

A Fritzmas Carol

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Before reading this, we recommend viewing the brief video at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W9V9SZPHAY>
to put yourself in the proper frame of mind.

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In a cozy little Enclave hidden at the heart of the deep Dry, the self-appointed Lord and Master of all Integrates, the Head Honcho, the Lama, the Bosscat, Fritz lounged on his throne, one leg tossed over one of its arms, an arm dangling over the other, a jaunty beret pulled down over his eyes. Somewhere off in the distance, one of his underlings read nonsensical free verse into an open mic while a bass player strummed tunelessly. It was all rather lame, and Fritz had half a mind to go over there and break the bass over the alleged poet's head and solve both problems at once. But Fritz had come to the conclusion that beat poetry was actually *supposed* to be lame, and the whole reason he had it going on in the first place was for the ambience.

Life was hard being the bosscat. Just today, he'd had to put a stop to another bunch of Inties trying to sneak back off their reservation and high-tail it back to the "real world." "But it's Christmas Eve, bosscat!" their leader, an anthropomorphic boar named Pratchett insisted. "We just

want to visit our families one last time! We'll come right back, honest!"

"Ixnay on the isit-vay," Fritz had said, with his best glower. "I know you don't like it, but there's good reasons we keep you stuck out here. So scram back to the Towers a'ready, and don't let me catch you tryin' to beat feet again."

Sullenly, they'd complied. Fritz followed them all the way back to their Enclave to be sure they went, before returning to his own Coffeehouse. "Bastards," Fritz muttered again. "Don't they know *I* know what's best for them?"

"Do you, *Felix?*" said a voice Fritz hadn't heard in a long time. Fritz went bolt upright, the fur on the back of his neck standing up straight. He tore the beret from his face and stared straight up into the face of someone who was supposed to be dead. *Was* dead.

Fritz stared. "F-Frank?" He gazed up into the face of a lynx not unlike he had once been. This lynx was still a feral-form animal. It was also charred and scorched all over, and was also clearly transparent. "But--"

"But you killed me? Yeah," Frank said, pausing to groom himself. A few flakes of transparent ash fell off and vanished. "I got over it. I'm here to tell you to mend your ways, or you'll end up like me. Dead, and cursed to wander around all see-through like a bad hologram. Forever."

Fritz snorted. "All right, who's the joker that thought this would be a funny joke. I'll rip his damn pelt off."

"No joke, 'Fritzie,'" Frank said. "You gotta clean up your act. So, you're gonna have three more 'guests' tonight. They're gonna show you what you're doing wrong,

and how you'll end up if you keep doing what you're doing."

"Yeah, right," Fritz growled. "For all I know, you're just a blob of rancid sarium from my last battery upgrade. Nice try, who- or whatever you are."

Frank shrugged. "Well, it was worth a shot. Anyway, don't get too comfy, O Bosscat. And you might want to tidy up a little. After all, you're gonna have more company before too long. Ciao!" The lynx licked a paw, and faded away.

Fritz rubbed his eyes, shook his head, and growled. He grabbed the beret and jammed it back on his head. "Can't a cat get any damn peace and quiet around here? Sheesh."

He must have drifted off, for the next time he opened his eyes the joint was dark and quiet. Fritz blinked a couple of times, pushed the beret back up on his head...and nearly jumped out of his skin at the apparition standing in front of him. "Gah!" Another transparent ghostly figure, this one wore Nextus military fatigues with captain's logos on the collar, and had a face Fritz hadn't seen for a couple of decades--since the person in question had been locked away in a big metal box in the back of his mind for all the time since. "What."

"Hello, Fritz," Captain David Ryder said. "Long time, no see."

Fritz stared at him. "How'd you get outta your box, man?"

"I didn't. You're hallucinating," Ryder said.

"Oh, like that makes me feel better," Fritz said.

"Anyway, you should have been told you were getting

three visitors tonight,” Ryder continued. “That makes me your Ghost of Christmas Past.”

Fritz blinked. “Wait...what? You mean we’re doing a *parody* here? Aw man, tell me we’re not doing a parody!”

Ryder rolled his eyes. “Don’t go off-script, this is live.”

“All right, fine,” Fritz growled. “Show me whatever the hell you got to show me. Then am-scray.”

“You know, I feel like watching some TV,” Ryder said. “I haven’t been out of your head for I don’t know how long. Got any popcorn around here?”

“Nah, man, you better not,” Fritz said. “That stuff would go right through you.”

