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ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

NOT A HEARTWARMING YULETIDE NOVELLA

By Chuck McKenzie

**DAFT
NOTIONS**

With a soft pop of burnt air, Sneet reconstituted in a small, rank-smelling cubicle in a room at the back of the building and found himself sitting in the lap of a rotund, white-bearded, middle-aged human male dressed in a crimson suit almost identical to Sneet's own, clutching a half-full bottle of fluid, with his pants around his ankles. Before the human could cry out, Sneet cocooned him, catching the bottle as it fell. The cocoon writhed on the floor for a moment until the sedatives kicked in. Sneet nodded, then sniffed the open top of the bottle and recoiled.

fermented sugars, their implant whispered. utilised locally as a beverage, as well as an industrial solvent and fuel

<Frek! Is it lethal?>

eventually

<Why was this information not included in the cerebral download?>

omissions are inevitable—a note has been uploaded to central

“Hoy! Stan!”

Sneet looked up. A small, frustrated-looking human male wearing a white shirt with a black tie and slacks stood in the cubicle doorway. The badge pinned to his breast read: HI, MY NAME IS JEREMY. “Just what the heck—?” His expression changed to one of surprise. “Oh, sorry, I thought—I saw you standing there in your Santa suit and just assumed you were Stan, using the loo without closing the door. As usual. Er...do you happen to know where I can find Stan? I was sure I spotted him sneaking in here.” He spied the bottle in Sneet's hand. “I certainly hope that's not what I think it is!”

“It is—” Sneet regarded the label on the bottle, “Clan MacGregor Blended Scotch Whiskey, Product of Scotland. But,” they added, noting Jeremy's expression, “it does not belong to me.”

Jeremy's shoulders slumped. “Well, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. So where on earth is Stan? Any idea?”

“Not here.” *Too obvious?* “He went...outside. Of this building.” Sneet performed a quick sift through the cultural lexicon downloaded to their cortex. “To have a smoke.”

“But...I didn't see him leave the bathroom.”

Sneet performed another sift. “He...went out of the window.” They pointed towards the small half-open aperture at the top of the wall at the back of the cubicle.

Jeremy's lip curled. “Again? Frankly, it's hard to reconcile his apparent skills in parkour with the fact that he's seldom able to walk in a straight line after lunch.” He glanced at the bottle again. “I'm rather surprised we didn't hear an explosion when he lit his cigarette. Unless that's still to come.” His eyes narrowed. “What on earth is *that*?”

Sneet followed Jeremy's gaze. *Frek! The cocoon!* Beneath their human disguise, spinnerets tensed, preparing to spray.

"Good Lord!" Jeremy shook his head despairingly. "What *is* this, a gosh-darned *squat*? Cigarettes, alcohol, and now a *beanbag*? Let me tell you, if we weren't so gosh-darned busy, and the agency wasn't so short on Santas this year—" He paused. "You *are* from the agency, I presume?"



Earlier...

Screaming. Flashes of laser-fire. Boiling mud explodes around them. G'norr soldiers fly backwards, reduced to gobbets of seared flesh. The metallic odours of copper and burnt chitin flavour the air. Greasy smoke rolls across the front, lending cover to the fungoid horrors stampeding towards them. Crouching low, Sneet glares down the sights of their maser, squeezing off precise shots as fleeting gaps in the smoke reveal glimpses of teeth and claws and the diabolical glow of atomic weaponry. Enemy combatants burst like microwaved optics, the survivors rapidly closing the gap between the two opposing forces. Sneet switches their maser to a sustained beam and rakes it across the oncoming horde, flaying tissue from cartilage, until the battery drains and dies. Dropping the weapon, Sneet stands and unsheathes the long razorglass blade at their waist as the slathering monsters bear down upon the remaining g'norr troops –

"Well??"

Sneet blinked. "I—apologies, Fleetlord. Could you repeat, please?" The screams of dying soldiers still echoed in their hindbrain.

Kevlaar fixed Sneet with a cold stare. "I *said*...you will accept the mission?" It was barely a question; more a traditional invitation to comply.

Sneet glanced at the light-up display on the conference table in front of them. "Operation Santa?"