smooth on Earth, but anyone on Mars who believes in miracles is the sort of person you don't want to be with during a habitat blowout or a dust storm alert. Belief in miracles implies belief in divine intervention, or luck at the very least; that kind of attitude has killed more people out here than anything else. Luck won't help you when a cell of your dome undergoes explosive decompression, but having paid attention during basic training will. I've known devoutly religious people who've died because they panicked when a wall of sand came barrelling across the plains, while atheists who kept their heads and sprinted to the nearest shelter have survived. Four people returning to Wellstown from a water survey were killed on Earth's Christmas Day back in m.y. 46, when the driver of their rover rolled the vehicle down a twenty-meter embankment; there was no yuletide miracle for them.

I'm sorry if this may seem cynical, but that's the way it is. Almost a million aresians now live on Mars, and we didn't face down this cold red world by believing in Santa Claus. Luck is something you make for yourself; miracles occur when you get extra-lucky. I've been here for over twenty years now, and I've never seen it work differently, whether it be on Christmas, Yom Kippur, or First Landing Day.

Yet still ... there's always an exception.

* * * *

Sure, we celebrate Christmas on Mars. We just don't do it the same way as on Earth.

The first thing you have to remember is that we count the days a bit differently. Having 39.6 more minutes each day, and 669 days—or sols, as we call 'em—in a sidereal period, meant that aresians threw out both Greenwich Mean Time and the Gregorian calendar in a.d. 2032, long before the Pax Astra took control of the near-space colonies, way before Mars declared its independence. The Zubrin calendar has twelve months, ranging from 48 to 66 sols in length, each named after a Zodiac constellation; it retroactively began on January 1, 1961, which became Gemini 1, m.y. 1 by local reckoning. The conversion factors from Gregorian to Zubrin calendars are fairly complex, so don't ask for an explanation

here, except to say that one of the first things newcomers from Earth have to realize is that April Fool pranks are even less funny at Arsia Station than they were back in Indiana.

Indeed, aresians pretty much did away with Halloween, Thanksgiving, Guy Fawkes Day, Bastille Day, and virtually every other Earth holiday. Our New Year's is out of whack with the rest of the solar system, and instead of Columbus Day we have First Landing; when Mars seceded from the Pax Astra in 2066, or m.y. 57, we began commemorating the event with our own Independence Day. A few religious holidays continue to be observed at the same time as they are on Earth. West Bank, the small Jewish settlement on the western slope of the Tharsis bulge, celebrates hanukkah in accordance with the traditional Hebrew calendar; I was once there for the third night of hanukkah, and watched as the family with whom I was staying lit its menorah when the colony's DNAI calculated the sun had set in Jerusalem.

Christmas has been imported as well, yet because the aresian year was nearly twice as long as Earth's, it comes around half as often. The first colonists tried having their Christmas promptly on December 25th, but it felt odd to be celebrating Christmas twice a year, sometimes in the middle of the Martian summer. When the colonies formally adopted the Zubrin calendar in m.y. 38, it was decided that the aresian Christmas would fall only once every two Earth years; this meant that we had to devise our own way of observing the holiday. So instead of designating one single sol in Taurus as being Christmas Day, aresians picked the second week of the month as Christmas Week, beginning on Ta. 6 and continuing through Ta.13; it was roughly adapted from the Dutch tradition of observing December 6 as the Feast of St. Nicholas. During that week, everyone would take a break from all but the most essential labor, and this would give families and clans a chance to get together and exchange gifts. Devout Christians who wished to continue unofficially observing December 25 as Jesus's birthday were welcome to do so—New Chattanooga and Wellstown took two sols off each aresian year for a terran-style Christmas—but it wasn't marked on the Zubrin calendar.

Most of the original Seven Colonies, with the exception of West Bank, accepted Christmas Week as a respite from the hard work of settling the Martian frontier. As more immigrants from Earth and the Moon began establishing new colonies along the eastern equator, they adopted Christmas Week as well. Yet, as time went on, the aresian Christmas began to lose much of its original meaning.

Indeed, as some noted, the week never had that much meaning to begin with. Since it wasn't held to celebrate of the birth of Christ, it had little religious significance. Families and clans tended to live in the same colonies, often sharing the same quarters, so there wasn't much point in setting aside an entire week for them to get together. These colonists lived on the verge of poverty; Pax trade tariffs and the enormous cost of importing items from Earth made Christmas presents beyond the reach of most people, and giving someone a new helmet liner is hardly the stuff of romance. So what usually happened during Christmas Week was that people congregated in taprooms to get ripped on homebrew and hempweed; when the taprooms closed, louts roamed the corridors looking for trouble. By mid-century, Christmas Week had degenerated into debauchery, random violence, and the occasional fatal accident. It wasn't a lot of fun.

Worse yet was the fact that the first generation of aresians to be born on Mars was growing up with only second-hand knowledge of what Christmas was supposed to be like. They'd read old microfiche stories about Rudolph and Santa Claus, the Grinch and Scrooge, or watch disks of ancient films like *It's A Wonderful Life* and *Frosty the Snowman*, and then go to their parents asking why Santa didn't drop down their chimney to leave wrapped and ribboned gifts beneath a tree strung with lights and tiny ornaments. Perhaps you can successfully explain to a four-year-old why there aren't any reindeer and Douglas firs on Mars, or even point out that your two-room apartment doesn't have a hearth, let alone a chimney ... but try telling a small child that there's no such person as Santa.

Mars was in desperate need of a St. Nicholas, a Father Christmas, a Santa Claus. In m.y. 52, he arrived

in the form of Dr. Johann Spanjaard.

* * * *

Despite the fact that I'm one of the few people on Mars who knew him well, there's very little I can tell you about Doc Spanjaard. That's not much a surprise, though; folks came here for many different reasons, and not always the best ones. Frontiers tend to attract people who didn't quite fit in the places they came from, and on Mars it's impolite to ask someone about their past if they don't voluntarily offer that information themselves. Some aresians will blabber all day about their home towns or their old job, but others I've known for twenty years and still don't know where they were born, or even their real names.

Johann Spanjaard fell somewhere between these extremes. He was born in Holland, but I don't know when: around a.d. 2030 is my best guess, since he appeared to be in his early forties when he arrived at Arsia Station. He was trained as a paramedic, and briefly worked on Clarke County; and later at Descartes Station. He was a Moon War vet; he told me that he witnessed the Battle of Mare Tranquillitatis, but if he had any combat medals he never showed them to me. He returned to Earth, stayed there a little while, left again to take a short job as a beltship doctor, then finally immigrated to Mars. There were at least two women in his past—Anja, his first wife, and Sarah, his second—but he seldom spoke of them, although he sent them occasional letters.

