

SAINT NIKOLAS DAY

When I was called Joseph “Joe” ColSCO, living as a graduate student in Berkeley, California, I went through a phase where I discovered YouTube had old episodes of the PBS series *Connections* with host James Burke. He took viewers through unexpected, byzantine paths linking events and discoveries no one would have suspected. I was always enthralled. Who would have thought underwear led to the printing press or the waterwheel to the computer? That’s why I laugh to know that on the planet Anyar, my attempt, in my persona as Yozef Kolsko, to develop penicillin led to the spread of Saint Nikolas Day on Caedellium. Oh, I should mention ice cream was somewhere in the middle of that connection.

Yeah, I know. “What?” That would have been *my* reaction, too. Bear with me as I relate how I *think* it all happened. It started six months ago when . . .

Orosz City, Island of Caedellium, Planet Anyar

“Exciting success, Paramount. That’s why we sent you the message.”

“It’s Yozef, Natalia,” said Yozef, annoyed. “When we’re in the shops and laboratories, I like people to call me Yozef.”

Natalia Mahzerski appeared uncomfortable. The head of the sugar team may have looked young for someone leading a group of budding chemists and biologists, as Yozef had named two of the new tradecrafts he’d introduced, but Natalia’s enthusiasm, maniacal work habits, and keen mind won over all but the most sour-tempered.

“I know . . . uh . . . Yozef, but I forget. It just doesn’t seem respectful.”

“You’re saying it’s not respectful, even though the Paramount says it is?”

Natalia’s face turned red and she stammered, “Merciful God, no, Paramount, I would never say *that!*”
Hopeless, thought Yozef. *Oh, well, let’s get on with this.*

“Tell me what this important news is,” Yozef said. “I assume you’ve had some success breaking down agar into sugars.”

Relief flooded Natalia’s face. “Yes, yes. Let’s go inside, and we’ll show you.”

Yozef shrugged at the guard accompanying him.

Synton Ethlore grinned back. “Why don’t you just give up? It’ll save time having useless conversations like that with the woman.”

“Oh, shut up, or the Paramount will send you to dig guano in Farkesh Province.”

“Like that’s going to happen. Maera trusts me to not let you do something stupid. And besides, Aeneas likes me. How would you explain it to them?”

Yozef chose to end the interchange by ignoring it. In fact, over time he had found himself depending more on Synton to help him maintain perspective. Yozef didn’t want his elevation to de facto ruler of Caedellium to make him think he either deserved the position or had answers to every problem, as too many people thought he did.

It’s like the medieval court jester, he often reminded himself, *who could speak truths to the king that others hesitated to say, or the legend of the slave who stood behind Caesar during triumphal processions, whispering, “Remember, you are only mortal.”*

Carnigan Puvvey also still contributed to keeping him anchored, but the big man now accompanied Yozef during the day only on formal occasions.

They followed Natalia into the Microbiology Laboratory, the name Yozef had given to the specially constructed building. There, his limited knowledge of microbiology was put to use solving problems practical, fanciful, and a few with dubious chances of success. The original impetus, and a still ongoing project, was to develop antibiotics to combat infections. The fight to drive the Narthani off Caedellium had produced thousands of wounded. Despite the fact that Anyar's biome had fewer microorganisms that would cause infections in humans transplanted from Earth, infection did occur, and the results could be terrible, crippling disfigurement—if the victim survived.

A critical first step had been developing conditions for growing microorganisms on agar/nutrient-filled glass petri dishes. Although they didn't use *real* agar, the gelatinous medium produced from seaweed on Earth, the holowar swamp plant growing on Caedellium served the same purpose. The dried "agar" was mixed with hydrolyzed protein preparations as a source of nutrients, then heated to boiling, poured into sterile shallow glass dishes with covering lids, and allowed to cool. The firm surface and the nutrients supported the growth of enough Anyar microorganisms to make research plausible.

The first room of the long, one-story building was for recordkeeping and breaks from the rest of the building, where conditions were kept as aseptic as possible with the available technology. They walked through two doors separated by six feet to cut down on external air flow and entered the microbe screening section. There, samples of fungi collected from all over Caedellium were tested for their ability to inhibit other microorganisms, ultimately producing diffusible antibiotics. A team identified candidates for antibiotic production and passed these on to another team that focused on increasing production of whatever compounds were inhibiting growth. Thus far, two

candidates had proved successful enough for external application to wounds. However, the amounts that could be isolated were enough to carry out experiment trials only on small animals. Production needed to increase a thousand-fold for further purification and tests with humans.

That's why Yozef believed the second project was critical. Efforts were ongoing to find ways to induce mutations in microorganism cultures and identify strains of the two candidate organisms with higher production levels of the antibiotic molecules. The teams didn't yet have access to chemical mutagens Yozef knew of from Earth, so they were searching for naturally occurring mutagens, usually members of the alkaloid and flavonoid chemical compound classes. No promising mutagen source had yet been identified, but once it was, extensive purification would be carried out until the teams had enough to mutagenize the antibiotic source organisms for higher production levels.

Yozef was realistic about the chances of success with existing technology. Yet he faced the eternal dilemma of trying anyway or waiting for future developments in technology, since unsuccessful efforts often actually led to those advances. Yozef was already pushing chemistry as fast as existing Anyar technology could absorb, and he believed basic and applied developments occurred synergistically.

A third project was unabashedly an exercise in a Paramount's prerogative. He had never particularly had a sweet tooth, but not being a dessert fanatic wasn't the same as never eating sweets. An Anyar version of honey was not abundant, and "jams" depended on natural sugars in the fruit and tasted to him as if something in the recipe had been forgotten—like sugar.

