



# The Santa

Bob Freeman

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It's time for the Holidays, celebrate 'The-Santa' on an Asteroid.

Another couple of cycles, and there was no work listed on the job tablets. Ponos was used to hard physical work and was poor at social interactions, so becoming a sales clerk was entirely out of his skill set. Sure, it was the holidays, and everyone was celebrating the change of seasons on Earth and waiting for *The Santa*. This is something Ponos barely understood. Here he was on a tiny rock, a world with no weather and millions of kilometers from the large, wet, seasonal Core planet, yet everyone was going crazy for a winter holiday. He knew winter was considered a cold season, and the asteroids had a  $-70^{\circ}\text{C}$  cold which Earth seldom sees. Try as he might, he couldn't quite make the connection.

The sentients; human, simian, canine, and octopus, celebrated with poles covered in green and silver trim, decorated with shiny baubles, and the exchange of gifts. He was told this was traditional, although he didn't know what tradition it represented. Those not from Earth or even a human species were happy to join the celebrations. Anything leading to food and gifts was all most of the sentients required.

Ponos had no problem with the concept of giving and receiving gifts, but after all of the cycles marking his stay on the chondrite asteroid Caerus, he still had no close friends. There was no one he felt comfortable exchanging this type of commitment. Gift-giving implied mutual support, and except for Cie, he didn't communicate with many of his compatriots. It took all of his efforts to find jobs to pay for rent, food, air, and waste handling.

He was on nodding friendship with many, but hardly anyone had his experience as a hard metal miner on this chondrite and had little basis for a closer relationship. It only made him more determined to find a berth on a Solar Sail ship to broaden his horizons. In the back of his mind, he considered heading toward the Core to see about this 'gravity' thing everyone kept mentioning.

Those few sentients who had been there and back had stories about bright colors, incredible moisture, odors, and foods that had to be experienced to be believed. There were a few horror stories about the crushing pull of the iron core, making movement difficult and frequently painful, but Ponos wasn't concerned about it. He was solid and strong and doubted a little gravity would cause him any problems. Maybe his asteroid mining skills could be parlayed into a mining job. After all, how different could it be to attack rocks in space vs. Earth? The only

mined minerals from Earth he knew about were coal and uranium, and he was a little afraid of an element able to glow in the dark all by itself. He had no idea how these little pieces of the sun were dug from the ground, but he would work with it, if he had to.

Work had slowed down during *The Santa* season. Ponos had no idea why there was no work matching his *curriculum vitae*, but he knew all the drinking, merry-making, and gifting distracted the sentients from their regular work. Ponos had no problem with happiness, although he didn't understand why parties were more important than work. Undoubtedly his need to work conflicted with the need to party by the more entertainment-denizens, especially the chimpanzees, where any excuse to party was a good one.

Cie, his savior, stocky with long, strong arms and red fur, extended credit to help him over the rough times between gigs. Cie's shop was next to the refreshment stand, and he was Ponos' landlord, mentor, and friend. They were able to build, a bond from experiences and hardship that transcended their species.

Credit, even from a compadre, was only good for so long. It could easily become a millstone if mishandled. Ponos scrolled the bioGel job tablets looking for another job at every opportunity. One job kept coming up, but it never seemed to be filled. It was a clean-up job at the asteroid's core, where the nuclear engine pumped out its heat and power.

Ponos was finally desperate enough to click on the link and, to his dismay, was immediately accepted. A bright, glowing golden acceptance code was delivered to his comm. He wasn't sure if this was a good sign or a warning, but he needed the job and the  $\Xi$ Standards it would return. Dangerous jobs always paid more, and this one looked like a real corker. It would get him out of his debt to Cie and maybe a chance to purchase a bauble and participate in the festivities.

There was a secret gift exchange as part of *The Santa*, but without spare  $\Xi$ Standards it was not an option for him. Knitting a scarf would be a great gift, but he didn't have any yarn. And he didn't know how to knit. He did have a small need to be part of the festivities, although he didn't need some unknown piece of junk from a random stranger tying him down. It was the thought that counted, or so he heard.

The new job started at the beginning of his day cycle and required his full spacesuit and an air bottle. It did not specify a full bottle, so he did his usual trick of bringing an empty one, figuring the job site would have an access port and he could fill it there. This was another warning to Ponos that the work would not be easy or safe since outside gear was an unusual requirement for a job not on the surface. To be sure, he double-covered the holes in his suit with speed tape and checked the fittings on the helmet. This would be interesting.