No children. In hindsight, that may be the most significant fact of all: even after marrying and leaving two wives, Doc didn't have any kids. Save that thought.

Doc Spanjaard immigrated to Mars in m.y. 52, five aresian years before the colonies broke away from Pax. By then Arsia Station had become the largest colony; nearly a hundred thousand people lived in reasonable comfort within the buckydomes and underground malls that had grown up around the base camp of the original American expedition, just south of the Noctis Labyrinthis where, on a nice clear day, you could just make out the massive volcanic cone of Arsia Mons looming over the western horizon. The colony had finally expanded its overcrowded infirmary into a full-fledged hospital, and Doc was one of the people hired to staff its new emergency ward.

I came to know Doc because of my job as an airship pilot. One of Arsia General's missions was providing medical airlifts to our six neighbor colonies in the western hemisphere; although they had infirmaries of their own, none possessed Arsia General's staff or equipment. The hospital had contracted my employer, AeroMars, to fly doctors out to these remote settlements and, on occasion, bring back patients for treatment. Within two sols of Doc's arrival at Arsia General, I flew him over the Valles Marineris to Wellstown so he could treat a burn victim from an explosion at the fuel depot. We ended up hauling the poor guy back to Arsia Station that same day; the sortie lasted twenty-seven hours, coming and going, and when it was over we were too wired to go to bed, so we wandered over to the Mars Hotel and had a few beers.

That trip established a regular pattern for us: fly out, do what had to be done, fly back, hand the case over to the ER staff, then head to the nearest taproom to decompress. However, I seldom saw Doc Spanjaard get loaded; three beers was his limit, and he never touched hard liquor. Which was fine with me; I'm a featherweight drinker myself, and two beers was the most I'd allow myself because I never knew when I'd get beeped to drag *Miss Thuvia* back into the sky again. But the three of us logged a lot of clicks together; once I had the princess tied down in her hangar and Doc had washed someone else's blood off his hands, we'd park our rumps in a quiet bar and tap mugs for a job well done.

We were a mutt-'n-jeff team if there ever was one. Doc was tall and preposterously skinny, with solemn blue eyes and fair skin that helmet burn had freckled around his trim white beard; imagine an underfed St.

Nicholas and you've got it down. I was the short, dumpy black sidekick from Tycho City who had a thing for Burroughs classics and loved old Eddie Murphy movies even though I had never spent more than two weeks on Earth (what can I say? he made me laugh). But Doc had a wry sense of humor that most people didn't see, and I was the only airlift pilot who wouldn't panic when he had to perform an emergency tracheotomy at twelve hundred meters with a utility knife and a pen.

We saw a lot of action over the course of the next nine months; by my count, we saved at least thirty lives and lost only four. Not bad for two guys whose biggest complaint was losing a lot of sleep. *The Martian Chronicle* caught wind of our act and wanted to do a story on us. We talked it over during a ride back from Sagan, then radioed back to Arsia General and arranged for the reporter to meet us at the Mars Hotel after we got home. The reporter was there, along with his photographer and one of Doc's former patients, a sweet young thing from West Bank whose heart was still beating again due to Doc's ministrations and my flying skills, but gee gosh, we forgot where we were supposed to meet them and went to Lucky Pierre's instead. Two more missed interviews, followed by profuse apologies and sworn promises that we'd be at the right place next time, went by before the *Chronicle* finally got the message. On Mars, the phrase "mind your own business" is taken seriously, even by the press.

But it wasn't always funny stuff. Our job took us places you'd never want to see, the settlements established along the equatorial zone surrounding the Valles Marineris. Over forty Earth years had elapsed since First Landing, and humankind had made substantial footholds on this big red planet, yet beyond the safe, warm confines of Arsia Station life could be pretty grim. New Chattanooga was infested with sandbugs, the seemingly indestructible mites which lived in the permafrost and homed in on any aquifer large enough for them to lay eggs; the colony's water tanks were literally swimming with them, and despite the best filtration efforts they were in every cup of coffee you drank and every sponge-bath you took. DaVinci was populated by neocommunist who, despising bourgeois culture and counterrevolutionary influences, wanted little to do with the rest of the colonies, and therefore turned down most aid offered by Arsia Station. Their subsurface warrens were cold and dimly-lit, their denizens hard-eyed and ready to quote Mao Tse Tung as soon as you entered the airlock. Viking, the northernmost settlement, was located on the Chryse Planitia near the Viking I landing site: two hundred people huddled together in buckydomes while eking out the most precarious of existences, and every time we visited them, the population had grown a little smaller. And people spoke only in hushed tones about Ascension, the settlement near Sagan just south of the Valles Marineris that had been founded by religious zealots; living in self-enforced isolation, running short of food and water, finally cut off from the neighboring colonies by the planetwide dust storm of m.y. 47, its inhabitants began murdering one another, then cannibalizing the corpses.

Doc and I saw a side of the Martian frontier that most people on Earth didn't even know existed: hypothermia, malnutrition, disease, injuries caused by carelessness or malfunctioning equipment, psychosis, and not a few deaths. We did what we could, then we flew home and tried to drown our sorrows in homemade brew. There's many wonderful things about Mars, but it's not Earth or even the Moon; this is a place with damned little mercy, and those it doesn't kill outright, it conspires to drive insane.

Perhaps we went a little stir-crazy ourselves, for one night in the Mars Hotel we got to talking about what we missed about Christmas.

* * * *

It was the third week of Aries, m.y. 53. Christmas was only a couple of weeks away, and already the taprooms were brewing more beer for the festivities to come. We had just returned from delivering medical supplies to the poor schmucks at Viking, and were watching the bartender as he strung some

discarded fiberoptics over the bar.

"I miss mistletoe," I murmured. I was working on my second beer by then, so I wasn't conscious of my alliteration. "Mistletoe and Christmas trees."

"You don't know mistletoe and Christmas trees," Doc said.

"Sure do. Had them in my family's apartment. My mother and father, they used to kiss beneath the..."

"You grew up on the Moon. You had vinyl mistletoe and plastic Christmas trees. Bet you've never smelled the real thing."

"No, but it was close enough."

"Not in the slightest. You'd know the difference." Doc sipped his beer. "But I get the point. Out in the belt, we'd get together in the wardroom on Christmas Eve and sing carols. You know caroling...?"

"Sure. 'Silent Night,' 'The First Day of Christmas,' 'Jingle Bell Rock'..."