Only when the microbiological projects began did inspiration strike Yozef. Agar was mainly composed of large and medium-size chains of linked basic sugars. The

problem was how to go from polymerized forms to single sugars. On Earth, scientists did it using combinations of mild acid hydrolysis, heat, and enzymes to turn large polymers such as cornstarch into simple sugars.

As the project members collected and tested microorganisms for antibiotic properties, they passed those that, as far as Yozef could tell, were likely yeasts from Earth to the Sweet Group. Many industrial enzymes used on Earth were of yeast origin, including those used to convert cornstarch into high-fructose corn syrup. Because the agar source was a swamp plant, Yozef hoped that local yeasts knew how to digest the agar polysaccharides. Natalia was leading Yozef's group to demonstrate a rumored breakthrough by the project team.

"Here we are, Para . . . uh . . . Yozef," said Natalia, as she directed them to a table with other project members standing on the other side. On the table sat a plate of one inch cube-shaped cakes and a glass of gunky-looking liquid.

Natalia pointed to the table's contents and spoke excitedly. "As you know, for months we've been testing fungi collected for the antibiotic project to see if any were able to break down agar into sugars. None have been promising, but we also tested fungi that we collected growing on holowar plants. The obvious hope was that they would be able to digest the plant. Otherwise, why grow on the plant? I don't know how many samples we tested—a couple hundred?" she asked, looking at her coworkers, as several nodded in agreement.

"Anyway, about two months ago, one of our people returned from Gwillamer Province with a new batch of a hundred samples that we started to test. You can imagine our surprise and enthusiasm when the sixth sample was plated on agar, and within hours we saw the surrounding agar breaking down.

“It’s taken us two months to learn to grow the fungi in a dilute agar broth and then process the broth to get rid of most everything except the sugars. What you see in this glass is the result.” Natalia stuck an index finger to the first metacarpal joint into the brown gunk, then put the coated fingertip into her mouth.”

“Mmmmm. Sweet. We’re calling it what you said it might be like—syrup. And we have been feeding it to four different types of animals, even before we got it to this degree of purification. There’s been no sign of ill effects. The liquid is viscous because the sugar content is so high. We think it looks bad only because we haven’t yet figured out how to remove the pigment.”

She held out the glass to Yozef. “Here. Try some yourself.”

He eyed the glass. His skepticism needed no words.

“Really, it’s fine. The only problem we’ve had is that we fed so much of it to a few animals that they’re getting fat.”

Oh, well, thought Yozef and duplicated Natalia’s sampling. The sweetness that hit his mouth reminded him of when he’d once tasted a saturated glucose solution. The main sugar released by agar would be maltose. He hadn’t known the relative degree of sweetness until now.

Must be about the same as glucose, he thought.

“What about the cakes?” he asked. “Did you bake those with this syrup?”

“No,” said Natalia, “we weren’t sure if the sugar would survive baking, so we baked the cakes longer than usual so they were dry, then dripped syrup onto them to soak in. Try one.”

It was the first non-honeyed dessert Yozef had eaten since coming to Anyar. The taste wasn’t great, but it was unquestionably sweet.

“All right, Natalia, looks like it’s a success, but let’s keep testing its effect on animals before we let it out to the

general populace. Also, keep trying to purify it more. Come see me tomorrow, and we'll meet with one of the chemists. I think we can get rid of the pigment and other impurities by using an activated charcoal column to run your syrup through, maybe after diluting it. You can always reconcentrate it later or crystalize the sugars."

With a month, Yozef was once again able to taste versions of sweets from his previous life: cakes, ice cream, and pies. However, the experiment's success had an unforeseen consequence.

"What's wrong, Yozef?" asked Maera one evening after a family meal at Kolsko Manor. "You've been quiet and preoccupied the last couple of days." She refilled his wine glass.

"I guess I feel a little melancholy about things that remind me of where I grew up, my family, and the rest of my people. It started when we worked out how to make the syrup and crystals substitute for honey to create sweet foods. It was common in Amerika to sweeten many different dishes, but here you only have honey, and the supply is limited. I never had what my people call a 'sweet tooth,' a craving for sweet foods, but there were things I did like and that can trigger memories. That's why I was so interested in gourd and nut pies. They are typically made at just certain times of the year for specific celebrations. I didn't think about making them until we had a supply of sweetener."

"Were the names you first gave for the pies words from your English language—pumpkin and pecan?"

"Yes, the ingredients aren't exactly the same, but I thought we could come close. The nut pie was close enough to pecan pie, but gourd pie was nothing like pumpkin pie, so we'd have to find something else to make those pies from."

“Thank God, you think so,” said Anarynd. “Everyone who tried the gourd pie thought it was awful but didn’t want to tell you how bad it was.”

Yozef chuckled. “Don’t think I didn’t notice! Half the people at dinner that night either spread their gourd pie around the plate to make it look like they’d eaten it, or they had the plate taken away when I wasn’t looking.

“But it wasn’t just tasting sweet dishes again. It was also the snow. During a season of celebrations, my family often visited an uncle for a day or more. Where they lived, it occasionally snowed, and two of the best visits happened during celebration times with up to six inches of snow on the ground and covering the trees.”

Yozef paused to remember his family driving from San Diego east into the mountains before coming to the desert. His mother’s brother lived in Julien, a town with a population of 1,500 located at just over 4,000 feet.

“I know childhood memories can be exaggerated in our minds, but two of those visits are among the best memories I have as a child. I remember how beautiful the falling snow was, and I ate far too many sweet foods. It was great to have my family together and feel the cheer of the occasion.”

“What was the name of the celebration?” asked Maera.

