



Merry Christmas Eve, young Mellemas!

I apologize if my writing looks rushed. As you may imagine, Christmas Eve is the busiest day of the year, and all of us at the North Pole are running at our limit. My office has been working around the clock to respond to the flood of last minute letters¹. And we must do it short-staffed: poor Avvu got recruited to haul presents from the workshops to the sleigh. (Avvu: Hauling the presents is hard work, but they give us a great dinner afterward. Plus, I still snuck away long enough to check Erno's letter!).

So with no more ado, here is the next chapter:

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The boys blinked, trying to process the little creature in their garage.

"You're a..." Jer began.

"Gnome." Kanute said.

Bri hesitated. "Like a garden--"

"No, not a garden gnome²!" Kanute huffed.

¹ A word of advice--if you want your letter to Santa to get full and proper attention, be sure to get it in before the third week of Advent.

² In case you meet a gnome, you should know they consider those garden decorations highly offensive. Never bring the subject up, no matter how much you are tempted to giggle.

“Are you sure?” Jer said, and the boys laughed in spite of themselves. For all Kanute’s protests, the comparison was uncanny. He looked like a garden gnome brought to life--the same pointy hat and bushy beard, the same bulbous nose, the same ruddy complexion.

“I do not come from a garden” Kanute said, “I come from the North Pole.”

“Like with Santa?” Bri asked. Jer and Matt looked at each other, unsure of how to respond.

“Yes.” Kanute replied, crossing his arms.

“But I thought Santa had elves...” Jer said.

“The North Pole has more than elves. Much more.” Kanute replied. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, you three have caused enough trouble already.”

Kanute marched toward the door to the garage. He jumped and jumped, his fingers stretching for the handle. Face flushed, he eyed a box he could stand on.

“We’ll let you out,” Matt said, stepping in front of the box. “But only if you tell us what’s really going on.”

The gnome fumed, then turned to the door knob and sighed.

“You boys lost something. An object of great power.” Kanute lowered his voice to a whisper. “The Heart of the North.”

The boys’ stomachs dropped. Afraid to look up, Bri asked, “Is that the jewel that--”

“You know full well it is! That’s why you tried to steal it!”

“We didn’t steal anything.” Jer said. “At least, *I* didn’t.”

“I was just looking.” Matt said. “I didn’t run it into the yard.”

“I only wanted to . . .” Bri’s voice trailed off. “Why’s it important?” he finally said.

Kanute looked like your dad if someone asked who John Elway was. “The Stone of the Saint? The Protector of the Pole? Do you really not know?” One look at Bri, with his head down and shoulders slumped, gave Kanute the answer. For the first time, his face softened.

“The whole tale is too long to tell. The jewel was a gift to Santa Claus from St. Nicholas himself. It contains all the blessings of St. Nicholas, as well as the best magic of elves and gnomes and fairies. It is immensely powerful.”

The boys’ heads spun. Matt wanted to know why Santa and St. Nicholas were different people. Jer tried wrapping his brain around not only gnomes, but elves and fairies.

“What does the jewel do?” Bri asked.

“What doesn’t it do? It gives the North Pole its magic. It lets reindeer fly and polar bears talk. It slows down time for Santa’s sleigh on Christmas Eve. It protects the North Pole from goblin attacks.”

“Goblins?” Matt said, still hoping this was all some joke.

“Yes. That’s why I used my trusty find-o-scope to come get it when it fell out of Santa’s sleigh.” Kanute held up a gadget that looked like a radar gun, only brass and covered with valves and gauges. “But before I could get it, you three ran it outside to be taken by a troll!”

“Wait, what?” Color drained from Matt’s face as he connected the lumbering shadow and giant snow prints.

“And that means, as we speak, the troll is bringing the Heart of the North to Krampus.” A chill pulsed through the boys, though they didn’t know why. “The North Pole is in grave danger, and I must tell Santa. Immediately.” Kanute glared at the door knob.

“Oh.” Jer said, mind elsewhere. He started opening the door.

“Wait!” All heads turned to Matt. “Don’t we get a wish?” Bri shoved Matt in the back, and Jer groaned. “What?” Matt said, “I read it in a book.”

Kanute gave a great, deep sigh. “It’s true. Capturing a gnome entitles you to one wish.”

The boys’ eyes grew wild.

“We should wish for a pet dinosaur.” Matt said. “How about a brachiosaurus?”

“Where would we keep a dinosaur?” Jer responded. “We should just wish for a billion dollars.”

“How about if I wish for the brachiosaurus, and you wish for the billion dollars. That way we can afford to feed it and still--”

“Why would I share my billion dollars with you?”

“Come on! I’d let you ride the brachiosaurus.”

“It’s one wish between all three of you.” Kanute said, toe beating against the concrete. “And neither of those would work anyway.”

Matt was about to ask what the rules were³ when Bri’s voice cut him off. “We wish to go to the North Pole!”

Kanute nodded. “Follow me.”

“But what about...” Matt groaned before following his brothers and Kanute out the front door. Then he gasped. Under the aspen was a red metal ball the size of a go-cart. Kanute pressed a button on his belt, and the ball opened down the middle, revealing a seat and control panel filled with gears and levers.

“Climb aboard.” Kanute said, hopping into the seat. “We may be a bit squished.”

Bri cheered, and Jer dashed to get the best spot. They ignored Matt, who was standing to the side and complaining.

The top began closing with a hydraulic wheeze. “Come on!” Jer shouted to Matt.

“I don’t know. What if--”

³ You may be curious as to why these wishes did not work. Unfortunately, there is no way to know. The “Rule of Wish-Making” is a fiercely guarded secret among the gnomes. No outsider has ever learned it. Our best guess is a treatise by the elf scholar Vilho in 1732 entitled “An Examination of the Rules Governing Gnomish Wish-Granting Based on an Exhaustive Examination of Discrete Examples of the Same.” His review of all 218 known instances of wish requests hints at a system governed by rules both byzantine and capricious. For instance, it seems that wishes for gold may only be granted if the wisher is wearing a purple shirt. Wishes for physical traits such as beauty and strength require the moon to be shining at that moment. And if you wish for someone to fall in love with you, there must be a bluebird within singing distance. We think. We have no idea why these rules exist, or even if they are correct. For what it’s worth, I once asked Kanute his opinion of Vilho’s work. He laughed and said it was a charming story.

Jer and Bri each grabbed an arm, yanking Matt inside just before the top locked shut.

A whirl of cogs, a whistle of steam, and they were gone.

* * *

And that is as far as I can go this year. One of the kitchen gnomes has asked for my help in preparing dinner for the polar bears. Sigh. I do not mind cooking in general. But the polar bears' favorite meal is *shudder* lutefisk. I only hope the smell does not peel the paint off the walls. (Avvu: Don't listen to Erno or your Grandma Sue--lutefisk is the best food in the world! The taste of fish, the texture of jello, all wrapped in a slimy film of skin. It's almost too delicious for words....).

If any of you spot Santa tonight, please say hello for me. He is so busy this time of year that I rarely see him, and I fear he is not getting enough sleep. Leaving a plate of cookies and can of Dr. Pepper should help him feel better.

Have the Merriest Christmas!

Festively yours,
Erno