Best Present Ever!

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Arnie Bellingham, age seven, looked at the big package sadly. He made no move toward opening it.

He had asked for it, but he had hoped Santa would somehow know he didn’t really want it. Alas, it seemed Santa’s magic wasn’t that thorough—or perhaps Arnie had done something to annoy Santa, and this was his punishment. He didn’t think he had been naughty, but the big man’s standards were a little vague.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” his mother asked.

Arnie looked up and tried to smile. “I think I’ll wait until I can take it outside,” he said.

“Well, okay,” she said, “but after all the fuss you made about wanting it, I thought you’d at least want to take it out of the box.”

“I will,” Arnie assured her. “I’m... I’m savoring it.”

She smiled, and leaned over against Arnie’s Dad, nuzzling his ear. Arnie seized his opportunity, picked up the big box, and headed back to his room. Once there he set the box on his bed and stared at it.

He really didn’t want a Super Mega Soaker—but Jayden Abbott, three houses up the street, did, and Jayden had been far too naughty to expect Santa to cooperate. Jayden’s parents had told him flat out that they knew he was on the naughty list, and had been pretty blunt that they weren’t about to give him any weapons, either, not even toy ones—they did seem to have some issues with their son’s behavior, even though Arnie was pretty sure they didn’t comprehend the true extent of Jayden’s evil. When Arnie had hinted to them that Jayden had been bullying him, the Abbotts had talked about Jayden getting carried away sometimes, Jayden didn’t always know his own strength, and he and Arnie would just have to work it out between themselves. They had told Jayden to behave himself, and Jayden had been apologetic and remorseful—until the instant his mother was out of sight, whereupon he had smiled hatefully at Arnie and warned him not to try that again, if he didn’t want more of his toys broken or stolen.

His own folks had been even less help. When Arnie had told them Jayden stole his stuff, they had punished him for lying to cover up losing things without even asking any of the Abbotts about it. Mrs. Abbott would at least look, and if Jayden hadn’t had a chance to hide whatever it was yet, Arnie got it back. Temporarily.

But Jayden never got punished, and the thefts and breakage and threats continued. Arnie couldn’t even avoid Jayden; since they were the only two boys near their age in the neighborhood, their mothers insisted they play together. Mrs. Abbott said Arnie was a good influence on her boy, and Arnie’s Mom was always worried about Arnie spending too much time alone, so they were thrown together whether they liked it or not. Which suited Jayden just fine. It meant he had someone to hit, and a source of goodies to swipe.

Arnie had learned not to ask for anything expensive for his birthday or Christmas, since Jayden would just steal it or break it, so his folks had been surprised when he asked Santa for the biggest water gun available. They never seemed to guess it was because Jayden had grabbed him from behind on Thanksgiving, when the grown-ups were all inside getting their dinners ready, and had twisted his arm almost up to his neck, and had ordered him to ask for it if he didn’t want to get the snot beat out of him. Jayden and Arnie both knew that Arnie would never get to use it—not unless being Jayden’s target counted. The best Arnie could hope for was that Jayden would fill it with water, instead of something more inventive and disgusting, before turning it on him.

Now it was Christmas morning, and the Super Mega Soaker was here, using up all Arnie’s credit with Santa for the year. He sighed as he stared at the box.

The box moved.

Arnie blinked, and stared harder. Had he imagined that? He took a step closer.

The box wobbled.

It shouldn’t do that, Arnie was pretty sure. He had been planning to deliver it to Jayden unopened, so that Jayden couldn’t blame him if there was anything busted or missing, but now he was having second thoughts. He put a hand on the box to steady it, and felt it jerk again.

“Okay,” he said to no one. “That’s not right.”

“Hello?” a squeaky voice said, from somewhere inside the box. “Is someone out there?”

Arnie felt a sudden sinking dread. Santa had messed up, and put the wrong toy in the box. This was some talking teddy bear or something, not a Super Mega Soaker at all. If Jayden didn’t get his water gun, Arnie might find himself losing a few baby teeth earlier than he wanted. He grabbed the scissors off his desk and attacked the box. A moment later he pried up a flap and started to look inside.

A tiny hand reached up out of the box, and the squeaky voice said, “About time!”

Arnie stepped back, and stared as an elf climbed out of the box.

Arnie hadn’t even been sure that elves really existed. Sure, he knew Santa was supposed to have a bunch of elves working for him, making toys, but Arnie wasn’t stupid; he had noticed that Santa’s presents arrived looking exactly like the ones in the toy stores, so he had figured that Santa bought them all from regular factories, and the elves and the workshop at the North Pole were just a story. He had thought there might be a warehouse up in Canada or Alaska somewhere, but not a workshop at the North Pole.

But the green-clad, pointy-eared thing staring at him out of the Super Mega Soaker box was unquestionably an elf, and not a talking teddy bear.

“Hey,” it said. “Where am I?”

“You’re in my room,” Arnie replied.

The elf looked around, taking in the Transformers bedspread and the shelves of junk. “Yeah,” it said. “I can see that. But where’s your room?”

“In my house,” Arnie said. Then, realizing what the elf probably meant, he added, “1205 East Palmcroft Drive, Tempe, Arizona.”