Name? thought Yozef. *If I tell them “Christmas,” it’ll feel weird.*

“It was a special day. Here, you have a five-day Harvest Festival, and some Godsdays are dedicated to specific saints or events. It was different in my homeland. We had special days that might or might not have coincided with a Godsdays, and there were no multi-day festivals. For example, on Christma . . . uh . . . Saint Nikolas Day, no one worked, and it was a day of general celebration.”

“What did you celebrate?” asked Anarynd.

“Well . . . everyone was cheerful, there were special treats for the children, we thought of everyone else as if

they were family, and we gave thanks for all the blessings of the previous year.”

I guess I'm describing a combination secular Christmas and Thanksgiving, thought Yozef.

“So, it was named after a saint,” said Anarynd. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of St. Nikolas. Oh! Silly me. It’s from your homeland, so, of course, I’ve never heard of him. It is a him, isn’t it? I assumed it, or do you have women saints where you come from?”

“Yeah, there are women saints,” answered Yozef. “There aren’t women saints on Caedellium?”

Maera laughed. “No, but my mother thinks there should be. She’s always saying that her sister must be a saint to put up with her husband.”

“What is St. Nikolas known for?” Anarynd asked.

Damn if I know, thought Yozef, *but I'd bet it has something to do with religion. Of course, no one thinks of Santa Claus in religious terms.*

“He’s the patron saint of children, and he teaches about the importance of caring for, teaching, and loving all children. He’s also known for promoting good cheer in life, treating other humans with kindness, and the general celebration of life.”

I guess that sorta sounds like Santa Claus.

“Tell us more about how your family celebrated St. Nikolas Day,” said Maera, refilling his wine glass and giving Anarynd a *look* missed by Yozef.

“It was magical when I was young . . . ”

Yozef began describing his memories of Christmas, not noticing how many glasses of wine he consumed or the leading questions from Maera and Anarynd. He later vaguely remembered laughing a lot and maybe tearing up a little but wasn’t sure exactly what he’d said after the fourth glass.

He fell asleep in his chair shortly after trying to sing “Frosty the Snowman”—in English.

“Well, that should have relaxed him,” Maera said with a chuckle. “Good thing he doesn’t get bad hangovers, or tomorrow wouldn’t be pleasant. Let’s get him into a bed.”

The two women pulled a semi-conscious Yozef to his feet and half-dragged him to the nearest bed, which happened to be Anarynd’s. As they took off his shoes, Anarynd paused.

“Maera, how sad do you think he is that he’s not back with his people? It never occurred to me how much he might wish to be there and not here.”

“Don’t worry, Ana. I think he just had a spell of remembering good times. I’m sure there were other times he’d rather *not* remember, but that’s the way it is with all of us. I heard Rhaedri Rison once say that selective memory is one way God helps us live happy lives, as long as we don’t forget *too* much.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Maybe it’s as he said, the sweet foods and snow bring back times he remembers fondly.”

Anarynd jerked upright. “Maera! Why couldn’t we do a St. Nikolas Day celebration right here in Orosz City? He’s told us enough of what his people do. Even if it’s not exactly right, I’ll bet he would appreciate it.”

“Hmmm. You know, Ana. I think you’re on to something.” Maera got more excited the more she talked. “We’d have to keep it a secret to surprise him. I’m sure Gwyned and Carnigan would help, but I don’t know whether the children might not give it away.”

“We’ll recruit Morwena and Dwyna to keep the others from saying too much,” said Anarynd.

Two sixdays later, a moisture-laden cold air mass protruded far enough south to cause snow to fall gently for three straight days. A horse-drawn snow scraper kept the road between Orosz City and the Paramount’s residence clear enough for sleighs. This mode of conveyance was unknown in Keelan and other provinces closer to sea level

but more common with the rise in elevation. At 4,242 feet, according to the detailed surveying done in preparation for the war against the Narthani, Orosz City was no stranger to snowfall, and the nearby mountains often remained impassable for six days until the snow melted.

By the time the weather system moved on, four inches had fallen at the base of the city and up to a foot in the cleft extending to the mountains north of the city.

Yozef finished a day of paperwork and individual meetings with hetmen Adris and Swavebroke to plan the recovery of two provinces most damaged by the war. Both capitals had been burned to the ground, and rebuilding was still ongoing more than two years after the last Narthani had left Caedellium.

Yet the meeting with Tomis Orosz had seemed curious to Yozef. Tomis had requested the meeting start at mid-afternoon. Yozef had assumed it would end well before dark, so he could get home before the road turned to solid ice. He had assumed wrong. Every time the meeting seemed about to wrap up, Tomis had another topic to discuss. Some of these had been covered in earlier meetings, and other subjects were not urgent, although the Orosz hetman acted as if they were. He also kept digressing into topics that ranged from conditions of their two families to what could only be termed gossiping about other hetmen.

If Tomis had been most other hetmen, Yozef would have cut him off, but the man had been one of the staunchest backers for uniting the clans in the war against the Narthani. The hetman had also continued to be among the five most reliable supporters of Yozef's plans to revolutionize Caedellium's clan structure.

By the end of the first hour, Yozef resigned himself to humoring his hetman supporter and friend.

A cathedral bell rang, which was not unusual, except this consisted of two rings between hours. The St. Wyan's bells rang only on the hour.

“Huh,” uttered Yozef. “I wonder why they’re ringing the bells now?”

“Oh,” said Tomis. “I’ve kept you too long with my prattling. My wife is expecting me. Thank you for listening, Paramount.”

“Yozef, Tomis. Please! How many times do I have to say we can use first names, at least when it’s just the two of us.”

“Paramount. Yozef. What’s the difference?” And with a nonchalant gesture, the Orosz hetman hurried from the room.