Ryder gestured, and a rimshot sounded. “The bosscat, ladies and germs. He’ll be here all night. Don’t expect to get a slot on Ed Sullivan.”

“Funny. Get on with it already, Jiminy.”

“As you wish.” Ryder looked up and waved an arm, and an immense Philco Predicta television lowered into view. The iconic television of the 1950s, with its funny-looking naked picture tube atop a rectangular console, the Predicta had been all over Zharus within the last decade after Crazy Joe Steader released an immense trove of 1950s nostalgia television.

The human “ghost” turned on the equally immense switch on the front. The entire thing started to hum.

“These tube TVs always take a while to warm up. But it should be ready just in time for my favorite show.”

Fritz eyed the screen skeptically. “This is gonna be painful. Isn’t it.”

“Kaylee, I’m home!” Fritz’s voice, laden with all the saccharine joviality of a black-and-white family man, came

from the speaker before the picture fully resolved.

“Oh, for the love of Bob,” Fritz himself said with a facepaw.

The screen finally glowed to life, revealing a monochrome living room that could have come from *I Love Lucy*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Honeymooners*, or *Dick van Dyke*, all put into a blender and pureed.

It was Kaylee and himself--his beatnik beret and dark glasses clashing desperately with the briefcase he was carrying and the overcoat draped over one arm--starring in a furry sitcom. The female lynx wore a flour-dusted apron and the sour expression last worn by Alice Kramden when berating her husband Ralph. “It’s about time you got home, Fritz! Dinner’s even still wiggling on the plate.”

“Rabbit again, honey?” on-screen Fritz said.

“With Tabasco,” “Kaylee” replied. The laugh track swelled with faux guffaws and cheers.

“But I *hate* Tabasco, dear,” “Fritz” said.

“That’s all right. So does the rabbit,” Kaylee said, to more canned laughter.

“That ain’t Kaylee, poindexter, and that sure as hell ain’t *me*,” Fritz fumed, actually mildly offended. “I know how this story’s supposed to go. You’re supposed to be showing me somethin’ that makes me hate myself. Well, that ain’t happening, murgatroyd.”

“It’s a metaphor,” Ryder said. “And this kind of gag is what meta’s for.”

On the screen, eight anthropomorphic lynx kittens scampered in from another room and clustered around the TV Fritz. “Daddy, you’re home!” “Katie” said, hugging him around the knee.

“We missed you!” “Keiko” added.

“Will you help me build a treehouse after supper?”
“Liam” asked.

TV Dad Fritz knelt and gathered his kids into a hug. “I missed you, too, kids. After supper, I’ll help you build the *best treehouse ever!* Now c’mon, let’s wash up.”

“Yay!” the eight kittens chorused.

The episode played out about as expected for a fifties sitcom, the treehouse construction largely a matter of hammering a bunch of nails, and occasionally other things. “Gosh darn it!” the TV Fritz swore, sucking his thumb. Everyone learned a Valuable Life Lesson about the importance of family togetherness, and the credits rolled.

“Katie, Keiko, Anny, Chloe, Mandy...” Fritz pointed to each girl and boy in turn. They were all recognizable, even anthropomorphized. “Liam, Reggie, and Benny.”

“Gotta admit,” Ryder said. “You may be an asshole, but you did some good work there.”

“It was a happy accident, you know? I just wanted some jazzing ‘tween us without all the tacked-on *human* crap in our heads,” Fritz said. “I never *forced* her, you know.”

“Other than, y’know, taking her intellect away,” Ryder pointed out. “But hey. Distant past, dead and buried, bygones are bygones, right?” He shrugged. “Just one thing bugs me. You out here, Kaylee in the Shed, who got custody of the kids?”

“I kept track of them!” Fritz said defensively. “I know where every one of ‘em is right now. I even saved Reggie’s tail that one time.”

Ryder nodded. “Okay, okay, I can see that. You

deserve some credit there. Hey, everyone, let's hear it for the Dad of the Year!" An invisible studio audience cheered and applauded. "Of course, Liam's baking out on the Hardpan, Mandy's down a hole near Nuevo San, and Benny's core is in a private collector's display case in Neo Francisco."

"Yeah, and you know what else? They're not *dead*. I'll get 'em back someday, when the time is right," Fritz said.

"Look, Fritz baby, I know how they made you. I know you better than your own mother," Ryder said, putting his hands on the lynx's shoulders. "For all the horrible things you've done, I still love you like a brother. I've *seen* the beautiful things you're capable of. I'll shake that psychopathic hero complex they made you with out of you yet, buddy. That's a *promise*."

