

# O Tannen Bomb

by Dave Schroeder

*A Galactic Free Trade Association Short Story*

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Jannosh did *not* look comfortable in his Santa suit. His face was redder than usual and his long white beard tentacles were writhing in agitation.

“Hee hee hee,” he said.

“Try again,” said Jeanette.

“Hah hah hah,” said Jannosh.

“Make your lips rounder,” Jeanette encouraged.

“Hoo hoo hoo,” Jannosh said, without much enthusiasm.

“Come on,” said Elizabeth, Jeanette’s younger sister. “You did it right last April.”

“Let me help,” said A.J., Jeanette and Elizabeth’s younger brother.

Anthony Junior was six, Elizabeth was eight, and Jeanette—the bossy sibling—was ten. Jannosh was a Nicósn. He’d been one of the three aliens in the delegation that had invited Earth to join the Galactic Free Trade Association on April Fools’ Day, 2015.

A.J. moved to stand in front of Jannosh and raised his hands to the area below the Nicósn’s chest that corresponded to a human’s diaphragm.

“One more time,” said A.J.

“HO HO HO!” said Jannosh in a perfect imitation of Santa Claus, assisted by A.J.’s palms pressing most of the Terran boy’s fifty-seven pounds into the alien’s abdomen.

“Isn’t Jannosh a little scrawny to play Santa?” asked Murriym, a seven-foot tall ectomorphic feline-like alien.

“Look who’s talking,” said Jannosh. “You’re nearly invisible when viewed from the side.”

“I am perfectly within the normal height and weight parameters for my species,” Murriym asserted with a smile that revealed a mouthful of pointed teeth.

“Would this help?” asked Chuck the Pyr. He was carrying a fat feather pillow half as large as he was as he flowed over to join them on his thousands of mobility cilia.

“Yay!” said Anthony Junior.

“Stand still,” ordered Jeanette.

“I’ll hold his coat out,” said Elizabeth.

“I’ve got the pillow,” said A.J. Chuck was looking a bit disconcerted after Anthony Junior pulled the pillow out of his manipulating tentacles, but he now had almost nine months of experience with the Obi-Yu children and took A.J.’s enthusiasm in stride, if that was an acceptable metaphor for an alien that didn’t have legs.

A.J. held the pillow in two hands and repeated his *Ho-Ho-Ho* maneuver with the pillow, pushing it up and under the jacket of Jannosh's red Santa suit. The Nicósn let out an *ooph* instead a *ho* as the pillow was forced into place. The children fussed over Jannosh for a few minutes, tightening his costume's wide black belt, adjusting his cap—which fit nicely over the Nicósn's somewhat conical head—and smoothing out the pillow so his Santa-belly was symmetric.

“What am I supposed to do again?” asked Jannosh.

“Walk on stage and say ‘Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas!’” said Jeanette. “Then sit on Santa's throne and smile.”

The Nicósn turned his head to one side as if he was thinking, then spoke.

“I can do that,” he said.

“Try to stay calm when you're doing it,” said Elizabeth. “If your beard tentacles are squirming, it could upset the kids.”

“Be tranquil, my friend,” said Murriym. “Contemplate your insignificance compared to the vast depths of the universe. That always works for me.”

It was clear from the expression on Jannosh's face that the Tigrammath's advice wasn't working.

“We've got a costume for you, too,” Elizabeth informed Murriym.

“That won't be necessary,” said Murriym. Her fur was starting to bristle.

“Contemplate your insignificance,” teased Jannosh.

“Shut up,” said Murriym.

“Don't be a baby,” said Jeanette, “and bend down.”

Murriym bowed to the inevitable and bent her body almost double. Elizabeth fitted a cute, green, triangular Robin Hood-style cap with a red feather on the tall alien's head. It rode just above Murriym's pointed ears and matched the hats the siblings were wearing. The Tigrammath stood back up, looking none too happy.

“What am I supposed to be?” she asked.

“The galaxy's tallest elf,” said A.J.

“Right,” said Murriym, shaking her head.

“What can *I* be?” asked Chuck.

“A gopher,” said Jeanette.

“But I don't look anything like a burrowing rodent,” said Chuck, sounding a bit sad.

“No, silly,” said Jeanette. “You can run errands and go for the bag of toys.”

“Oh,” said Chuck. Then he got it and said, “Oh!” again in a much happier voice.

In ten minutes, two hundred orphaned children would be entering the hall for a holiday party sponsored by GalCon Systems, the startup company recently launched by Jeanette,

Elizabeth and Anthony Junior's parents and George Crispos, the former top assistant to the chairman of JPMorganChase.

The siblings and their three alien companions were in a small antechamber behind the hall's stage while George and their parents greeted—and herded—their guests.

"Why is there wrapping paper on the floor?" asked Elizabeth.

She looked pointedly at her little brother.

"It felt like one of Mom and Dad's new *My First Congruency* kits and I wanted to check it out," said A.J. "I had an idea for something cool for the party and needed the kit."

Congruencies—wormholes connecting two points in space—were discovered by Janet Yu, Jeanette, Elizabeth, and A.J.'s mother. Janet's discovery had led to Earth's invitation to join the Galactic Free Trade Association. GalCon Systems was building telecommunications hardware to connect Earth with the rest of the galaxy, and had released the *My First Congruency* kits to introduce children—and their parents—to the new technology in a friendly, non-threatening way.

"What did you do?" asked Jeanette in a voice that sounded a lot like her mother's.

"I tweaked a congruency to shine more light on the Christmas tree," said her little brother. "It was looking a little dim."

"You're a little dim," said Jeanette.

"Be nice," said Elizabeth.

