

Elf and Elf Again.

“Don’t even think about going near that shed,” Claus implored.

“Ok,” Nobby the Elf replied.

“I mean it. I don’t want a repeat of last year.”

Nobby’s mind delivered a snapshot of wounded reindeer, lost lists and extreme violence in the confines of a police cell. He nodded with doubtless obedience.

“Good,” Claus said. “Now, I’m going to get my suit on. It’s almost time for me to be off.”

“I could just ride along.”

“No you couldn’t, Nobby. I want one year without a hitch. If you want something to keep you occupied, see if the Professor has anything you can help with.”

Claus waddled off towards the house, leaving Nobby out in the snow.

The accident prone elf watched his boss go inside and close the door behind him, then turned on his little pointy toes and trudged off towards the Professor’s workshop.

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The Professor’s workshop was a small building on the edge of the Claus Complex, just within the boundaries of the Virtual Heating System.

Nobby had become well acquainted with the Prof over the last few years, especially since the misadventures of Christmas past. He still believed that not everything had been his fault, and his partial exile from the annual proceedings seemed a little unfair. In the end though, Claus was the boss.

Nobby pushed open the door, shrieked and dropped to the floor as a large, bulging sack hurtled over his head.

“Eh?” came a voice from across the room. “What? Whatchit?”

“Professor it’s me. Nobby.”

Nobby remained on the floor, looking about for the source of the voice.

Suddenly the bulging eyed face of the Professor popped up from behind something that looked like a washing machine with a tennis racket attached to it.

“Ah, Nobby. Sorry. Didn’t see you lurking behind the closed door there.”

“I wasn’t-” Nobby began.

“No of course you weren’t,” the Professor continued over him. “That’s the way to keep them off your scent. Never admit you were doing anything.”

“I wasn’t-”

“It’s ok, Nobby. You don’t need to convince me. I’m on your side in this...ermherm...whatever this may be.”

Nobby pulled himself off the floor. “What may this be?”

“Ah, glad you asked that,” the Professor said patting the machine responsible for hurling a sack at the young elf’s head. “This is my Automatic Sack Shifter. And can you guess what I call it for short.”

Nobby had played this game before and quickly deduced the acronym.

“Ass?”

“No,” the professor said, removing his goggles. “I call it Bob, actually.”

Nobby’s mind ticked over but he couldn’t see the connection.

“Oh,” was the most useful of any number of one syllable sounds he could muster.

“Oh indeed,” the Professor enthused. “This could shave hours of time off the worker elves in the warehouse. No more humping heavy sacks from the stores to the sleigh. No more injury claims to contend with either.”

“Right,” Nobby said, his mind wandering and his eyes looking for something a little more exciting.

The Professor’s workshop should, by all rights, have been surrounded by cordon and sealed off as a public health hazard. Monstrous machines of dubious use and even more dubious intention lurked in every corner of the room. Contraptions of metal and plastic hung from the rafters, while the floor was littered with parts of kitchen appliances, old vehicles and the occasional remnants of a forgotten sandwich.

If Nobby’s brain worked in the usual way, namely if it could think, he would have wondered how the Professor managed to collect such a horde of junk. Such heavy junk too.

Instead, Nobby was content to stare moon-eyed at cobbled together gadgets, each and every one of them capable of saving hours of hard labour or decapitating everyone within a five mile radius. He reached out towards what seemed to be a number of kitchen utensils held together with elastic bands, which in turn were tied to a high pressure gas cylinder.

“Don’t touch that one!” the Professor shouted, startling Nobby into ramming his hands into and through the lining of his pockets. “That one should not be touched by anyone who is not properly trained in quantum physics and trigonometry.”

Nobby simply nodded. He had no idea what any of those things were, but he was certain he had no knowledge of either. He knew what a trigger was but couldn’t see one on the device. He was about to ask if there was any chance he could be trained on the use of this particular trigger, but once again the Professor’s mind had already discovered another tangent to traverse.

“Now that one over there would be an interesting one to play with.”

The Professor hobbled over to what seemed to be an old oven.

“What’s that one do?” Nobby asked, his little overwhelmed mind instantly drawn to the new attraction.

“Well, this one is my greatest ever invent-”

The sudden rumble drowned out his words, accompanied by the subtle hint of sleigh bells and a distinct “Ho, Ho, Ho.”