Fritz tried to reply, but was interrupted by an unexpected tightness in his throat. Before he could find his voice, the TV said, "This concludes our broadcast day." It showed a test pattern while the Star-Spangled Banner played in the background. The whole thing blurred from the sudden moisture in Fritz's eyes. He blinked and rubbed them, and when he opened them again the TV and Ryder were gone and he was alone in the darkened room.

Fritz shook his head. "Damn. I *knew* watching that *Leave it to Beaver* marathon last week was a mistake." He growled, twisting the beret in his paw-hands. "Yeah, screw that self-righteous cube and the horse he rode in on. I did the best I could with the choices I was given. I played the damn hand I was dealt and the chips fell where they may. I got *nothin'* to be ashamed of. *Nothin'*."

He tried to ignore the echo of Ryder in the back of his

mind. *That's your problem, Fritz. You tell yourself that enough, you actually end up believing it.*

He must have dozed off again, because something woke him up. Reviewing his mental recording, he placed it--the flutter of wings. *Large* wings. "Aw, hell," Fritz muttered. "What now?"

"Not what, but *whooooo!* Hey, I see you've still got my wingtip on the wall."

Fritz facepawed again. "Yeah, it really ties the room together," he muttered. "And what are you supposed to be, the Ghostate of Christmas Presents?"

"Afraid not," the huge feral barn owl said, settling into place in front of him. "I didn't *bring* you any Christmas presents. None you'd open willingly, anyway."

"Hey, aren't you supposed to be a ginchy cheetahgirl these days?" Fritz smarmed. "Mrrowl."

"Think I'm going to give you a pretty kitty bod to ogle? Ha! Gigi's too good for you," Ghost said. "Besides, this isn't a social call. You've been a *baaaaad* bosscat."

It was then Fritz noticed the microphone on a stand in front of the immense bird. "Oh no," he muttered. "Tell me you're not--"

"What's a Christmas special without a musical number?" Ghost said as the musical accompaniment started up out of nowhere. Fritz groaned as he recognized the tune. It was only the greatest holiday season guilt-trip song to come out of the 1980s, after all. Ghost leaned forward and sang into the mic about how, while the listener was all comfortable, there were plenty of less fortunate people elsewhere.

And there won't be snow in Africa this Christmas time

*The greatest gift they'll get this year is life
Where nothing ever grows, no rain or rivers flow
Do they know it's Christmas time at all?*

“Now that’s not fair,” Fritz muttered as the music wound down. “Nobody in my Enclaves is starving.”

“For food, maybe,” Ghost said. “But for freedom? Come on, Fritz. What are you afraid of? What d’you think will happen if we go live? You have any idea how many of us just want to go home?”

“The Enclaves *are* home, birdy,” Fritz insisted. “Besides, it’s not as if *you’re* stuck in one anymore.” He added under his breath, “Much as I wish otherwise...”

“Me and the rest on the *Clementine* are the exceptions, and we know it,” Ghostate said. “A gilded cage is still a cage.”

Fritz waved a hand. “Eh, there’s a few loners out there. Inties that look human and don’t make any ruckus. They’re copacetic. As for the Enclaves, bah, there’s always a few malcontents like you. *Most* of us are *happy* to live where we don’t gotta worry about the Man coming along and cutting us open to see what makes us tick.”

“Want to put money on that?” Ghost smirked. “I’ll bet you don’t often get to see how they act when you’re *not* around to throw a scare into ‘em. So let’s go live.” A desk rose out of the ground in front of Ghost and a big projection screen rose up to the side, putting Fritz’s throne into the position of the guest’s “hot seat” on a talk show.

“In faaaaaact...” Ghost said, pausing dramatically before turning to look straight at the camera. “Live from Towers Enclave, it’s Saturday night!”

“But it’s Sunday,” Fritz protested weakly.

“Just go with it,” Ghost said.

The screen showed a table in a small dining room. The room appeared to be an aging tenement apartment, with patches of exposed plaster and boards in the wall, and dim light fixtures overhead. A small group of Integrates sat at the table. Fritz recognized them as Pratchett the boar and the others who had wanted to visit their families back in human civilization.

“I can see them right now,” a ferret named Mavra said. “My kids and grandkids, sitting around a huge mahogany table laden with Christmas ham--honey ham, not that cheap fabbed stuff. All the trimmings...”

Pratchett glowered at her.