Ponos suited up and headed to the commissary for his morning algae-coffee. He checked his finances, and it looked like he had enough for a dose of caffeine and maybe a little heat for the brew. He greeted Cie as he found his usual seat near his food stand. After airy greetings, he began with, "I'm off for a new job. It should pay enough to clear any debts in arrears."

Cie raised an eyebrow, his sign of interest. "Well, that could make for a happy *Santa* cycle, and you could join the gift exchange. I'm not concerned for our debts, I know you are good for it."

Ponos, again reminded about the upcoming holiday, said, "Yes, this job seems to be an opportunity to get ahead in a short time."

He finished the A-coffee, nodded to Cie, and ended the gossip session with a formal goodbye. "My Air is Your Air. I have to catch a pod to the core."

Cie raised a different eyebrow; he knew what was in the core and the danger it entailed. Was he concerned for a friend or his rental? He didn't say but tossed Ponos a few algal appetite suppressant nubs, or as he called them, 'Food.' "Here you go. This should help you keep your strength up during the job."

Ponos thanked Cie for the nutrients. "Yes, this should help with my appetite," as he headed for the pod booth. He thought *I hope lunch is included in the job offer. I forgot to check.*

The pod halted at a large, heavy door emblazoned with the Ionizing Radiation Hazard emblem. The trefoil ☛ symbol has not changed from the before-years of 1946 and was universally recognized.

As usual, the huge double doors were not for him, and a flash of his comm to the guard sentient opened up a pass-thru door. He met his boss, standing impatiently with a bioGel pad in his hand. Ponos was not late but right on time, as always. An irritated boss was not a great start to this job, but Ponos had been through this routine before and would do it again. Standard greetings were called for as Ponos bowed slightly and said, "My Air is Your Air."

The only response could be "My Air is Your Air" from the boss. This set them up as almost equals, and Ponos quickly followed up with, "What are my job duties, Jefe?"

Using the title seemed to agree with the Jefe, and he calmed down, handing Ponos his punch list for the cycle.

Jefe opened a box and drew out four dosimeters. "Place one on each arm, the front of the suit, and I'll attach the last one to the back." This seemed excessive to Ponos, but it certainly got his concerns raised.

The Jefe continued, "If your dosage gets too high, we'll pull you out for the cycle, and you can come back later."

Nothing in those instructions eased his concerns, quite the opposite.

Jeff finished his instructions. "Fill up your air bottle at this port; it doesn't count against your allotment. Free air for the day."

Ponos let a small smile pass his stern countenance, *Well, air is something else I could exchange with Cie, as long as I made it out alive and the bottle doesn't glow.*

Being of short stature could be advantageous here; maybe he could duck below the ionization flow and not be damaged, although he was glad he'd already had a kid, wherever he was.

The Jefe came up to Ponos. "I see you were a miner. Did you handle the remote drills and jackhammers?"

Ponos answered in the affirmative and entered the control capsule. The controls were much like those in the drilling mosquito he'd used as a miner. All modern hardware interfaced with personal comms and had virtually the same design.

He took a few moments to become familiar with the machine, sending the arms up, down, and around. The claws were new for him but easily became an extension of his hands, once he got used to the action. Ponos walked the capsule to the reactor and read his comm. It told him which graphite rod was expended and slated for removal. He carefully picked them up one at a time and placed them in the rock and lead storage container. As each one was removed, a second worker fed a new graphite rod into the empty spot. They continued this game of tic-tack-toe until all of the rods were replaced. This took all of a full cycle, and it was time to check out.

Ponos dosimeters never pinged back to the bioGel control tablet, so he was either below the threshold of contamination, the probes were broken, or the bosses were lying to him. He preferred to believe the first one and gladly received his pay to his comm.

The  $\Xi$ Standards were above his expectations but made sense since there was no bonus treats like on the farm or chemistry labs. This was enough to pay back Cie and tuck away for future use.

There was work for another three full cycles; each quadrant of the reactor had to be updated, one after another. Ponos and his work partner, a young orangutan, were happy to come back; the pay was great. As long as they didn't spontaneously explode or become luminous, they were willing to continue the work.