“What the hell is going on with Tomis?” Yozef asked the walls.

He looked back at his desk. He had been fifteen minutes from finishing for the day when Tomis had shown up, which meant he was still fifteen minutes away.

Sixteen minutes later, he reached for his fur-lined coat when Synton Ethlore poked his head in the door.

“You ready to go yet? I didn’t think Orosz would ever stop yammering about nothing. I had the sleigh all ready but was freezing my balls off, so I came inside. I’d have brought the horses in, too, but the door wasn’t wide enough.”

“I’ll have someone look into widening the door,” said Yozef, “just for you.”

“If you’re going to do something for me, how about paying me more?”

“I think you’re already overpaid,” said Yozef. “I could probably find two men willing to work for half your wages, and they’d probably do as good a job.”

The bantering continued until both men were seated side by side in the sleigh with a fur throw across their legs.

They traveled from the burgeoning island government complex outside the old city walls, through the main gate, and down a wide street to the main plaza.

“Where are all the people?” asked Yozef. “This time of the evening there should be hundreds on the streets. We’ve only seen a dozen or so, and several ducked into doors as if they didn’t want us to see them.”

“Aw. City folk,” said Synton. “Who can understand them? I certainly can’t. Why would you want to live all crowded together like a krykor flock?”

“Something must be going on I don’t know about,” Yozef complained. “Where are the people? Take me to Hetman Orosz’s residence. Maybe he knows what’s happening.”

“What! We’re already late from when you told Maera you’d be home. Don’t tell her I told you, but she and Anarynd have some special meal planned. I don’t know what it is, but she sounded firm about you getting there when you said you would.”

“Hmmp,” Yozef growled. “All right, all right, but tomorrow I’m going to investigate.”

The sleigh slid along the ice-coated stone pavement, as they wound from the plaza to the northern city gate to exit and began climbing into the cleft.

When they were out of the city, snow replaced ice under the sleigh runners. The horses slowed, as the snow gradually deepened, and they passed through brief snow flurries.

Yozef leaned over the side of the sleigh to look down, then back to Synton. “I know there are more estates being built up this way,” said Yozef, “but I’m surprised the road has been so well traveled. Look at the depth and width of tracks.”

“You want me to stop so I can talk with you, or do you want me to control the horses and this damn sleigh to get you home? I can’t do both.”

Yozef’s puzzled look went unacknowledged.

What’s eating Synton? Yozef wondered. The man was unrepentantly disrespectful. On most days, Yozef found

this refreshing after acting in his role as the island's Paramount leader. Still, his guard had a different demeanor today. He'd ask Maera if she'd noticed anything. It occurred to Yozef that he had begun to count Synton as one of his friends—as defined by someone he could relax around. At least, short of revealing he was from a different planet. Yozef smiled and strove to relax and enjoy the ride.

Both of Anyar's moons peeked from behind the scattered clouds, casting light on the snow. The larger moon hung in the southern sky, highlighting snowflakes from a cloud directly overhead. A warmer glow shone from two small kerosene lanterns mounted on poles at the front corners of the sleigh. Only the lantern sides facing ahead had clear glass and acted like dim flashlights, creating a tunnel effect as they wound into the cleft.

“What—” Yozef exclaimed, as they turned off the road and onto the Kolsko Manor drive. The deep ruts in the snow didn't continue along the road but instead veered toward the house. Fifty yards from the building, they passed other sleighs, their horses tied to trees, one wagon without horses, and several saddle horses.

The one-story manor house had lantern light coming from only one window. As Synton stopped at the front steps, he leaned and whispered in Yozef's ear, “This was a better-kept secret than our preparations to fight the Narthani.”

Before Yozef could ask, “What the hell are you talking about?” curtains opened and all the house windows burst forth with light. The front door swung toward them, and out flowed a stream of people. Leading the charge were Morwena, Dwyna, and Aeneas, with other children following in their wake.

“Happy Saint Nikolas Day, Papa Yozef!” shouted Morwena. She jumped into the sleigh and into Yozef's arms. Dwyna and Aeneas reiterated the greeting over and over, both hugging Yozef.

More shouts came from the adults spreading out on the veranda. “Happy Saint Nikolas Day!” “Joy to Saint Nikolas!”

People hurried to uncover lanterns with colored glass hanging from the veranda. Yozef stared at the hung wreaths made from entwined evergreen boughs and festooned with red bows and what looked like small pine cones painted different colors. The children tugged at Yozef to unstupefy him, and he allowed himself to be led to Maera and Anarynd waiting at the bottom of the steps.

“It was Ana’s idea,” said Maera, “after you told us all about Saint Nikolas Day with your family and people. There’s no reason why you can’t have the same custom here. We tried to replicate what you told us as much as possible.”

They pulled him up the stairs, to be pummeled by people waiting on top.

Gwyned Puvay hugged him as soon as he reached the top—a perfunctory hug. She couldn’t get too close because of the bump of her and Carnigan’s next child, due shortly. “You can’t seem to avoid infecting people with your crazy ideas, can you, Yozef?” Her smile belied her words. “Carnigan has been around you too much and has decided our family will also celebrate Saint Nikolas Day from now on, God help us.”

Rhaedri Brison, the elderly theophist, squeezed in to whisper to Yozef. “We’ll have to sit sometime, and you can tell me more about Saint Nikolas.”

“Happy St. Nikolas eve,” greeted Tomis Orosz, a twinkle in his eye at Yozef’s obvious befuddlement.

“Even *you* are in on this?” Yozef asked.

“Paramount, I think the whole *city* is part of this.”