“Uh, sorry,” Mavra said. “Never mind about the ham. So, what’ve we got on the table here?”

“A big brimming bowl...of Quarry,” said a thylacine Integrate named Kyla, pointing at the bowls of blue rocks on the table in front of everyone. “It isn’t grown...it’s mined.”

“It’s just raw qubitite,” Mavra muttered. “No need to make a big production out of it.”

“And you can polish that off with new Shimmer!” Pratchett held up a whipped dessert topping can. “It’s a floor wax *and* a dessert topping.”

Mavra rolled her eyes. “I *hate* Integrate food.”

“Want a glass of Swill?” the feral wyvern across the

table from Mavra asked. “Dredged from the bottom of Aloha’s Briny Deep. Lots of yummy qubitite salts.”

“I haven’t had a good Christmas ham in years,” Mavra muttered, off in her own little world. Pratchett sighed.

“I know what you mean,” the wyvern said. “Have I told you about this *great* little seafood place in Cape Nord--”

“Many, *many* times, LeLane,” Pratchett assured him. “Trust me, we all miss one human food or another.”

“Ah, but it lacks essential Intie nutrients! Eat your Q,” Kyla said. “Sorry, Mav. The organic food fabbers are on the fritz again.”

“It’s not really the food,” Mavra said. “It’s the company. No offense.”

Pratchett sighed. “I know. We all have *people* we miss, too. Family. Who we can’t visit or even *e-mail* thanks to Our Glorious Leader.”

“Do *not* taunt Happy Fun Fritz,” Kyla said. “If Fritz begins to smoke, get away immediately. Seek shelter and cover head. Fritz may suddenly accelerate to dangerous speeds.”

“Ingredients include an unknown glowing green substance that fell to Zharus, presumably from outer space,” Mavra added. “What a murgatroyd.”

“It’s not as if we can change it. We should probably just make the best of things,” LeLane said. “After all, things could be worse. At least we’ve got a home of sorts, and each other...”

“Yeah,” Pratchett agreed. “Much as I’d like to be with my human family, I guess you guys are my family now.”

“Hmph,” Mavra said. “If you can’t be with the ones

you love, love the ones you're with? I guess I can see that."

LeLane raised a glass. "Happy Hogswatch then, you old Prat!"

"I'll oink to that!" Pratchett said, chugging his Swill.

"See? Things aren't so bad after all," LeLane said.

"But what about Tiny Tim?" Mavra asked.

All heads turned to look at the frizzy-haired man leaning against the wall and strumming "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" on a ukulele. "Oh, don't mind me, I'm just practicing."

"C'mon, let's get a group picture taken to remember this moment," Kyla suggested. "With the new Kannon AE-1. It's so advanced, so simple, even Stevie Wonder can use it."

At the end of the room, the blind musician raised the camera. "Say cheese!"

"Uh, we're over here, Stevie," Pratchett said.

"I knew that! I was just playin' wit'cha."

"You know, I kind of feel sorry for Fritz," Kyla said.

Everyone turned to look at her. "What? Why?" Mavra said.

"Well, it would suck to be alone on Christmas, wouldn't it?" Kyla said. "We've all got each other...but who does *he* have?"

Pratchett snorted. "Does it matter? I'm not gonna shed a tear for that bastard. He can sit and spin in that throne of his."

"She's got a point," Mavra said. "I hear it's lonely at the top. Maybe if Fritz had some friends, he wouldn't be such an asshole all the time."

"You volunteering?" Pratchett retorted.

“Me? Hell, no!” Mavra said. “Someone else can bell the hep cat.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Kyla said. “I might feel sorry for a poisonous snake with its tail caught in a crack, but that doesn’t mean I’d pull it out. Still...sad.”

“So anyway...let’s make the best of things, okay?” LeLane said.

Pratchett nodded. “Agreed. So I guess that’s that.”

Everyone turned to look at Tiny Tim expectantly. The musician looked up from his ukelele. “What? Oh.” He cleared his throat. “And God bless us, every one.”

As the screen faded to black, Fritz opened his mouth to say something, then paused and thought better of it. He tried again, then realized he’d quite forgotten whatever it was he was going to say. It took a few more seconds for him to come up with a suitable overall response that covered all aspects of the scene he had just witnessed. He finally settled upon, “What.”

Ghost rustled his wings. “There you have it. Your people aren’t very happy, Fritz.

“So? Not my bag, man,” Fritz said. “Better bummed than dead.”

“And even then, they still felt sorry for you,” Ghost said. “How does that make *you* feel?”