"Santa Claus Is Coming To Town,' that's my favorite. And then we'd exchange gifts. Sarah gave me a ring with a little piece of gold from an asteroid ore our ship had refined." He smiled at the memory. "Marriage didn't last, but I held onto the ring."

"My favorite was a little rocket from my Dad. I was eight ... nine, I guess. He made it for me in his lab. About two meters long, with a hollow nose cone. We put a little note with our squid number in the cone, then went EVA and hiked up to the crater rim, set the trajectory, fueled it up and fired it at Earth." Once again, I remembered that little rocket's silent launch, and how it lanced straight up into the black sky over Tycho. "Dad told me that it would eventually get there and land somewhere, and maybe someone would find it and send back a letter."

"Anyone ever fax you?"

"Naw. It probably never got to Earth ... or if it did, it probably burned up on entry." I shrugged. "But I like to think that it made the trip, and just landed some place where no one ever found it."

"But it meant something, didn't it? Like Sarah's ring. No Christmas gift is ever insignificant. There's always a little of your soul in whatever you give someone." Doc scowled at the lights being strung above the bar. "Here, it's just an excuse for people to get drunk and stupid, and the next day everyone has to apologize to each other. Sorry for banging on your door. Sorry for keeping you awake last night. Sorry for making a pass at your wife..."

"What do you expect? Rudolph the green-nosed reindeer?"

"Red. Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. Don't they teach you selenians anything?"

"Oh, yeah. Red-nosed reindeer." I polished off my second and last, shoved the mug across the bar.

"Yeah, I know, but all that Santa stuff doesn't make a lot of sense out here, y'know?"

"It doesn't? Why shouldn't it?"

I could tell that he was spoiling for a fight. "Aw, c'mon, Doc ... does this look like Earth to you? Cheststuff smoking on an open fire, jackass stepping on your toes..."

"You can't even get the lyrics right! 'Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your toes..."

“What's a chestnut?”

“Never mind.” He turned away from me. “Jeff, I'll have another one. Put it on his tab.”

I didn't object. Doc was in a self-righteous mood; when he was this way, silence was the only way you could deal with him. I helped myself to some fried algae from the bowl the bartender had placed between us while I waited for him to calm down.

“I guess what I miss the most,” he finally said, “is the look ... no, not just the look, the *glow* ... children have on Christmas morning. Until I came here, I'd never seen a kid who didn't think it was the best day of the year. Even out in the belt, it was something they could look forward to. But here...”

“I know what you mean.” My gaze wandered to the line of ceramic liquor bottles lined up on the shelf. “The best some of them can hope for is that their folks won't be too hung over to make breakfast for them. I mean, some people try to do better, but ... I dunno, something's missing.”

“I'll tell you what's missing” Doc tapped his finger against the bartop. “It isn't just trees or presents. Magic, that's missing. There's no Sinterklass.”

“Yeah. No Santa Claus.”

“Did I say Santa Claus? I didn't say Santa Claus. I said Sinterklass.”

“There's a difference?”

For a moment, I thought he was going to brain me with his beer mug. “Hell, yes, there's a difference! Sinterklass arrives in Holland on a ship from Spain. He's a tall, slender gent with a long white beard who wears a red robe and bishop's miter. He rides into town on a white horse with his assistant Zwarte Piet, where he gives presents to all the good children on his list. Then he ... what's so damn funny?”

“That's Santa Claus, you quack! Only the details are different! Reindeer, elves, a sleigh from the North Pole ... it's still the same mook, right down to the extortion racket.”

“True, but Sinterklass came first ... or St. Nicholas, if we want to call him by his proper name.” He swigged his beer. “He was brought to America by the Dutch, but just like everything else brought over from Europe, he was changed until virtually no one remembered his origins.”

“Tell me about it. Same thing happened to my African ancestors ... although not by choice.”

“Then you'd appreciate the similarity between Santa's elves and Zwarte Piet. It means Black Peter ... he's a Moor.”

I shrugged. “Sounds like a demotion. My great-grandfather used to play Santa every Christmas at a shopping mall. There weren't many of them black Santas back then, I'm told.”

“Your grandfather played Santa Claus?” He raised an eyebrow. “Now there's a coincidence. My father played Sinterklass in our village, as did my grandfather.”

“No kidding?”

“Goes with the genes.” He stroked his trim white beard. “Men in my family have the right whiskers for the job. All we have to do is let our beard grow out and...”

He stopped just then. To this day, I'll never forget his slack-jawed expression as he stared at me in wonderment. He had just spoken of the glow that children have on Christmas morning; in that instant, I

saw something like that appear in his own face. Wonder and joy, wonder and joy; tidings of wonder and joy ... I don't believe in telepathy any more than I do in Santa Claus, yet I suddenly knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Oh, no, you don't,” I said, turning to hop off the stool and book out of there. “Don't even think for a minute...”

“Oh, shut up and sit down.” Doc grabbed my wrist before I could make it to the door. “Let's see if we can work this out.”

Against my better judgement, I stayed. Doc finished his beer, and then we switched to coffee, and by the end of the evening I had a new name.

* * * *

Sinterklass and Zwarte Piet live in the caldera of Olympus Mons, within an invisible buckydome which contains their secret toyshop. When they're not making toys or teaching sandbugs to perform tricks for their flea circus, they watch all the boys and girls of Mars through magic telescopes that can peer through walls, putting together a long list of who's been naughty and who's been nice.

Then, on the first sol of Christmas Week, they load their gifts aboard their airship, climb aboard, and fly away from Olympus Mons. Over the next seven sols they visit the colonies one by one, stopping at each to distribute presents to the good children of Mars. They may stay overnight at a settlement, because sometimes Black Peter gets too tired to fly St. Nicholas to the next colony, but if they do stay, the children should try to leave the pair alone, or next Christmas they may find the boots of their skinsuits filled with sand instead of candy.

That's the story that we artfully disseminated through the Marsnet. It was posted on all the usual sites kids would mouse, plus a few that their parents would find. It isn't hard to create a myth, if know what you're doing, but Doc and I didn't do it all by ourselves, and not without running into a little trouble.

Arsia Station's board of selectmen were skeptical when we formally pitched the idea to them at the next weekly meeting. They thought Doc and I had dreamed this up as a sneaky way of earning overtime until Doc explained that we would also be transporting food, medical supplies, and replacement parts to the settlements. Not only that, but since we would be hitting each settlement in turn, we could take stuff from one place to another, in much the same way supply caravans presently operated, yet in a shorter time-span and for more charitable reasons. The selectmen were all too aware of the ill-will some of the smaller settlements felt toward Arsia; our plan would make for good colonial relationships. So they found a few extra megalox in the budget to fund an extended medical sortie, not the least of which was subcontracting *Miss Thuvia* from AeroMars for a seven-sol sortie.