On cue, cathedral bells in Orosz City began ringing. Yozef could make out the sounds from St. Wyan’s Cathedral and the dozen smaller houses of worship.

“They lit a fire on the children’s lookout spot as soon as you arrived,” said the Orosz hetman.

Yozef glanced up to where the children watched down to the government complex where hanging banners signaled the Paramount’s presence. He saw flames from what had to be a large bonfire.

“That was the signal for the bells to ring,” said Tomis. “Now everyone who stayed inside can come out, and people can light their lanterns or uncover windows.”

“Don’t tell me the whole city knew about this?” said Yozef.

The hetman nodded. “Word got out about doing the Paramount a kindness. Along with the story about Saint Nikolas and giving sweets and small presents to children, it caught fire like I’ve never seen. At St. Wyan’s last Godsdays, Abbot Parwyn told me he thought it might be residual relief at our victory over the Narthani that people still needed to express. The stories about Saint Nikolas struck a nerve.”

“What stories about Saint Nikolas?” asked Yozef, his mind threatening to retreat again to confusion.

“Why, all the ones you told us, Yozef,” said Anarynd.

“I don’t think he has any idea what he told us, Ana, after we plied him with so much wine. Yozef, it was two sixdays ago when you felt a little sad about missing your original family. Ana and I got you talking about your home, and you went on for hours. We had to open two more bottles of wine to keep you telling stories and reliving memories.”

Oh, lordy, thought Yozef. *What else did I spill when my brain was pickled?*

“Presents and sweets?” he asked, while trying to remember whether he’d said anything he shouldn’t have—such as about being from another planet, television, flying saucers, or smart phones.

“Yes,” said Maera. “How men dressed like Saint Nikolas and went around handing out sweets and presents to children. Word got around, and every child who is old enough to understand has been looking forward to tonight.”

“That’s where Carnigan is right now,” said Gwyned. “I’ve never seen him get so enthused. He got the men from the prison he runs to act as temporary Saint Nikolases for the evening.”

“Now, Gwyned,” said Maera, “it’s not a *real* prison. More what Yozef calls a detention center.”

“Prison or detention center, they still can’t leave without permission, have to work as told, and there are guards. Oh, all right, the men aren’t the dangerous ones, and I know it seems to work well, at least with Carnigan Pudev as the overseer. Most of them are older boys or young men who’ve gone astray, and there’s hope to straighten them out.” Gwyned laughed. “Certainly, there’s no one who can keep their attention like Carnigan can.”

“It’s true,” said Tomis Orosz. “With Carnigan ensuring disciplined behavior, the teachers and theophists are making good progress with most of the miscreants.”

“So, wait a minute,” said Yozef. “Carnigan and the detainees are dressed as Saint Nikolas and doing what?”

“Riding around Orosz City in sleighs like you said Saint Nikolas uses,” said Maera. “Well . . . most places, I guess. We weren’t sure about the weather, so they made up both sleighs and wagons just in case there was no snow or ice. Anyway . . . they’re giving out small cakes baked dry and then soaked in the syrup you’re making from holawar leaves and roots.”

“And a small present to each child,” said Anarynd. “Things like little cloth dolls, colored blocks, reed whistles, and . . . oh, I don’t know what all else. I think every tradesperson in Orosz City has done nothing else the last sixday or two, except making enough presents.”

“And the bakers,” said Gwyned. “Another woman who escaped from Hanslow with Anarynd and me is married to a baker here. She showed me the back room of their shop. As of yesterday, the room was packed right to the ceiling with little sweet cakes wrapped in paper. I don’t know how many there were, but she said the city’s bakers were sure they had more than enough for the children and probably enough to give some to adults.”

“If things are going well,” said Tomis, “Carnigan and the others are moving through the streets being mobbed by children.”

“Well, Carnigan is probably loving it,” Yozef said grudgingly. “Most of the children in Orosz City have gotten over being afraid of the big oaf and treat him like some giant stuffed animal.”

“Can we continue all this inside?” asked Synton. “I was only kidding before when I said my balls were freezing, but now I think it’s true.”

Synton didn’t wilt under Maera’s disapproving look for saying such things in front of the children. Yozef thought the kids didn’t even notice, being too busy asking any adult within hearing when Saint Nikolas would arrive.

As they flowed back indoors, Yozef passed Toowin Kales holding open the front door.

“I suppose you’re in on this, too?” asked Yozef.

“As if anyone in Orosz City isn’t in on it, except you.” Kales shook his head in mock disgust. “I certainly don’t understand how a paramount can be so oblivious to what’s going on around him.”

“Leave him alone, Toowin,” Anarynd admonished jokingly. “He’s probably been too focused on saving the world or figuring out how to fly to the moons.”

If you only knew, Ana, Yozef thought. Though he had no such active plans, he’d written enough descriptions in his secret journals that future generations might do exactly what Anarynd thought preposterous.

Inside, Yozef passed through the large foyer. A three-foot red bow covered the first gun cabinet a visitor to Kolsko Manor would see. After the Narthani's attempted assassination of Yozef and Maera's father, loaded weapons were distributed in several gun cabinets throughout wherever they were living. All weapons were beyond the reach of young children, with dire warnings given to children old enough to understand that they shouldn't even touch the cabinets. A hammer attached to the cabinet top could be used to break the thick glass-paned cabinet door.

From the foyer, they entered the great room, the largest room in the manor. Here, guests were entertained, and larger gatherings occurred. The first thing Yozef saw was the nine-foot tree with a top star almost touching the ten-foot ceiling. It passed through Yozef's mind that certain trees on Anyar more closely resembled firs and pines his family had used as Christmas trees, but this tree was green and naturally cone-shaped.