“What’re you, my head shrinker?” Fritz sneered. “I don’t give a rip how they feel about me as long as they do what they’re told. I knew from the beginning they’d either hate me or suck up to me. I deal with it either way.”

“Would it really hurt anything to let them go home for a visit?”

“Them? Probably not. But what happens when *everybody* wants to?” Fritz shook his head. “World’s not ready. Don’t know if it’ll *ever* be ready.”

“There’s how many of us now? Fifty, sixty thousand? Eventually there will be just too many to hide,” Ghostate said. “Especially with all the dragons and other mythicals. Those RIDEs seem to turn Intie a lot. The military has to stretch their excuses. Only so many ‘training accidents’ you know.”

“That’s as may be. But no whacked-out group meeting of SNL Meme-Infected Anonymous is gonna make me change my mind about it *now*.”

Ghost shrugged. “Well, then. If your mind’s made up, I guess there’s no more need for me to hang around here.”

“Then am-scray, birdy! Move those tailfeathers before I cut *them* off, too!” Fritz growled.

“You’ve got one more visitor tonight, Fritz baby. But I know when I’m not wanted. That’s a wrap, everyone! Cast party on the *Clementine*!” Ghostate shouted into the ether. The scene faded to black.

Fritz was jerked awake again by the clock striking midnight in sonorous tones that echoed like a church bell in a sepulchre. This was odd, because as far as Fritz knew his tiny enclave didn’t *have* a clock. “All right, who’s the wise g--” Fritz’s growl died in his throat as he blinked his eyes open to stare at the apparition before him.

The figure wore a dark, hooded cloak that concealed its entire body--a body that was a bit too low and long to be human, though it was hard to tell exactly, because even that figure was half-concealed by a layer of fog that wafted

along the ground. “Oh, great, the enclave humidifier’s on the me again,” Fritz muttered.

“Friiiiiitz...” The voice that emanated from the hood was an unearthly rasp. It sounded like it was produced by metal parts grinding together, rather than any semblance of a human voice box or RIDE vocoder. Fritz felt icy fingers run up and down his spine, and not in the good way either.

“Yeah, yeah. So you’re the Ghost of the Future,” Fritz droned. He got off the throne and got a closer look at the apparition. “Ooooh, scary! What do you look like under that ginchy cloak?”

“You rreaaaally want to know?” the voice said. “Cause ye ain’t gonna liiiiiike it.”

The cloak blew off as if by a great wind, revealing a metallic feline RIDE’s skeleton, without servos, without eyes or ears, missing its tail and a couple of paws. The whole thing was surrounded by a qubitite blue aura emanating from the RI core embedded in the skull. The serial numbers on the skull: LNX(f)-LMA-001.

“*Kaylee?*” Fritz sputtered, backing up against an unseen wall.

“Got it in one, poooindexxxxter,” the skeleton said. It settled on its haunches and licked the forepaw that wasn’t there with a nonexistent tongue. “Have I got a sssshow for you. Close your eyes...wait. What’s that noise?”

A grinding, rasping sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. A blue light started blinking in the air off to one corner of the room, followed by a blue police box materializing beneath it. The door opened and an unfamiliar tiger Integrate in khakis and a

fez stepped out, swinging a cane. “Am I too late? Did I miss it?”

“Who the fuck are *you* supposed to be?” Fritz said. “Matt Smith when he forgets to shave?”

“The name’s Zane,” the tiger said. “You don’t know me yet. But boy are you gonna, in a few years.” He shrugged. “Central Casting thought there should be a Ghost of Christmas Future who was actually *from* the future. No offense, K-Spared, but this version of you is *technically* from the past.”

“All right, fine,” Kaylee said in a more normal voice. “I’m heading back to my trailer to get my bits put back on.” She turned and padded away through the fog. “I’m going to have *words* with my agent. When he said there was a nude scene...”

Zane took a rolled-up script from under one arm and flipped through it. “Let’s see, where are we...ghostly apparition, check. Scene from original FreeRIDERS story, strike that. New revision. This is where I come in.”

“Let me see that script!” Fritz snarled. He tried to grab it, only for Zane to roll it back up and whap him on the nose with it. “Hey!”

“BAD kitty! Bad!” the tiger reproved. “Next time keep better track of your copy.”

Fritz rubbed his nose. “All right, fine. Make with what you gotta show me and let’s get this jazz over with.”