“He’s off early tonight,” the Professor commented.

“Wish I was with him,” Nobby mumbled.

“Sorry? My hearing’s going a bit off.”

“Nothing. What were you saying about that?”

“Oh, yes,” the professor said, eager to display his wares. “My greatest invention, this one is.”

To Nobby, it still looked like an oven.

“This is my Particle Atomising Transporter. For short I call it-”

“Pat?” Nobby cut in, with an expectant smile.

“No,” the Professor said. “Bob!”

Nobby scratched his head. “But wasn’t...? Never mind.”

The Professor waited a moment, a perplexed expression on his face momentarily, then he continued.

“Yes, well. This is Bob. It can transport anything, anywhere. With this device I have bent the laws of space to allow travel between two places instantaneously.”

Nobby did not look as impressed as he felt he should. In truth, he didn't quite understand what he was being told. The Professor could have been declaring his undying love for a baboon and Nobby would have continued to stare with the same bemused face.

"There is only one of these anywhere. Do you know why that is?"

Nobby shook his head.

"Because it's the only one I made, that's why. Wouldn't want this type of thing getting out there into incompetent hands. They could go anywhere with it in the blink of an eye."

"Well," Nobby said ponderously. "Anyone can go anywhere anyway if they walk."

"Ah!" the Professor shouted, bouncing over and wagging his finger in front of Nobby's face until the young elf felt dizzy. "But they can't do it in the blink of an eye can they? Ha!"

"I guess not."

"You guess right. Now, climb inside and I'll show you how it works."

"Erm," Nobby said, looking inside the dark compartment. "Is it safe in there?"

"Of course it is!" the Professor said, pushing Nobby through the opening. "I've never had any casualties or accidents yet!"

"Oh well in that case," Nobby said ducking to avoid having his brow slapped against the metal frame. "I'm sure it can't hurt to give it a go. How many people have been in here?"

"You're the first," the Professor chuckled as he happily slammed the door.

A frantic explosion of small elf fists pounding against the inside of the door erupted from the teleporter.

"Heeeelp!"

"Don't worry," the Professor said. "It'll all be fine. Nothing could possibly go wrong. Now, where's that nuclear canister gone?"

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Claus felt good about himself.

The night had gone smoothly, smoother than it had in years, and the only change he had made was to cut Nobby from the proceedings. The elf was a liability. Ending up in a police cell on Christmas Eve of all things. If only they hadn't pulled him out of the cell so soon. Damn police and their rules.

But that was in the past. No point dwelling on such matters now. Nobby was safely back at the Pole and couldn't cause any problems this night.

Claus pulled the reins and the reindeers glided to the left, heading towards a small terrace of houses.

A few moments later the sleigh glided to a halt on the rooftops. Claus pulled the List from his coat and ran a chubby digit down the names. Wilson, Harris, Burton and Cock. There were some unfortunate surnames in the world.

Claus tucked the List safely back into the confines of his coat and turned to the thousands of sacks somehow contained in the back of the four by five sleigh. Like climbing down a chimney, it was never meant to be logical.

He searched through the labels, grumbling over some of the bags that had fallen out of line into those for other countries.

“Aha!” Claus exclaimed pulling out the sack he had been hunting for. “Just a quick check.”

He pulled open the sack and peered inside.

Wide eyed he pulled back and clamped the sack shut again.

It couldn't be possible. He couldn't have...

Like a man expecting to see his impending doom staring him in the face, Claus slowly opened up the sack again.

Inside were a number of brightly wrapped presents, all neatly labelled and ready to be laid beneath the trees in the houses below. That was all. Nothing else.

Claus breathed out a long sigh. He was expecting something to go wrong, that's what it was. He had to concentrate on getting the presents out and to hell with the past.

Hauling the sack onto his shoulder, he trudged over to the chimney and implausibly squashed his fat arse down it.

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Beyond the English Channel, Claus guided the sleigh across the skies of France.

There were only a handful of places Claus dreaded passing through. American no-fly zones where he frequently had to dodge missiles and bullets. The jungles of Africa with their spiders, snakes and vicious bastard monkeys. The tower littered skies of Tokyo where he frequently had to untangle the sleigh from a newly erected monstrosity. Then there were the cloudy French airways, ripe with the whiff of garlic and the sound of much love being made. He was just jealous really.