Hanging from its limbs were ornaments such as he must have described to Maera and Anarynd. Many of them appeared to be made of polished metal because the lanterns reflected them as points of light.

"You said there were lights on the tree," said Maera, "but we didn't see any way to do that without setting the tree on fire. You can tell us how when we do this next year."

Tinsel on the tree and wrapped presents below would have completed the image, but Yozef didn't mind. He felt a mix of emotions: lingering melancholy from missing his family and everything else he had known in his previous life, appreciation for having this arranged for him, and the warmth of cheer and spirit that a Christmas or Saint Nikolas Day purported to celebrate.

It was Anarynd who saved him by declaring it time for toasts. Yozef was dragged to a table covered with stemmed wine glasses like he'd never seen on Caedellium. The clue

to their source was the Fuomi ambassador, Eina Sassanian. She stood behind the table alongside Elian Faughn, the elderly housekeeper who had come with the Kolsko family from Abersford.

“Happy Saint Nikolas Day, Yozef,” said Eina, waving a hand over the empty glasses. “These were meant to be a gift on some auspicious occasion the Fuomon embassy might host, but when Maera told me about your surprise, I figured this was close enough. I also brought some of Fuomon’s best whiskey, which also came in the last ship. Or would you prefer wine?” She pointed to a box with bottles Yozef recognized.

“It’s the Mittack wine you like so much, Yozef,” said Anarynd. “We ran out here at home, but Maera semaphored Hetman Mittack, and he sent several boxes in time for tonight.”

Yozef looked at Maera, back to Eina, then back to Maera. “Are Rudolf and Frosty the Snowman coming, too?”

“Maybe later,” Gwyned said with a laugh. She’d come up behind them and slapped Yozef on the back. “Now I’ve got to pee before Carnigan gets here. Worst thing about being almost ready to drop a kid is I have to empty my bladder every few minutes. I don’t want to miss when he arrives.”

“Whiskey or wine, Yozef?” pressed Maera. “Everyone is waiting for you to get the first glass before the rest of us can choose.”

“I’ll have the wine,” he said. “Though don’t let me drink as much as I did when telling you about Saint Nikolas. I want to remember everything this time.”

Moments later he walked away, shaking his head. He looked over his shoulder at the Fuomon ambassador serving as barkeep.

Maera guided him around the room to say hello to guests he hadn’t already talked to. He knew most of them,

and for those he didn't, he would ask Maera later why they were here. While perambulating, he grabbed an occasional cracker, nut, or piece of cheese from plates positioned around the room.

"We'll eat later," said Maera, "after the fireworks and Carnigan comes."

"Fireworks? You mean like at the Harvest Festival?" He imagined the Caedellium version of sparklers and firework fountains he'd seen at festivals and a few other occasions.

"Oh, no. Dyllon Erasmus says he has something special he's been working on."

"Dyllon?" Yozef asked nervously. The young man was an imaginative student of Yozef's innovations—a bit too enthused, which sometimes worried Yozef. Nevertheless, Dyllon had been put in charge of developing rocket artillery as an extension of the signal flares used against the Narthani. "Where is this going to happen?"

"You probably missed seeing him when you arrived. He and a couple of other workers are setting up in the open space south of the manor. He'll let us know when he's ready."

Yozef finished his wine and looked for a spot to set down the glass. "I'd better go check how he's doing. I like Dyllon, but—"

"No, you don't," said Maera, hooking an arm around one of his. "Tonight you're Yozef the guest of honor, not a paramount or laboratory manager or whatever you call yourself when you're involved in your projects. Let Dyllon handle it."

She pulled him back across the room to where Eina dispensed wine and whiskey. "Fill him up again, Eina. He's in danger of trying to find something to be in charge of."

The Fuomon ambassador filled his glass fuller this time. "There. Listen to Maera and enjoy the evening.

Before Yozef could say anything, Eina turned to acknowledge one of the Landolin ambassadors, Yozef couldn't remember from which kingdom—he thought maybe Naskin or Mureet.

Someone grasped his elbow. He turned to find Rhaedri Brison's wrinkled smiling face. "I meant what I said earlier, Yozef. You'll have to tell me about this Saint Nikolas. Just a quick, curious question. Well, maybe two questions. How long ago did he live, and why was he made a saint?"

"Uh . . . I'm not sure of the exact years ago. I'm afraid studying the past was not one of my interests. He was revered for several things he did. One was making us understand that children are human beings who deserve respect as much as adults." Yozef figured he was on safe ground because care of children was a major precept of the Caedelli religion and the culture's ethos. He was trying to think of something else a Saint Nikolas could be famous for when Rhaedri interrupted.

"Oh . . . tell me some other time. Here comes Abbot Parwyn. God forgive me, but I've talked with him all I care to for this sixday. Tell him I have to meet the new ambassador from Iraquinik."

Maera had been listening and helped cover Rhaedri's swift escape.

"There you are, Abbot Parwyn. I've been meaning to tell you how much I enjoyed your Godsdays message on the eternal struggle between good and evil."

The abbot's frown at losing his prey was replaced by a smile, and for next five minutes Yozef listened half-heartedly to theological or philosophical arguments—he wasn't sure if there was a difference. As he wondered how to signal Maera to find an exit, a boy about twelve years old rang a hand bell at the open door to the foyer.

“The fireworks are about to begin. Everyone kindly follow me. I’ll lead to a spot where you can stand behind a rope at a safe distance.”

Anarynd rejoined them, and they merged with the movement following their guide.

The snow flurries had changed to scattered large flakes falling gently in the still air. Yozef got his first good estimate of the number of guests: twenty-nine adults and somewhere around twelve children. He couldn’t be certain of the last number because the objects of his enumeration wouldn’t stay *still* long enough to ensure he hadn’t counted the same ones more than once.