Zane nodded. “Okay, here we go. We were gonna cover some early bits, about how you ended up getting all the Enclaves so pissed off that they wouldn’t let you join in any of their reindeer games, but this part’s running a bit long already and it didn’t play well with the focus groups.

So let's just take that as read, and fast-forward a little further on to after you screw up a few times, get really pissed off at me, and end up leading an attack on Uplift and bringing the domes down.

Fritz stared. "I do *what?*"

"Yeah, that's what I said," Zane said. "You don't seem to be thinking too clearly by the end there. C'mon, I'll show you." He gestured toward the Tardis.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Fritz growled.

"Don't worry, it's bigger on the inside!" Zane said cheerfully over his shoulder as he opened the door.

"That's what *she* said," Fritz muttered, following Zane through the door. The console room was exactly as it was in Matt Smith's tenure, the hexagonal console on a high platform in the center of the room. Zane danced around it, flipping switches, pulling levers, and pushing buttons.

"Do you really even know how to work this thing?" Fritz said. "We're not going to end up fighting Daleks on some other planet in the distant future, right?"

"Oh ye of little faith," Zane said, pulling the big lever. The time rotor began to move up and down, and the grinding dematerialization sound commenced.

"Setting the way-forward machine for Uplift, December 3, 156 A.L.," Zane said. "Be there in two shakes. Or, for a tail like yours, maybe three or four."

Fritz rolled his eyes. "Laugh it up, striped boy."

With another grinding sound, the Tardis rematerialized. "Right! Come on, then." Zane led the way back to the door and out. It debarked onto an Uplift city street, just next to a gate in a four-meter wall. A hardlight forcefield glistened, sealing the wall and whatever was

behind it off from the rest of the world. And there was this time's Fritz himself, marching up toward it with a gaggle of Integrates at his back.

Not a very large gaggle, Fritz thought. *Or a very happy-looking one*. "Should we be here?" Fritz asked.

"I've materialized us slightly out of phase, so we can see them but they can't see us. We can't touch or affect anything in this world, or it us," Zane explained.

Fritz looked down. "Then why aren't we sinking into the ground?"

"Uh..." Zane said. "Wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey stuff? Look, just watch the show. Oh--you'll need these." He handed Fritz a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses, and put one on himself.

Fritz blinked, but put them on. "All right, what's this f--oh."

"Annnnd...OPEN!" future-Fritz said, pointing his arm at the gate and unleashing what now-Fritz estimated at one of the three or four most powerful blasts he'd ever tried. Now-Fritz winced in sympathy. He'd be feeling that later on--but at least it was an effective gate key.

Or...no, it wasn't. Fritz pulled the sunglasses off and stared. The hardlight field was still there, without a scratch on it. The future-Fritz didn't seem to be taking it so well either, especially when Zane--a different Zane from the one standing next to him--popped up at the top of the wall and engaged him in a Monty Python meme skit. And that Fritz went along for several lines before he could stop himself.

...the hell? I don't get meme-infected. That's for weak-heads.

Then after Zane cheerfully invited them all in, future-Fritz just stood there muttering. *Arguing with Jiminy*, Fritz realized. Things must have really slid if he was doing that out loud, in front of his subordinates. Several of his followers started drifting away...and then Fritz turned and snapped at a cougar Integrate who'd been coming up to check on him, sending her away in tears. *Oh, now that's just not cool*, Fritz said.

"C'mon, let's follow them in." Zane walked after Fritz and the others as they entered the gate, which opened onto an open field area in the middle of a corporate campus. The buildings were all walled off by force fields.

A garage door opened on a building across the way and an immense IDE mech stomped its stompy way out into the open with Zane inside. Future-Fritz laughed at it, even after it blasted several of his followers, then cloaked and attacked. The IDE fired several missiles at nowhere...and Fritz decloaked and shielded himself, only to get smacked by a giant robot drop kick afterward.

Fritz's future self grabbed one of his followers, a zebra smacked unconscious by the IDE's earlier blast, and threw him at the mech, breaking bones along the way. Fritz stared. *What*.

"Never easy seeing yourself at your worst, is it?" the Tardis Zane said conversationally.

"This has *gotta* be some kinda gag, man," Fritz said. "I'd never go ape like that."

Zane just smiled and shook his head. "Never say never."

The fight went on. Zane finally came out of the mech to fight future-Fritz mano-a-mano--though Fritz wasn't

pleased at all that he'd only done it because future-Fritz *asked* him to. *I should have been able to crack that thing like an egg! What's wrong with me?* He wasn't exactly happy to watch more and more of his followers drift away as the fight went on, either.