When we contacted the other five colonies and informed them of our proposal, we received mixed reactions. Wellstown, Sagan, Viking, and New Chattanooga were mystified by the notion of a Martian Santa, but otherwise interested, albeit not wildly enthusiastic; if anything, it meant they would be receiving a previously unscheduled visit from Arsia General, and a few freebies to boot. West Bank was initially cool to the idea—they didn't observe Christmas Week, after all—until we agreed to knock off the Sinterklass routine and perform as if it was just another airlift. But DaVinci was the aresian home of Ebenezer Scrooge; after a few days of stone silence, we received a terse fax from its Proletariat, stating that the free people of DaVinci had decided to reject St. Nicholas was an archaic symbol of capitalistic society and Black Peter as a shameful hold-over of racist imperialism. Well, tough boots: no candy for the commies.

Most people went for it, though, and once word leaked out about what Doc and I intended to do, we

received assistance from various individuals, sometimes without us soliciting them for help. Aresians have a strong tradition of looking out for the other guy, after all, and the citizens of Arsia Station came out for us. A textile shop volunteered to make toys for us: tiny Mars landers, statuettes of men in skinsuits, some inflatable replicas of *Miss Thuvia*. A food-processing firm turned out several kilos of hard candy; it looked weird and tasted the same, or at least so I thought, but Doc field-tested samples on kids passing through the ER ward and none of them spit it out. A lady I was dating from Data One hacked out a game pak which she stored on a handful of spare disks; one of them was a little hide-and-seek involving Sinterklass and Zwarte Piet chasing each other through a three-dimensional maze. She made sure that the odds of Black Peter winning the match were always in my character's favor, something which Doc resented when he tried playing it.

Yet the best efforts were those on behalf of our skinsuits. It wouldn't do for us to cycle through airlocks looking like any other dust-caked aresian coming in from the cold. Sinterklass and Zwarte Piet were magical, after all; we had to look the part. So we hired Uncle Sal, Arsia's premier skinsuit tailor, to come up with some hempcloth overgarments which closely mimicked the traditional costumes worn in the Netherlands. Doc's outfit was bright red and white, with a long scarlet cape whose ribbed hood, when pulled over his helmet, looked much like a bishop's miter. My costume was dark blue, with a plumed white collar around the neck and puffed-out sleeves and leggings. To add to the effect, Sal weaved colored microfilaments through the garments; when we switched them on, we looked like walking Christmas trees.

The only problem we had was with Doc's beard. He stopped trimming it once our plan was approved, and within a couple of weeks it flowed down his face like a pale waterfall. It looked terrific and his girlfriends loved running their fingers through it, but he had the damndest time tucking it into his helmet. He finally figured out what that hearty "ho-ho-ho" business was all about; it allowed him to spit out the whiskers in his mouth.

Altogether, it was an impressive effort, doubly so by the fact that we pulled it all together in less than three weeks. On Ta. 6, m.y. 53, Doc and I climbed aboard *Miss Thuvia* and set sail from Arsia Station. The blimp had been temporarily festooned with multicolored lights. I turned them on as soon as we were clear of the hangar, and watched from the gondola windows as a small crowd of aresians waved us farewell.

It was a good beginning, but our first stop, at twilight on the first day of the tour, was a bust. West Bank didn't want anything to do with Christmas, so I kept the lights turned off when we approached the settlement on the western slope of the Tharsis volcano range, and we weren't wearing our outfits when we exited the blimp's airlock. The settlers were cordial enough; we handed out sweets and toys to the handful of kids we met inside, and once their folks unloaded the supplies they had requested—which wasn't much, because West Bank took pride in its self-sufficiency—we had a meal and a glass of wine in the commissary before we were shown the way to the hostel. Nothing lost, but nothing really gained either, save for fuel and a night's rest; by dawn the next morning we were airborne again. The only thing which made the trip worthwhile was seeing the sunrise over Pavonis Mons as we flew eastward toward the upper edge of the Noctis Labyrinthis.

That was the longest leg of the journey. Over a thousand clicks lay between West Bank and Wellstown, and although Doc stood watch in the cockpit while I bunked out for a couple of hours, I did little more than doze. Questions ran through my mind even while my eyes were shut, murmuring like the incessant drone of *Miss Thuvia*'s props. What were we doing, two grown men dressing up like the Dutch Santa and his Moorish apprentice? I could be home now, trying to find an unattached lady with whom I could share some holiday cheer. What were we trying to achieve here? The children at West Bank had shown only slight interest in us; a little girl had stoically gazed at the toy lander Doc placed in her hand, and a

small boy had made a sour face when he ate the candy I had given him. Yeah, so maybe Christmas wasn't part of their culture, but the Jewish friends with whom I had been raised on the Moon knew what it was, if only for the spirit of the season. Perhaps Christmas didn't belong on Mars. So why did any of this matter?

When I finally got up and went forward, I could see that Doc had been contemplating the same thought. "It'll go better in Wellstown," he said softly, but I don't think he believed it either.

We ate cold rations as the sun went down behind us, drank some more powdered coffee, and said very little to one another until the lights of Wellstown appeared before us, a tiny cluster of white and amber lights against the cold darkness of the Martian night. Almost reluctantly, we pulled on our skinsuits; I almost forgot to switch *Miss Thuvia's* Christmas lights until we were above the landing field.

A handful of men grabbed our mooring lines, dragged us in, tied us down. It was only the second time we had worn our costumes on EVA; Doc stepped on his cape and nearly fell down the gangway, and the puffed-out legging of my suit forced me into a bow-legged gait. We looked stupid as we made our way to the airlock of the nearest buckydome. The final touch came when Doc couldn't fit inside, and he had to lower the peaked hood of his cape.

The outer hatch shut behind us; we got a chance to study each other as the airlock cycled. Two fools in gaudy, luminescent skinsuits. A bad dream come to life. We had been flying for the past twelve hours, but I would have gladly flown straight home if I thought it would save me any further humiliation. Why did I ever let Doc talk me into...?

Then the green light flashed above the inner hatch. Doc and I were unclasping our helmets when the lockwheel began turning its own, then the inner hatch was thrown open from outside. Bright light rushed into the airlock, and along with it, the excited squeals of the dozens of children waiting outside.

At that instant, it all made perfect sense.