When they got to the rope cordon, Dyllon Erasmus waited until people were all spread behind the rope before he spoke.

“In honor of Saint Nikolas Day in Paramount Kolsko’s homeland, we have prepared a show of colored lights to honor the day.”

Yozef leaned over and whispered to Maera. “I didn’t mean rockets going into the air. It was more like the colored lanterns.”

“Hush. Dyllon and his entire staff have worked almost nonstop for two sixdays, trying to get this ready. Anyway . . . everyone else will love it.”

“But what about Orosz City? The last time they saw flares was during the worst of the fighting. They might panic.”

“Not to worry. As soon as we start here, it will be the signal for fireworks outside Orosz City. There’s probably tens of thousands of people standing either outside the walls or on top of them and watching this way for the signal.”

Crap. I hope they don’t burn down part of the city or kill anybody, worried Yozef. In fact, I’ll have to talk with Dyllon for diverting from his project to work on fireworks.

I appreciate the thought, but I can't have project leaders going off whenever they feel like it.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Maera, elbowing him sharply. “We’re not fighting anybody right now, so a little time away from your rocket weapons won’t matter. You already told me it was a long-range project, so relax and enjoy what Dyllon and the others worked to accomplish by Saint Nikolas Day.”

Just then, with a WHOOSH, a streak of light shot from the middle of the clearing. Oohs and aahs erupted, as the rocket rose to about a hundred feet and burst into a shower of yellow sparks. Some of them were a little too close for comfort, in Yozef’s opinion, though no one else seemed to notice.

At intervals of a minute or more, succeeding rockets burst into yellow, white, red, and violet—those that burst at all. About every fourth rocket never exploded, and where they landed was anybody’s guess. Again, no one seem to care or to be bothered if they noticed.

Good thing it's cold and there's snow on the ground, or we'd be setting fires all over the place, thought Yozef.

By now, he felt cold enough that he hoped the show was nearly over. On cue, Dyllon called out, “And now for the grand finale. Several rockets at once.”

“Dyllon said he had it worked out how to fire six rockets at the same time using all four colors,” said Maera.

Just hope he doesn't kill anybody, Yozef thought. He reflexively glanced at his surrounding family to see which ones he’d prioritize in pulling to the ground.

A loud sizzling sound didn’t sound right. Just as Yozef localized it to where the rockets had been launched, he made out Dyllon frantically picking up a bucket.

WHOOSH! and flames erupted near Dyllon, followed by a flash and four rockets taking off all at once. Unfortunately, only one rocket shot vertical. Another streak of light seemed to head for Yozef but hit thirty feet up a

tree trunk to Yozef's left. It didn't explode into a firework display, but pieces showered to the ground. A second errant rocket performed a series of corkscrew turns at 45 degrees from the ground before ending in its planned starburst directly opposite from where the spectators stood. The third rocket was a dud last seen arching over the manor house.

Yozef later reflected that the adults' reactions were a mix of shock at the accident, silence at not knowing whether what they had witnessed was part of the show, and appreciation of the impressive finale—the latter group involving most of the children.

The first group included Yozef, but once he recognized none of the lookers had been injured, his attention returned to Dyllon.

“Hang on to the children, and keep everybody else behind the ropes. There may be more powder than hasn't gone off.”

He motioned to Synton and Toowin Kales to follow and jogged toward the launch point. Light from the manor and a few lanterns carried by onlookers gave enough illumination that Yozef could see Dyllon lying on the ground. Yozef held out his arms to stop everyone about twenty feet away so he could check for signs of sparks.

“I think it looks all right,” he said and started forward again before strong hands gripped each elbow.

“No, you don't,” said Synton. “If any idiots are going to get blown up, it's Toowin and me. We'll scuff around to be sure the fun is over.”

“Damn right,” added Toowin. “Wouldn't be good for the Paramount to be killed celebrating some saint we never heard of. Besides, Maera is watching, and we don't dare let you go first.”

“Well, get your asses moving, then! We have to see how Dyllon is doing.”

“I . . . think I’m all right,” said a shaking voice from the body on the ground. Dyllon sat up, his face covered in black powder.

Giddy relief washed over Yozef, and a line from the movie *Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid* rose to his consciousness.

“Think you used enough dynamite there, Butch?”

Even in the darkness and with his face obscured, Dyllon’s voice only confirmed his confusion. “I didn’t use dynamite, Paramount. Just a new batch of powder formulated specifically for signaling and fireworks rockets. And who’s Butch?”

“Grab him, and let’s get away, in case the finale isn’t over,” Yozef told Synton and Toowin.

The men rushed to Dyllon and lifted him up off the ground by his arms. The four of them hustled back to the spectator area, where the mood was cheery with relief that no damage was done to any person or structure.

“I think the fireworks are over, everyone,” announced Gwyned. “Let’s all go back inside.”

Maera called over a medicant guest to check Dyllon, who by now was walking independently and kept stuttering apologies to the Paramount.

The gaggle of guests flowed up the steps with the Kolsko family in the lead. As they reached the top of the veranda, Yozef froze, creating a domino effect as people behind bumped into those who’d been forced to stop.

He turned, cocking his head automatically to let his right ear face something he’d heard.

“Are my ears ringing, or are those sleigh bells?”

“Must be Carnigan,” said Gwyned. “He said he’d leave the other Saint Nikolases to distribute sweet cakes and toys to the children as soon as he thought everything was going well.”

The bells grew louder, though the sleigh wasn’t yet in sight.