Then Zane started carving the future Fritz up with a laser beam fired from his cane. Fritz was able to whack off the tip of Zane's tail, but Zane put it back on nonchalantly.

And then Kaylee showed up, and another lynx in a sleek, fast DE shell that moved like nothing Fritz had ever seen in his life. He didn't recognize her until Kaylee called her by name. "Katie? That's my Katie? What's she *in*?"

"Donizetti sports DE shell. You wouldn't have heard of it--he didn't go into biz 'til next year from your time. But it's like the Aston Martin of shells." Zane smirked. "The *James Bond* Aston Martin."

Fritz wiped moisture from his eye as he watched his future self express the same parental pride *he* was feeling. "You know, if this is supposed to 'scare me straight,' it's not working. I'm *happy* to see my little girl looking so good."

"There's good and there's bad in everything, Fritz," Zane said quietly.

The fight continued. Fritz watched his future self break his mono-blade against Kaylee's shielding, and then match beams head-to-head with a pair of immense shoulder cannons Kaylee was sporting...and lose. He dropped to the ground with his fur on fire, and Katie followed up with a bodyslam that left him limp.

"...let's finish this," Kaylee snarled, training her cannons on him. "A little frontier justice."

And then the grinding, wheezing sound came from all around. The last thing Fritz saw was the muzzles on Kaylee's cannons glowing bright white, then the Tardis control room materialized around him to block out the view. "Hey!" Fritz protested weakly.

"I don't think you need to see the next part," Zane said from the console. "Time to get you home."

Fritz stood there and stared for a long time at the section of Tardis wall where he and Kaylee had been. It wasn't every day you saw yourself go crazy, then get beaten up, then get (presumably) killed. "Bad scene, man," he finally managed. "So you're saying, if I turn all nicey-nice and let those losers go visit their families, everything's copacetic? I can skip out on that whole getting my ass whipped by Kaylee deal?"

"Actually...no," Zane smirked. "I'm afraid the future is already written. You can't change it no matter what you do. Fixed point in time. Sorry."

Fritz blinked. "Wait...what? Wasn't the point of the original *A Christmas Carol* to scare the asshole into cleaning up his act?"

"You don't understand," Zane said. "When I say it's already *written*, I mean it. Literally. It's on this website called shifti.org. You should check it out. The authors will be going back and revising bits of it, one of these days if they can ever find the time, but they're certainly not gonna change *that* bit. And being a parody and all, *this* story isn't exactly canonical anyway, so it's not like anything you do now can change anything. Face it, good buddy, you are *screwed*."

The air hummed as Fritz's arm cannon charged and

he pointed it at Zane's nose. "So it won't matter if I turn you and your Tardis knockoff into subatomic dust here and now, you dig?"

"You can't," Zane said smugly. "I've got script immunity." He held up the rolled copy of the script again. "See? I have the script, so I've got immunity." He chuckled, coming around the console to speak to Fritz face to face. "Seriously...you're not looking at this the right way. Since nothing you do matters to the rest of the story...why not try being a *good* guy for a change? It's not like the rest of the Enclaves will be able to decide you've suddenly gone all weak-kneed, since you obviously didn't in the...*canon*." He glanced at Fritz's arm. "You see what I just did there?"

"Har har." The energy in Fritz's arm dissipated. "It'd be no fun anyway. You don't really exist."

"Technically, neither do you," Zane said. "Ain't that a kick in the pants? If you wore pants?" He leaned forward to whisper in Fritz's ear. "I'm probably not supposed to tell you this...but don't worry. You come out okay in the end."

"Uh, thanks," Fritz stammered. All the same he was glad Kaylee's ghost had decided to leave him with this strange tigerish Doctor Who. If she'd still been here during that last scene... "Are we done here? Can I wake up now?"

Zane flipped through the script as he walked to the door. "Yeah...I think so. Not seeing anything else here." He tucked it away again, opened the door, and made a sweeping gesture to motion Fritz through it.

The lynx Integrate stepped back out into the misty coffeehouse room, then turned to look back at Zane.

"Thanks for the lift, I guess."

"You're welcome. Anyway...live for the now. Good

luck!” He doffed his fez, then closed the door. A moment later, the light flashed and the blue box faded away with that same wheezing grinding sound.

Fritz stomped back to his throne and sat down, waving a hand to kick the Coffeehouse’s ventilators into action to suck out the stupid ground fog. His mind raced with questions moral and philosophical. What was he going to become? Was there really no way to avert it? Did it matter what he did if it *didn’t* matter what he did?