The one thing he did look forward to in France was the food and drink they left him. Champagne always turned out to be the drink of choice, along with some select brand of cheese and biscuits. Just for a few hours it made him feel slightly superior to those around him...with the exception of the French, obviously.

Claus wandered around the lower floor of a rather exquisite Parisian mansion, admiring the art works hung on the wall, the statues enclosed in numerous alcoves, and the large aquarium that took up more room than most people's homes.

Claus often wondered if he would be able to get a place like this when he came to retire. It couldn't be in France, obviously. He hated the name Noel.

The presents for this particular house had taken up two sacks. Claus screwed himself out of the fireplace for a second time when he heard a peculiar noise coming from somewhere nearby. It sounded...odd. It was like...he couldn't put his finger on it.

Looking around the room, Claus tried to locate the source of the sound. His eyes crossed to the left and strayed by an ornate mirror.

Two things happened at once. Claus realised that the sound he was hearing suddenly sounded impossibly like a very familiar, very inept elf yelling for help underwater, and as his eyes passed the room's reflection he saw, certainly saw, the distinct shape of Nobby floating through the giant aquarium with a fish hanging from his nose.

Turning around so fast his shoes made an ear-bursting shriek on the polished floor, Claus looked towards the tank. A large carp stared back at him.

He rubbed his eyes. There were still a dozen countries to go and he was hallucinating through tiredness already.

The sound of feet on the floor above spurred Claus to make a dash for the chimney. By the time the lights came on, and a portly nightdress-wearing Frenchman lumbered into the room, Claus was already airborne.

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Nobby.

Twice tonight Claus was certain he had seen the bloody imbecilic elf. He worked only one night a year so he could not put it down to the stress of the job. Then again, after last year...

Maybe he was suffering some kind of PCT – Past Christmas Tension. Enough had gone wrong last year to last him a career.

And it had all been down to that bloody elf.

He needed to look into getting some kind of therapy before next year. Jack Frost had offered him the number of someone to contact about his anger management after the police cell fiasco. Maybe he would give the number a call when he got back to the Pole.

The never dimming lights of New York illuminated the way ahead as Claus piloted the sleigh over Manhattan and into this final deliveries of the night. It was always hard delivering to the city that never sleeps, but with his years of experience he was able to flit from block to block, finding empty rooms and avoiding those bursting with drunken party season revellers.

“One more stop, boys,” Claus shouted over the reindeer. “Then it’s back home for a good long SHIT!”

Claus jerked the reins as Nobby appeared in midair a few yards ahead of the sleigh.

“Heeeeeee-“ Nobby cried, his yell cut off as he vanished into the ether.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Claus bellowed, pulling wildly to try and get the sleigh under control.

“eeeelp!” Nobby finished as he reappeared and slammed into Claus’ face.

The Saint tried to stay in his seat but the force sent him toppling to the remaining present sacks in a shower of expletives. The reins whipped free of his hands sending the sleigh into an unplanned descent. Presents flew from the rear of the sleigh in all directions, disappearing into the night.

Claus thrashed around, pulling himself up on the sides of the sleigh while his eyes darted around in search of the elf.

Once again, he knew that it couldn’t be possible, but the chaos around him and the throbbing in his nose told him otherwise. The elf was here somewhere and goddamn it he would find the little fu-

Claus’s thoughts of murder suddenly dissolved into blubbling as Times Square opened up around him and the sleigh hurtled at speed directly towards the Christmas tree dominating the neon lit quadrangle.

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Nobby collapsed out of the machine like a diver escaping a ruptured shark tank.

Sweat dribbled into his eyes and mucus streaked from his nose along the side of his face like long skinny fingers.

The blurriness of his vision combined with the bright lights of the room made it difficult to determine whether he had indeed escaped the machine or was now somewhere entirely different.

“What’s the matter with you?” the Professor said beside him, removing all doubt. “You didn’t tell me you had claustrophobia.”

“Claust...clau?” Nobby spluttered. “Claustrophobia! I...you...I...”

“Here, blow into this bag.”

Nobby took the bag without question and blew, then inhaled.