* * * *

Even after all these years, I still consider that first Christmas tour to be our best. We ran short of candy and toys before we were through, and we were bone-tired by the time we left Sagan for the last leg of the circuit back to Arsia Station, yet we brought home with us the most exciting discovery since microfossils were found in the Noctis Labyrinthis.

St. Nicholas was alive and well and living on Mars. How could nearly three hundred kids possibly be wrong?

Sometimes it was tough. The children at Viking broke our hearts: grimy, hungry, wearing cast-off clothes, but enchanted the moment we stepped through the airlock. None rejected our awful candy, and they fought jealously over the crude toys from Doc's bag until we made sure that everyone had something to take home. They took turns sitting in Sinterklass's lap, and he listened to stories of hardship and loss that would have horrified the worst curmudgeon. Several kids were sallow and feverish with lingering illnesses that required Doc to play physician as well as holiday saint; we were prepared for that, so after a sneaky sort of examination ("How long is your tongue? I bet you've got the longest one here. Open your mouth and let Sinterklass see. Oh, yes, you do, don't you...?") he'd send the sick ones over to Black Peter for a card trick and a couple of pills; later, we'd give the rest of the prescription to their parents.

Sometimes it was funny. A little girl in New Chattanooga was adamant in her outspoken belief that Sinterklass was a fake; the brat kept yanking at Doc's beard, tearing out white hair by its roots in her dogged attempt to dislodge his mask. She got candy and a toy—no child came away empty-handed

during that first tour—but before we left the following morning I tracked down her skinsuit in the community ready-room and filled her boots with handfuls of sand. She was much nicer to us the next year. Sagan's resident nymphomaniac decided that the holiday season wasn't complete until, in her words, she had “made Santa's bells jingle.” She started by sitting in his lap and whispering something in Doc's ear that succeeded in turning his nose bright red. At any other time, Doc might have obliged, once they were safely away from the little ones, but he decided that this might set a bad precedent. To her credit, she took his refusal with good grace ... and then she asked me why I was called Black Peter.

And, yeah, sometimes it was scary. A slow leak in one of her hydrogen cells caused *Miss Thuvia* to lose altitude as we were flying from Viking to New Chattanooga. The pressure drop occurred while we were flying over Cupri Chasm, one of the deepest parts of the Valles Marineris; for a few minutes, it looked as if we would crash in the red-rock canyon dozens of kilometers below us. I awoke Doc from his nap and he scrambled into the gondola's rear to open the ballast valves. When that wasn't enough, he shoved some cargo containers out the airlock—including, much to our regret, one containing several bottles of homemade wine we were freighting from Wellstown to the other colonies. We jettisoned enough weight from the princess to keep her aloft just long enough to clear the chasm, but she left skid marks when she landed at New Chattanooga. And then we had to put on our costumes and pretend that we hadn't just cheated death by only a few kilos.

But it was fun, and it was exhilarating, and it was heart-warming, and it was *good*. Even before we arrived back at Arsia Station, where we were greeted not by the small handful who had witnessed our departure a week earlier but by hundreds of skinsuited colonists who surrounded the crater and threw up their arms as *Miss Thuvia* came into sight, Doc and I swore to one another that we'd make the same trip again next year.

It wasn't because our newfound fame—we still ducked the *Martian Chronicle* when it came to us for an interview—or the lure of adventure, or even another shot at our cuddly friend in Sagan. It was simply because we'd brought something pure, decent and civilized to Mars. Perhaps that was a Christmas miracle in itself. If so, then we wanted another one, and another one after that.

We'd eventually receive our miracle. But it wasn't one I would have ever expected.

* * * *

In 2066, the Pax Astra underwent a political upheaval when the Monarchists overthrew the ruling New Ark Party on the Clarke County space colony near Earth. The coup d'etat was led by former New Ark members frustrated with the economic stagnation brought on by the Pax's government by consensus. They formed an opposition party with the intent of recasting the Pax Astra as a democratic monarchy, and eventually deposed the New Ark in a near-bloodless revolution. Yet shortly after Queen Macedonia had been crowned, the aresian representatives to the new Parliament realized that Martian interests were a very low priority in the new order. The diplomats caught the next cycleship home; no sooner had they arrived at Arsia Station that they formally announced that Mars was seceding from the Pax Astra and that its colonies were declaring political independence.

This was the beginning of the great Martian immigration. Within a year, our world began receiving the first shiploads of refugees from the Pax. Most were New Ark loyalists who had quickly discovered that Monarchist democracy was restricted to those who supported the royal agenda, which mainly involved keeping itself in power and persecuting anyone who objected. Since the Moon was part of the Pax and life on Earth was intolerable to those who had been born in low-gee environments, Mars became their only sanctuary.

But we hadn't built a Statue of Liberty anywhere on our planet, and even Arsia Station was ill-equipped

to handle the dozens, then hundreds, of refugees—drybacks, you want to use the impolite term—who came to us during the long winter of m.y. 57. Human survival on Mars has always been a frail and precarious matter; even with mandatory water rationing and voluntary birth control, the six colonies were unable to support everyone from the Pax who wanted to move here. Ascension was reopened and West Bank relaxed its standards to admit non-Jewish immigrants; when their resources were exhausted, the colonies sent messages to the Pax pleading for it to stop sending more bodies our way. Yet the Monarchists turned a deaf ear to us; since Mars was no longer within the Queen's domain, it was a convenient dumping ground for its dissidents, low-lives, and criminals. When its escapees began to include people they wanted to keep to themselves, they revoked exit visas and began searching outbound vessels. But they couldn't stop everyone from leaving, and it was a rare week when the contrail of another lander wasn't spotted streaking across our pink skies.

Some of the newcomers came equipped to establish new settlements; this was how we got Nova America in the Solis Planum south of Arsia Station, Graceland in the Margaritifer northeast of New Chattanooga, and Thankgod up on southern edge of the Acidalia Plantia. Others arrived with little more than a second-rate skinsuit and a handful of useless Pax lox that the Mars colonies had stopped accepting as hard currency. They often came down in cramped landers stripped of all but the most essential hardware. Many arrived safely; one way or another, they managed to survive, even prosper. A few crashed in remote areas. Decades later, explorers were still finding their remains: sad and lonesome skeletons, desiccated by dust storms, half-buried within cold red drifts.

As the month of Taurus rolled around once more, Doc and I found little free time to prepare for Christmas Week. I had received paramedic training by then, so I could assist Doc when we flew out on a sortie; good thing, too, because Arsia General's resources were stretched to the limit. Besides the fact that many immigrants had sustained injuries during landing, just as many had become ill during their long flight from near-space. Radiation sickness, calcium deficiency, dysentery, bronchitis, malnutrition, Tibbet's disease, a half-dozen different strains of influenza ... you name it, they had it. We had already logged sixteen hundred hours aboard *Miss Thuvia* by Christmas, and were seldom seen in the bars at Arsia Station.