As anticlimactic as it was, somewhere in the middle of all that worry Fritz drifted off to sleep again.

Fritz blinked his eyes open. Morning in the Coffeehouse. Shafts of light slanted down from the artfully-placed skylights, brightening the room and providing comfy warm patches where a cat could doze. One of them was, naturally, his throne. Fritz checked his internal chronometer. Christmas morning. “Ugh...what hit me.”

As he woke up, he started to remember. He’d had some seriously whacked-out dreams last night. He remembered them clearly, thanks to the Integrate eidetic memory, though the emotional urgency of them had faded somewhat. Still... “What the *hell*, man?” Fritz mused. “No more D-grade sarium batteries for this cat. Especially not the ones as big as me. Ugh. What a headache.”

Of course, he couldn’t entirely blame the batteries. It was pretty clear that the stress of his position was getting to him. His subconscious had obviously been working overtime, and must have come up with this crazy-ass hallucination to point him toward relieving some of it.

Yeah, that was the ticket.

Fritz wondered what he would do if it was actually *true* that no matter what he did right now, he was destined to lose his shit, bite off more than he could chew, and get clobbered—and that he could do *anything* right now without it mattering worth a damn because he wasn't the “real” Fritz anyway. *The ultimate get-out-of-jail-free card.*

It sounded sort of like one of those movies about how people acted when the end of the world was upon them. He entertained a brief fantasy of getting Kaylee out of the Shed, going and collecting all their kids, and singing Christmas carols together ‘til the end. He snorted. *Yeah, as if. Even if it was the end of the world, no way would Kay be happy to see me. Most of the kids probably wouldn't either.*

Still, if his subconscious had fixated on that one bunch of malcontents as the thing he was worrying over, well, there was an easy solution to that. He opened a comm line to his people in the Towers.

A crow answered the comm. “Sirveaux speaking. Hey there, Bosscat. What can I do you for?”

“I need you to round up Pratchett, Mavra, Kyla, LeLane, and Tiny Ti—er, ahem, Pratchett, Mavra, Kyla, and LeLane.”

“Okay, what you want me to do with ‘em?”

“Send ‘em down here. I want to...speak to them.” He drew out his flensing blade and looked thoughtfully at it. Yeah, maybe he *could* use some more carpets around here...

It didn't take long for the four malcontent Integrates to be delivered to his doorstep. He had his problems here

and there, but most of the Enclaves still respected him enough that he got what he wanted and got it *fast*—especially if the “what” was a “who.” *They’re just glad it’s not them*, Frits thought wryly. The foursome stepped up to face the throne, exchanging nervous glances.

Well, this is it, Fritz thought, reaching for the knife again. *Time to show ‘em why I’m the bosscat, and what happens when you piss me off.*

Friiiiitz... said that voice, that still small voice in the back of his head. Only...it wasn’t the *right* voice. Damned if he understood how or why, but it wasn’t Captain Ryder at all this time, but that idiot tiger from the last part of his dream! *Live for the now...* he said.

Suddenly, Fritz felt *incredibly* tired of it all. Tired of ruling, tired of shoving people around, tired of being *such an asshole*. “I just wanted to tell you crazy kids, I changed my mind,” he said. “I can do that. It’s part of what makes me the happenin’ lama you all know and love, or at least fear, which ol’ Macky-velly said was the next best thing.” He grinned at them. “You four got your furlough. Your... *furry* furlough. Go, visit your family, spend some time with the loved ones, tell ‘em what you gotta, moss moss, but keep it on the down-low. Then get your asses back to Towers.”

The four Integrates stared at him as if they weren’t sure he was all right in the head. And Fritz had to admit, he could see where they were coming from. But they knew a good thing when they heard it. “Y-yessir!” Pratchett said. “Thank you, Mr. Scrooge!”

Fritz blinked, “What?”

“I said, ‘Thank you, Bosscat!’” Pratchett said. “Don’t

worry—we'll keep it secret.”

Fritz waved a paw magnanimously. “I know you will. Get outta here before I change my mind.”

They sure didn't let any grass grow under their feet. Fritz actually cracked a smile watching them scurry away. “What the hell. Maybe the ‘ghosts’ were right. It *does* feel nice not to be an asshole for a change.”

“That's the spirit!”

“Eh?” Fritz looked up at the speaker—the stringy-haired musician with the ukelele.

Tiny Tim waved. “And God bless us, every one!”

THE END