The next thing he knew he awakened in a chair on the far side of the room feeling a little light-headed and confused. The Professor was sitting in a chair opposite reading a copy of Inventor’s Weekly.

“What happened?” Nobby asked, the words coming slowly.

“You had a bit of a panic attack, it seems. I had to give you one of my calming inventions I made for when the reindeer start to get in one. The bag contained a mixture of natural calming aromas and the gas equivalent of horse tranquiliser.”

“Oh,” Nobby managed. “Is that safe?”

“Don’t know really. That’s the first time I’ve tried it. You woke up so I would count that as a good sign.”

“Oh,” Nobby said again. “About that machine...”

“Never mind that piece of junk. No good for nothing but causing hallucinations brought on by the lack of oxygen.”

“I thought I was your greatest invention!”

“Well, thank you for the compliment, Nobby. Maybe it will be one day but it needs some tinkering and twiddling.”

Nobby scratched his numb head. “But I thought you said...?”

“I said I’d have to show you my greatest invention, but then you got stuck in that contraption. Now,” he reached behind the chair, “this is my greatest invention.”

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Nobby hobbled out of the Professor’s workshop a few minute’s later munching on a toasted teacake.

He hadn’t wanted to burst the Professor’s bubble, but his mother used to have a machine that did exactly the same thing but with less fire.

The whole episode inside the would-be teleport machine still bothered him. The Professor had been adamant though. Perhaps it all had been a hallucination. In future he intended to think very carefully before clambering into anything smaller than his bed.

He trudged through the snow towards his hut, stopping only when he passed under the window of Claus’s house.

“Not again, Jack,” Mrs Claus said. “What’s he done this time?”

Nobby felt a small twitch in his eye.

“I’ll send one of the elves down with some clean clothes for him. How much is the bail this time? Ok.”

Nobby hurried on past the door, making it only a few yards before the voice of Mrs Claus hit his ears.

“Nobby? I need you to get over to New York with these for Jack Frost. That silly old fool of mine’s got himself in bother again. At least he can’t blame it on you this time.”

“Oh, I don’t think I can,” Nobby said. “I’ve got to feed Barney.”

“That’s ok. You’ll need to take him with you All of the reindeer have been impounded. Well, those that haven’t been taken into the animal hospital down there. Now, no arguments. I know things went wrong last year but that’s all forgotten now. Off you go.”

Nobby took the bag of money and separate bag of clothes. He headed into the goat shed where Barney greeted him with a vacant expression and a low fart.

It was a sign of things to come, surely.

Soon Nobby was coming in to land in New York. Barney’s feet trotted to a halt on the icy pavement and Nobby dismounted. He tied the goat to a lamppost and looked at the note attached to his deliveries.

Before he was able to check the name of street, the thin, blue-tinged figure of Jack Frost stepped out of a doorway to his left.

“Ah,” Frost said in his polite, slightly snobbish tone. “She sent you. I sometimes wonder if she wants him back at all.”

“What do you mean?” Nobby said innocently.

“I think it is best you do not know what he has been threatening to do with you when he sees you. Have you been out at all tonight?”

Nobby shook his head.

“Hmm, I did not think so,” Frost said, stroking his pointed chin. “He seems to believe he has seen you in three different places tonight. I think he needs to take some time out when he gets back to the Pole. I will take those off you. It would probably be best if he did not see you right now. I am having enough trouble convincing these to let him go. I suspect that having him launch a potentially lethal attack on someone inside their station would not help matters.”

“I’ll be getting back then,” Nobby said, inwardly thanking his stars for the chance to leave without seeing Claus.

Frost opened the door and walked back into the station. Nobby watched him go, then wandered back to Barney.

He untied the goat, climbed on its back and trotted up the road by the open window of the station.

“He was here? Here? Let me out! I’ll get the truth out of him! I’ll stuff the little shit and have him put on the mantle piece!”

Nobby paused only a fraction of a second before spurring Barney on. It was a long ride back to the Pole. Plenty of time to think how he was going to keep out of Claus’s way in the foreseeable future. It was going to be a long twelve months before Christmas came again.

Barney the goat took flight and Nobby flew over the smouldering stump of the Times Square Christmas tree.

Yes. It was definitely going to be a long twelve months.