Yet just because the colonies were in crisis didn't mean that Sinterklass and Zwarte Piet got a break. Indeed, their presence was needed more than ever before; the children whom we had visited during our first tour were now teenagers and young adults, but their ranks had been filled by yet more kids, many of whom were toddlers born on Clarke County and the Moon. Uprooted from their homes by the Monarchist revolution, bewildered and frightened by their harsh new environment, some sick, most living in awful poverty, they needed Christmas just as much as they needed air, food, and medicine.

Our annual Christmas tour had become a major part of aresian life by now. The West Bank elders finally decided that a little gentile culture wasn't such a bad thing after all, so they allowed us to wear our costumes when we came to call, and since DaVinci's socialist government had crumbled a couple of years earlier, St. Nicholas and Black Peter were now welcome as the next stop after Viking. Along with the revived Ascension colony and three new settlements, the tour now had nine stops, not including our home port at Arsia Station.

This meant that Doc and I spent the entire holiday week on the road, sometimes making two stops a day. Fortunately, the older colonies had learned to not depend upon Arsia Station to make the holiday season for them; as well as offering room and board if we stayed overnight and refuel *Miss Thuvia* when she touched down, they began making gifts of their own for their neighbor settlements. Since *Miss Thuvia* has a limited payload capacity, and therefore couldn't haul thousands of kilos of Christmas presents from one settlement to another, a rather clever system of gift-giving had been devised: each colony gave presents to the next settlement on our route. Arsia Station gave to West Bank, West Bank to Wellstown,

Wellstown to Viking, Viking to DaVinci, and so forth. Every other year, Doc and I reversed the schedule so that DaVinci gave stuff to Viking, etc. And the gifts themselves ranged from the simple to the elaborate; West Bank made wonderful handcrafted dreidels that spun forever, Wellstown could be depended on to supply excellent wine, DaVinci distributed illustrated chapbooks of poetry and short stories, Viking's artists contributed tiny yet endlessly fascinating sand paintings, and Sagan's gliders could fly for almost a quarter-klick. And, of course, Arsia Station continued to send candy and small toys to every child who wanted one.

The new settlements were still too impoverished to spend the time or energy to making gifts of their own, though, so I sent email to representatives at each of the older colonies, telling them that Black Peter would be reserving a little extra cargo space aboard Sinterklass's magic dirigible for gifts to Ascension, Nova America, Graceland, and Thankgod. No one objected to the deviation from standard operating procedure, and we were promised extra goodies from everyone when *Miss Thuvia* lifted off from Arsia on Sag. 6.

For the past four years, the Christmas tour had been blessed with good flying weather. Our luck couldn't last forever, though; by the time we arrived at DaVinci, Marsnet had posted nowcasts of a severe dust storm developing in the Amazonis Plantia, due west of the Tharsis Montes range. West Bank, which we had left only eighteen hours earlier, was already reporting high winds. They warned us that *Miss Thuvia* wouldn't be able to handle the storm, and suggested that we deflate our craft and hunker down at DaVinci until the worst was over.

That might be good advice at any other time, but during Christmas Week it posed a real problem. Dust storms have been known to last for days or weeks, even months on certain historic occasions. If Doc and I chose to ride out the storm in DaVinci, we might be celebrating New Year's there. About two dozen immigrants in Thankgod were barely holding out in shelters little more sophisticated than those built by the First Landers; they were in dire need of the food, water, and medicine aboard *Miss Thuvia*. And we quietly regarded DaVinci was our least favorite of stopovers; we hadn't forgotten the snubbing we'd received during our first tour, and more than a few hard-line neocommies still hadn't warmed up to us.

We managed to get the station manager to loan us a long-range rover. It was about six hundred and fifty klicks from DaVinci to Thankgod, but since the rover burned methane/oxygen and carbon dioxide, it was capable of manufacturing its own fuel from the atmosphere and from recaptured water vapor from the condensers, and ditto for cabin air. Using the rover would be slower than taking the blimp, but flying *Miss Thuvia* in this sort of weather was out of the question. The rover had a top speed of seventy klicks per hour, so the round-trip to Thankgod would take about nineteen or twenty hours. If we budgeted two hours for our appearance at Thankgod and add two more as a fudge-factor, and with luck—there's that word again—we'd only lose a sol. Thus we figured the storm should blow itself out by the time we made it back to DaVinci; then we'd be able to reinflate the blimp and head for New Chattanooga.

The kids at the remaining colonies on our tour might have to wait a bit for their Christmas, but there were limits to even Sinterklass's magic. However, we had little doubt that we'd make it to Thankgod.

That's what we told ourselves. In hindsight, I think we were counting on miracles we hadn't earned.

* * * *

So Doc and I loaded our stuff into the rover and set out from DaVinci near the middle of the same sol. The wind was already rising from the west as we followed the line of compacted rover tracks away from the colony into the high country northeast of the Valles Marineris. We hadn't covered a hundred klicks before Doc had to switch on the windshield blowers.

Well, no problem. You've seen one dust storm, you've seen a dozen. I brewed some more coffee, then sacked out in the shotgun seat. When I woke up, my first thought was that I had overslept and that night had already fallen, until Doc told me that it was only late afternoon. The road had completely disappeared behind rippling curtains of red sand; despite the rover's lights, visibility had diminished to only a few meters ahead of the front bumper.

We were driving into the throat of the worst winter storm in ... well, forget the stats. It was nasty, and that's all there was to it.

Yet we weren't worried. Not really. We had a clear satellite fix on our location, so there was no real danger of getting lost out here. Although our ground speed had dropped to fifty klicks, the rover's six tandem wheels continued to move through the dense sand that scurried around us. We had air, we had hot coffee, we had Nashville music on the CD player; the howling wind buffeted the rover as if it was a boat on high seas, but it was Christmas, and we were Sinterklass and Zwarte Piet. We couldn't be stopped, storm or no storm.

I had just switched off with Doc, and he was rummaging through the food locker in search of cold rations which wouldn't taste too much like cardboard, when we received a microbeam transmission from Arsia Station. I thought it was just a courtesy call: the folks back home making sure we weren't in trouble. The reception was bad, and I was fumbling for a headset when Doc came forward and told me to keep my hands on the yoke, he'd take care of it.