“How *many* bells did he put on the sleigh?” asked Yozef. “The idea is to announce his coming merely to those nearby, not to people in the next province.”

“Well, you know Carnigan,” said Maera. “He never thinks there can be too much of a good thing.”

Movement down the drive caught Yozef’s eye. “Ah, here he comes.”

Moments later, Yozef started laughing. “You got to be shittin’ me.”

Gwyned slapped him on the back. “When Anarynd heard all the details you told her and Maera, she and Carnigan wanted everything as close to what you remember as possible.”

Torn between appreciating the effort and knowing no one else would realize how ludicrous the sleigh was, Yozef compromised by simply watching. The sleigh itself was impressive enough with its large size, red paint and gold trim, four large lanterns at its corners, and strings of reasonable sleigh bell facsimiles hung everywhere possible. However, the sleigh was a paragon of staid conformity compared to the four horses pulling it. Sets of makeshift antlers were fastened by straps around each horse’s head, and the top of each nose was painted red.

“Only Rudolf should have a red nose,” Yozef said faintly.

“See, I told you,” Maera said to Gwyned.

“I *told* Carnigan,” Gwyned answered, “but I’ll bet he couldn’t remember the reindeers’ names, and he just decided to give them *all* red noses.”

“Papa Yozef,” asked Dwyna, tugging at Yozef’s pants. “I thought there was only one Rudolph.”

“It’s Papa Carnigan,” said Morwena. “I don’t think Rudolph came tonight, so he put red noses on the Dasher, Dancer, Comet, and . . . oh, who’s the other one, Papa Yozef?”

“Uh . . . Dasher, Dancer, Comet, and . . . uh, Donner, I think.”

“It’s Cupid,” said Maera. “Papa Yozef just got the name wrong.”

“Right. Cupid. Dasher and Dancer . . . uh, Comet and Cupid.” He singsang the names he’d memorized as a child but had to pass over Prancer and Vixen—and left out Donner and Blitzen.

“HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!” a deep voice boomed from the oncoming sleigh.

Yozef looked at Maera.

“Don’t look at me. We *told* him it was supposed to be HO-HO-HO, but he kept insisting we must have got it wrong. ‘Ho-ho doesn’t mean anything,’ he’d say, so it must be ‘ha-ha’ to suggest laughing and the good cheer Saint Nikolas Day is supposed to celebrate.”

“Whatever,” Yozef said. “Uh . . . everybody needs to get onto the veranda. Saint Nikolas, reindeer, and sleigh are about to land.”

Carnigan reined in his reindeer. Snow and ice scraped from the sleigh’s runners sprayed on the veranda’s floor and people’s feet. Children screamed in glee, and Saint Nikolas bounded from the sleigh, spread his arms wide, and boomed, “HA-HA-HA.”

Yozef didn’t know whether Carnigan was the biggest man in all of Caedellium because, after all, he hadn’t *seen* every man on the island. But Carnigan was certainly the most intimidating, which amplified the incongruity of the scene. Saint Nikolas was dressed in brown boots and pants, with a bright red cloak and a stocking cap, both trimmed in white. His beard and hair were somehow dyed or dusted white for the evening. Yozef fought the impulse to giggle.

“I think that’s the biggest strawberry shortcake I’ve ever seen,” Yozef said without thinking.

“A what?” asked Rhaedri Brison. “Something else from your homeland?”

“Nothing,” said Yozef and hurried on to distract from further questions. “Let’s get Saint Nikolas into the manor.

Carnigan reached into the sleigh for a sack. He carried it into the manor and proceeded to distribute sweetcakes and small toys to all the children. He stopped with the cakes only after Maera ruled enough was enough. Meanwhile, the adults were restricted to one cake each, though no limit was applied to alcohol. An hour later, the children were pried off the walls from their sweetcake- and excitement-generated high and taken to bed. After that, the adults sat down for more courses than Yozef could later remember.

At one point during the meal, Hetman Tomis Orosz rose to announce he would consult the district boyermen with the recommendation that Saint Nikolas Day be established as an Orosz Clan tradition. The boyerman of the district that included Orosz City hastened to endorse the proposal.

It was well past midnight when the guests were bundled up and ready to leave. Maera had kept them from leaving singly, telling them earlier, “Before you leave, please wait until Yozef can say something.”

He felt mellow after drinking more glasses of wine than he had intended, but his attempt to pace himself, combined with the work of the nano-elements in his body, left him lucid.

“Friends and family. Before the evening ends, I want to thank you all for coming and for all of your efforts to make this evening possible. I can honestly say this is the best Saint Nikolas Day I’ve ever had.”

So, there you have it: how the project to identify antibiotics led to development of a sugar-rich syrup from an Anyar swamp plant, which led to introducing more

sweets to Caedellium and my wine-facilitated reminiscing about Christmas, and ultimately how the attempt to relieve my melancholy about home led to Saint Nikolas Day. I suppose I have to credit Rhaedri Brison, the Septarsh-in-waiting, for the holiday's rapid spread to the other provinces. He wrote and distributed a missive on the "Spirit of Saint Nikolas" after philosophical discussions he and I had in the following months. But those details are best left for another story. Suffice it say that the pantheon of Caedelli saints had a new member whose depictions bore a striking resemblance to Carnigan Puvey.

This also eventually made for an interesting retelling of the origin of the Saint Nikolas Day celebration to a pair of new residents of Caedellium who were the only people fully capable of appreciating the story. As for future generations, they will have to wait until my secret journals are revealed and translated. That's assuming it happens and the books are not passed off as the ravings of an important historical or mythological figure, depending on how I'm remembered. I even suppose Saint Nikolas Day could end up being one of the only contributions I make to Anyar's history.