Chuck rubbed two of his tentacles together anxiously. He didn't like it when his young friends fought. Jannosh's beard tentacles were writhing and Murriym's ears were flicking nervously. She was anything but serene. Then a loud *pop* and a muffled *whoosh* came from the other side of the door to the stage.

Jeanette opened the door and saw that the elaborately decorated natural Christmas tree displayed at stage right was now a spindly, blackened skeleton of its former self. The aliens and the rest of the siblings crowded in behind Jeanette and witnessed the remains of the tree collapsing into a pile of fine dust, like a mound of laser printer toner. A gold star from the top of the tree fell into the pile and raised a puff of dark powder.

"Oops," said A.J.

"You idiot," said Jeanette, turning to confront her little brother. "You must have linked to an *exploding* star."

"Way to go," said Elizabeth. "You just set off a bomb—a *nova* bomb. Mom and Dad are going to kill you. They want to show the world that congruencies are *safe*—and you blew it."

"Sorry," said A.J. "I thought it would make the tree brighter."

"Instead," said Jeanette, "you demonstrated that *you're* not that bright."

Jeanette looked like she was winding up to deliver a spectacular tongue-lashing to A.J., but Murriym headed her off.

"I'm sure your parents will take appropriate actions to chastise Anthony Junior shortly," said the Tigrammath. "In the meantime, what are we going to do about the current situation?"

"Yeah," said Elizabeth. "We've got to have a Christmas tree."

"A.J. and I will clean up the remains of the nova-bombed tree," said Jannosh. "After all, if I get a bit of charcoal on my face and suit, our guests will simply think I got it climbing down chimneys. Come along, Anthony. We need to find a broom and dustpan."

The Nicósn and the boy walked through the door to the stage to look for what they needed in the wings. Theatres always had brooms backstage. A.J. moved slowly, with his head down.

"Is there another Christmas tree around we can move on stage?" asked Elizabeth.

"Just the thirty-footer in the lobby," said Jeanette, "and it's not going anywhere."

"I may be able to be of assistance," said Chuck. "Did you know Pyrs have chromatophores?"

"You can change *color*?" asked Elizabeth. "Like octopuses?"

"Octopi," said Jeanette.

"*Octopodes*, if you're going to be *that way*," Elizabeth rejoined.

"Yes," said Chuck. "We *can* change color. It's a vestigial defense mechanism."

He rapidly shifted his normally putty-colored skin through all the colors of the spectrum in order from red to violet. Then Chuck went through the sequence again, stopping on a vibrant green. His three-sided pyramidal form looked remarkably like a small Christmas tree. He even created the illusion of ornaments by selectively changing circular patches of his skin to look red and silver and blue.

"Does this work?" Chuck asked.

"It *does!*" exclaimed Elizabeth. "You're the cutest little tree! People will think we planned it this way all along."

"Maybe," said Jeanette, "but he's not very tall. He's going to be hard to see from the audience."

"I'll look for something to help with that backstage," said Murriym. "There may be bits of scenery or a table that would get Chuck higher."

"I'll come with you," said Elizabeth. "We've got to hurry. They'll be opening the hall doors soon."

The three-foot height difference between them made the alien and the eight-year-old girl an incongruous pair as they stepped on stage.

"Thank you," said Jeanette.

She was a few inches taller than Chuck and had to lean down to hug the little Pyr. Chuck and his chromatophores shifted to red for a few seconds before returning to green.

"You've saved Christmas," said Jeanette.

"Now you're being melodramatic," said Chuck, "though I will take credit for saving GalCon Systems' reputation."

“And maybe A.J.’s life,” joked Jeanette. “Mom and dad really might have killed him if he’d screwed up their public relations campaign for congruencies.”

“I’m sure your parents value their children’s lives and well-being more than they do their company’s success,” said Chuck.

“Perhaps so,” said Jeanette, “but I’m glad they don’t have to make that decision *today*. Let’s get you up on a pedestal.”

Jeanette walked on stage and Chuck glided behind her using his mobility cilia.

Jannosh and A.J. had cleaned up the remains of the old tree and Murriym and Elizabeth had located a collection of two-foot black plywood cubes that were common elements for dozens of stage sets. They’d built them up into a pyramid at stage right.

A.J. clapped and Jannosh smiled when they saw Chuck’s unique take on a Christmas tree. Jannosh and Murriym helped lift Chuck to the top of the stack of cubes. Climbing is not a core competency for Pyrs as a species.

“He needs one more thing,” said A.J. “Just a second.”

The boy raced off into the wings and came back at double-time, clutching something shiny to his chest.

“Here,” he said. He held out the gold star from the top of the original tree.

“Perfect,” said Jeanette. She nodded at Murriym.

The tall Tigrammath picked up A.J. and ascended to the bottom level of cubes. Then she lifted the boy up so he could place the gold star on top of Chuck’s head. Chuck used one of his tentacles that couldn’t be seen from the audience to keep the star in place.

A door at the back of the hall opened a crack and Janet Yu peeked in.

“Is everything ready?” she asked.

“Yes, Mom,” said Jeanette.

“Great,” said Janet. “Looking good, Chuck,” she said, nodding to the Pyr.

Then the doors opened and orphaned children began pouring in.

“Wait until I tell Mom and Dad about what you did,” said Jeanette to A.J.

“Instead of tattling on me, why don’t you send me on an errand instead?” asked A.J.

“Errand? What errand?” asked Jeanette.

“I think he wants to be a gopher,” said Elizabeth.

“Uh huh,” said A.J.

“Oh crap,” said Jeanette. “Go get the bag of toys—and hurry.”

“I hear and obey, my exalted sister,” said A.J., dashing away.

“Ho ho ho,” said Jannosh. “Merry Christmas!”

From atop his pedestal, Chuck began singing *O Tannenbaum*.