I didn't catch most of it; my attention was focused on avoiding boulders and craters. Doc played the keys until he got a semi-clear channel, listened for a few minutes, scribbled some stuff on a pad, murmured a few words, then clicked off and turned to me.

“Problem.”

“Big or small?”

“Dunno. Phobos Station spotted a lander making atmospheric entry about a half-hour ago. Probably from a Pax freighter that made orbit earlier today. Arsia Traffic locked onto its transponder and followed it down until they lost it in the storm.”

“Where did it come down?” Then I shook my head. “Oh, no. I can guess this one...”

“Edge of the Acidalia, about a hundred and fifty klicks southeast of Thankgod.”

“Aw, for the love of...”

It figured this might happen, if only because it had happened before; the commander of a Pax refugee ship tried to drop his lander on one of the new colonies without first informing Arsia of his intentions. Pax Royal Intelligence, in an attempt to stop the hemorrhage of its best and brightest from Clarke County and the Moon, had recently begun spreading ugly rumors that we'd launch missiles at any immigrant ships arriving in aresian space. This played into the hands of freighter captains taking aboard drybacks as unlisted passengers; they'd load them aboard a lander, drop 'em near a new settlement, then swing around the planet, make a periapsis burn, and scoot for home before anyone was the wiser. The commander and his crew make out like bandits from the megalox they've taken from their desperate passengers; meanwhile, we're saddled with another dozen or so immigrants who didn't know they were being taken for a ride, both literally and figuratively.

Only in this case, the freighter captain had deposited his human cargo in the middle of a dust storm. Perhaps he wasn't fully aware of the ferocious nature of the Martian climate, but I couldn't bring myself to

give him to benefit of the doubt. More likely he knew that dead men don't tell tales, let alone disclose ship registry numbers.

I was still fuming about this while Doc played with the high-gain. "I've got something," he murmured after a few moments. "Weak, but it's there."

"Vox or transponder?"

"Transponder. You think we're going to get local vox through this crap?"

Good point. Unless the drybacks were bouncing signals off one of the satellites, they probably couldn't transmit anything through the storm. Landers that came down intact, though, were programmed to broadcast a shortwave distress signal as soon as they touched down, even if it was only a repeating Morse-code dit-dot-dit that could be received for hundreds of kilometers. "Mayday cast?" I asked, and Doc nodded without looking up. "Can you get a lock on it?"

Doc dickered with the keypad a little while longer before he spoke again. "Yeah, got it. I'm feeding the coordinates to your board."

A topo map appeared on the flat just above the yoke. The signal source was approximately hundred and fifty kilometers east-southeast of Thankgod, about forty clicks west of our beeline from the colony. Doc looked at me, I looked at him, and that was it. We didn't even discuss the matter; there was no question of whether or not we'd head for the crash site. We were Sinterklass and Zwarte Piet, but before that we were meds, and this is what we did, plain and simple.

"Pain in the ass," I murmured as I began punching the new coordinates into the nav system.

"Yeah. Kind of screws up Christmas, don't it?" Doc lurched out of his seat and headed aft again. "So what do you want? Cheese and tomato, ham and cheese, or turkey?"

* * * *

It was close to midnight when we located the downed lander.

One moment, it wasn't there; the next, it was in our high-beams, a gargantuan manta ray that had mysteriously been thrown across space and time. Its starboard landing skid had buckled during touchdown, so the craft listed sharply to one side, its right wing half-buried in the sand, the wind had driven dust into its engine intakes. The cockpit faced away from us, but there was a dim glimmer of light from within the main hatch porthole.

I halted the rover about ten meters away, and tried one last time to raise someone on the radio. As before, there was no answer, not surprising since the ship had sustained heavy damage during landing. I went aft and found that Doc had already suited up. Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to either of us to strip off all the Father Christmas stuff, but now we didn't have the time nor inclination. So we switched on the holiday lights so we could see each other better in the darkness. Doc raised his hood and picked up his medical bag, then we cycled through the airlock.

We made our way to the lander with our heads down, our arms raised to shield our faceplates against windblown silt and gravel. Glancing back, I could make out the rover only by its lamps. I doubted that anyone within the lander had heard our approach through the storm. If, indeed, there were any survivors.

Typical of Pax spacecraft, the airlock was only large enough to accommodate one person at a time. I went first; Doc waited outside while I closed the outer hatch. The light we'd seen outside came from an emergency lamp in the ceiling, but there was sufficient power in the back-up electrical system to allow me

to run the cycle-through routine. I went by the book, though, and didn't unlatch my helmet even after the green light appeared above the inner hatch.

For a moment, there was only darkness when I pushed open the hatch. Then a half-dozen flashlight beams swung my way, and muffled voices cascaded from the gloom:

“...opening! Look, the hatch...!”

“...the hell, where did he come...?”

“...it's a man! Daddy, there's a man in...!”

“...everyone, stand back! Get back from the...!”

“It's okay. Everything's all right!” I raised a hand against the sudden glare. “I'm from Arisia Station! I'm here to rescue you!”

They couldn't hear me, of course; they were all shouting at once, and my voice didn't carry well through the closed helmet. Yet there were at least a dozen people in here, shadows backlit by flashlight beams. Moving awkwardly against the sloped deck, I stepped the rest of the way out of the airlock, then turned to close the hatch behind me.

Something slammed against my shoulder, hard enough to make me lose my balance. I collapsed against the airlock hatch. It fell into place, then a hand grabbed my shoulder and twisted me around, shoving me back against the portal.

“Don't move!” a voice yelled at me. “Keep your hands where I can see 'em!”

“Hey, cut it out!” I yelled back. “I'm just trying to...!”

There's nothing like having a gun shoved in your face to kill conversation. Even in the dim light, I could make out the maw of a Royal Militia blaster, a miniature particle-beam cannon capable of ending all debate over my hat size.

The guy holding it didn't look too pleasant, either: a large gent with a selenian helmet tan, his dark eyes narrowed with rage. His breath fogged my faceplate—it must be pretty cold in here for it to do that—but above the heavy sweater he wore was a blue uniform jacket. Its epaulets told me it was from the Pax Astra Royal Navy. I had a hunch that it wasn't military surplus.

“Kyle, cut it out!” A woman's voice somewhere behind the ring of flashlights. “Can't you see he's...?”

“Shut up, Marcie.” Kyle let go of me and backed away a few centimeters, but kept his weapon trained on my face. “Okay, Mars boy, I.D. yourself.”

I took a deep breath. “Look, calm down, okay? Don't shoot. I'm not here to...”

“Jeez, lieutenant, let him take off his helmet.” This from another man elsewhere in the compartment.