Like all gig work on this floating rock, nothing lasted forever, and the rods would not need replacement for at least a couple of EarthYears. Ponos ended the last shift, richer than when he started, but still wanting more work to build up a nest egg.

Ponos liked the pay from the reactor work, but the danger level was a bit much, even for him. He couldn't wait another two years for the work to appear again. Checking the job bioGel a bit too often, he found a job topside this time, but it didn't start until after the festivities.

It was time for FirstMeal and Ponos sat in his seat at the algal-coffee shop, ready for a little caffeine, snacks, and gossip. Cie brought some of his undigestible algal nuggets for snacks. Ponos sipped the warm green liquid, enjoying the silence of a shared space. "This is my first time celebrating such a festival."

"I think you'll enjoy it," said Cie. "Everyone goes all out. Food, song, drink and gifts. A regular party."

"Please don't think I'm a rube, straight from an asteroid mine, but what are the protocols and expectations of the party?"

"Just have fun, you know what it is? Don't you?"

"Of course, I haven't worked away my whole life, we had fun at the mines."

"Great, bring a gift, fancy dress, and your fun skills."

"I don't own a dress and have little experience in gift buying."

"Not to worry, your spacesuit is considered fancy enough."

Cie, never one to leave a sale on the table, offered, "I have a fine selection of gifts for *The Santa* if you want to join in the exchange."

"Yes, that would be fine, please pick out something suitable."

"Consider it done, drop by the shop before the party, it will be wrapped and ready."

Ponos went back to his rock cubby-hole and inspected his suit, trying to ignore the rips and discoloration *If it is a party, I should shine this old space suit up.*

Ponos stepped out and saw his reflection in a hallway porthole. *Hope this is dressy enough. It's the best I can do.* The two companions entered the party. Earth, asteroid, and Jupiter tunes echoed in the room as the DJ's played their customized bioGels. Tables ran across the walls, bulbs of drinks and sealed food packets were everywhere. "Here, place your present in *The Santa's* sack."

A boarding net held the gifts for all to see, tied with colorful ribbons.

There were more than a few in the hall who noted where each gift was and who dropped it in. Calculations were carefully designed to ensure capture of the best present.

"How does the exchange work? I don't want to get my own gift back, that would be unseemly."

"Don't worry, it has your name on it, if you find it, toss it back. The distribution is easy, all the gifts are set in motion and at the sound of a gong, the cover falls off and they spin around the room. Grab something that isn't yours."

Cie checked out the centerpiece. "Look at that!" he exclaimed, "a real wooden stick, someone had  $\Xi$ Standards to burn. It looks like a real tree, if you squint real hard."

"Do you think it came from Earth?"

"It had to, any trees grown in space are mushy, their internal lignin structure is too weak to become sticks."

"Do you miss trees and your jungle life?"

Cie thought about his youth, deep within the jungle before he signed up for an outer space gig. He sighed, "we all make our choices. I don't regret life on this asteroid. Look at all the special friends I've made."

Ponos knew Cie was a central figure in the underground economy and had a fair amount of power. Everyone on this asteroid was either a transactional friend or a business associate.

Ponos changed the subject. "Look. *The Santa* exchange is about to start."

The octopuses were using their multi-talented arms to set the bag of presents spinning. As one, they undid the restraining ribbons and gifts spin around the room. Timing and location are everything for the sentients interested in grabbing the best prize. Cie and Ponos stand aside from the melee and wait for a gift to find them.

Ponos's gift was a yellow tube with a pretty bow, Cie had a box.

"Open it, Cie. Let's see what you got."

"You too. On three. We'll both tear into it."

"Three!"

"Just what I needed, a brush and comb set."

"I got a hand-knitted scarf, who would have guessed?"

*The Santa* always knows. Good, bad, human, simian, canine or octopus.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

BOB FREEMAN graduated from Humboldt State University, California after flunking out of UCLA from spending too much time in Yosemite. He continued the education scheme by taking 4 years for a 2 year Master program studying Anaerobic bacteria digesting Lignin. Forced to work for a living he spent 18 years in the Imperial Valley, as a Public Health Microbiologist/Lab Director, with emphasis on border Tuberculosis and all the other nasties that seem to interact with humans, bats, and dogs (We're talking Rabies). He went on to develop and program a Laboratory Information System software for Public Health Labs.

After years of writing protocols, procedures and instructional manuals, he started writing science fiction in 2019.