“How can you hear him?”

“Kyle...” Marcie said.

“Everyone shut up!” Kyle braced his feet against the deck. “Okay, open up ... slowly.”

“Okay, all right. Take it easy.” I slowly moved my hands to my suit collar, began unlatching the ring. I heard a child crying from somewhere in the darkness.

I was getting a bad feeling about my friend Kyle. If he was a former PARN officer, then he was doubtless a deserter. Worse, he had most likely heard the Pax agitprop that aresians are cannibals who raid dryback landers. My Christmas gear didn't help matters much; it wasn't your usual standard-issue skinsuit, so to him I probably looked like the Martian equivalent of a wild native wearing a grass skirt and a shrunken head. The man was desperate and afraid, and hiding his fear behind a gun.

“Look,” I said once I had removed my helmet, “you're not in any danger, I promise you. We're a med team from Arsia Station. Our rover's just outside. We picked up your transponder signal and...”

“There's more than one of you?” His eyes flickered to the hatch behind me. “How many are out there?”

Great. Now he thought he was surrounded. “Just one other guy. I promise you, we're not armed. Please, just put down the gun and we can see about getting you out of this jam, okay?”

“Kyle, would you listen to him?” The woman who had spoken before, Marcie, stepped a little closer. Now I saw that her neck was wrapped in thick swatches of torn fabric. A crude neck brace; she probably suffered whiplash during the crash. “He doesn't mean us any harm, and we're...”

“Dammit, Marcie, did you hear what he just said? Nobody drives from Arsia Station in a rover. If there was going to be rescue mission, why didn't it come from Thankgod?” Kyle's gun didn't budge an millimeter. “I'm not about to take this guy at his word. He's just going to have to...”

Whatever Kyle was about to propose that I do—I suspect it wasn't pleasant—it was forgotten when the hatch suddenly clunked.

Everyone heard the sound. They froze, staring past me. I felt the hatch nudge my back, and I automatically moved aside before I realized what I was doing.

“Doc,” I yelled, “don't come in!”

“Shut up!” Kyle shifted his gun first to cover me, then aimed it at the hatch. “You there, listen up! I've got a gun on your pal, so you'd better stop right ...!”

“Ho, ho, ho! Mer-r-r-ry Christmas! Mer-r-r-r-r-ry Christmas!”

Then the hatch was pushed fully open, and in walked Sinterklass.

Doc had removed his helmet and had lowered his hood. In the darkness of the cabin, the lights of his suit glowed like a childhood fantasy. Motes of dust swirled from his red cape and caught in his long white beard like flakes of fresh-fallen snow.

“Mer-r-r-r-ry Christmas!” he bellowed again, and gave another jolly laugh.

In that instant, he was no longer Doc Spanjaard. He had become every holiday legend. Sinterklass, St. Nicholas, Father Christmas...

“Santa!”

The little girl I had heard earlier bolted from the gloom. Before Kyle or Marcie or anyone else could grab her, she rushed across the dark cabin.

“It's Santa Claus!” she screamed. “Santa's on Mars! Mama, you were right! There's a Santa Claus on Mars!”

As Doc bent to catch her in his arms, I heard another child call out, then another, and suddenly two more

kids darted past the legs of the bewildered adults surrounding us. They were all over Doc before anyone could stop them, least of all Kyle, who suddenly didn't seem to know what to do with the gun in his hands, and Doc was laughing so hard that I thought he was going to lose his balance and fall back into the airlock with three children on top of him, and everyone else was yelling in relieved surprise...

Then Marcie turned to Kyle, who stood in gape-jawed confusion, his blaster now half-raised toward the ceiling so that it wasn't pointed at any of the kids.

“So what are you going to do?” she murmured. “Be the guy who shot Santa Claus?”

He stared at Doc, then at me. “But it isn't Christmas yet.”

“Welcome to Mars,” I said quietly. “We do things a little different here.”

He nodded, then put the gun away.

* * * *

And that was our Christmas miracle.

We dispensed some food from the lander; the three children were handed toys from Doc's sack and the adults were given two bottles of wine. Doc spent a couple of hours treating injuries while I went back to the rover and radioed both Thankgod and Arsia to tell them that we had located the lander. Arsia informed me that the storm was ebbing in our region and that DaVinci had already volunteered to send out a couple of rovers to pick up the new arrivals. I relayed the news to Kyle, whom I learned was their leader; he couldn't look me straight in the eye when he tendered an apology for his behavior, but I accepted it anyway.

By the time Doc and I left the crash site, the first light of dawn was appearing on the eastern horizon; it might be mid-summer back on Earth, but here it was the third sol of Christmas. Peace on Mars, good will towards men.

We completed that long, hard tour, and returned to Arsia Station only a little later than usual. Once I had put *Miss Thuvia* to bed, Doc and I decompressed in the Mars Hotel. For the first time since we had started this little homecoming ritual, we allowed ourselves to get drunk. No wonder Doc rarely got blotto; he didn't hold his liquor very well. He sang dirty songs and made jokes no one understood; it's a good thing no children were present, because he would have ruined Christmas for them forever. The last I saw of him that night, he was being helped out of the bar by two of his girlfriends, neither of whom seemed likely to let him quietly pass out before they gave him the mistletoe treatment.

We made eight more Christmas tours before I retired from service. By then I was married and running AeroMars; my wife and business partners didn't want me leaving Arsia Station for several sols each year to haul candy and toys to distant settlements. Nor was it necessary for me to play Black Peter any longer; now there were nineteen self-sustaining colonies scattered across the planet, and nearly every one of them had their own homemade Sinterklass and Zwarte Piet costumes.

Doc, though, continued to play his role every year, if only to take a rover out to nearby settlements. He was the first and best Sinterklass on Mars, and everyone wanted to see him; he relished the job, and continued it long after he set up a private practice at Arsia. Toys and candy for all the children, wine for the adults, and a different Zwarte Piet everywhere he went. It was what he did, period. And whenever he came home, we got together for drinks and small talk.

Twelve years after we made the Acidalia rescue mission, though, Doc didn't come back to the bar. He

went out alone to Ascension during another dust storm and ... well, vanished. No final transmissions, and no one ever found his vehicle. He simply disappeared, just like that.

I miss Doc, but I think this is an appropriate way to go. Mars is full of mystery; so is Christmas, or at least it should be. The holiday got ruined on Earth because everything wonderful about it was gradually eroded, the magic sucked away. Out here, though, we've got a great Christmas, and a patron saint all our own.

He lives in the caldera of Olympus Mons.