“Arizona?” The elf scratched his ear. “That’s one of the United States, right?”

“Uh... yeah,” Arnie said.

“That’s all right, then,” the elf said. He looked out the window. “Pretty sunny for December, isn’t it?”

Arnie looked out the window as well. He shrugged. “About the same as always,” he said.

The elf jumped out of the box, the bells on the curled toes of his shoes jingling, and scampered over to the window. He shaded his eyes as he looked out.

“Where’s the snow?” he said.

“Snow?” Arnie was baffled. “It doesn’t snow here.”

It was the elf’s turn to look baffled. “What?”

“It doesn’t snow here,” Arnie repeated. “Anyway, who are you, and what are you doing here? Why were you in that box?”

“I’m Dimble,” the elf said, holding out a hand, which Arnie cautiously shook. “I escaped! They always told me there was no way out, that we were all trapped there for life, but I did it—I got out, and here I am!”

“Escaped from where?” Arnie asked, confused.

“From Santa’s workshop, of course!” Dimble looked out the window again. “It really doesn’t snow here? I’d heard there were places like that, but I thought they were a myth! If it doesn’t snow, how does Santa land his sleigh?”

“I don’t know,” Arnie said. “I never thought about it.” He hesitated, then asked, “What do you mean, escaped?”

“I got away! I’m free!”

That didn’t make any sense to Arnie. “Was Santa keeping you prisoner or something?”

“Well, duh!” Dimble said. “Have you ever seen an elf anywhere else but the North Pole?”

“No,” Arnie admitted.

“You think that’s because we all want to stay in that frozen wasteland? Uh uh. It’s because the only way in or out is in Santa’s sleigh, unless you want to walk across about a thousand miles of ice and snow.”

That didn’t sound right at all. “But I thought Santa was a good guy!” Arnie protested.

“That’s what they want you to think,” Dimble said, tapping a finger on his head. “That’s what they tell all of us. They say it isn’t safe anywhere else, that elves were almost extinct until Santa brought our ancestors to the Pole, but I don’t buy it. He just wants a supply of cheap labor, so he set up his workshop in the middle of nowhere and tells us scare stories about the rest of the world.”

“You really think so?” Arnie asked.

“I’m sure of it!”

“But you got out.”

“Sure, by hiding in that box,” Dimble said, pointing at the empty carton. “Santa delivered me here right on schedule. But none of the others had the brains and nerve to try it.”

“Wow,” Arnie said.

“Yeah. I got tired of copying all the toys kids asked for, so I buried that Super Mega Soaker in a snowdrift behind the brewery, and got my buddy Kibz to seal me in the box and make sure it went on the sleigh, and here I am!”

That reminded Arnie of something. “The Super Mega Soaker?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s in a snowdrift at the North Pole?”

“Yeah.” Dimble saw the horrified expression on Arnie’s face, and said, “Is that a problem? I know you asked for one, kid, but I can make it up to you somehow—I’m pretty good with my hands.”

“It wasn’t for me,” Arnie said, swallowing. “It was for Jayden, up the street. He’s going to beat me up if I don’t give it to him.”

Dimble looked shocked. “He what?”

“He’ll beat me up.”

It was the elf’s turn to look horrified. “But... but... nice kids don’t do that!”

“He’s not a nice kid,” Arnie said. “He’s a naughty one. That’s why he had me ask for the Super Mega Soaker—Santa never brings him anything.”

“But... but that’s not right,” Dimble said. “Good kids are supposed to get their presents to keep. Naughty kids aren’t supposed to take them!”

Arnie grimaced. “Tell Jayden that.”

“I will!” Dimble exclaimed. “You just wait and see, I will!” Then he hesitated. “Um... how old is this Jayden?”

“Eight,” Arnie said. “And he’s big for his age.”

“Hey, I can take an eight year old!” Dimble said, puffing out his chest. “Just you wait and see.”

Arnie looked at the elf, which stood scarcely a foot and a half tall including his green cap, and tried not to show his disbelief. Maybe Dimble knew kung fu or something, he thought.

“You show me this bully,” Dimble said, “and I’ll give him the thrashing he deserves!”

“Okay,” Arnie said. “I’ll take you over to his house this afternoon.” Maybe that would take care of the problem of the missing water gun—Arnie could show Jayden the empty box and tell him there’d been a screw-up, and the elf would back up his story, even if he couldn’t beat Jayden up.

Or maybe the elf really could beat up Jayden. Elves were magical, weren’t they? Dimble had somehow survived the trip from the North Pole with no food, water, or air-holes; maybe he was stronger than he looked.

Nonetheless, Arnie was wary, a few hours later, as he approached Jayden’s house, cutting across the back yards as usual. Dimble was back in the box, which was tucked under Arnie’s arm. Jayden liked to surprise his visitors. He had once surprised Arnie with a whiffle bat to the head, and when Arnie protested Jayden had shrugged and said, “Hey, it’s just plastic. Be glad I didn’t have a wood one.”

Arnie rounded the final fence cautiously, and there was Jayden, throwing a kickball up and catching it. He spotted Arnie, and said, “There you are!” as he flung the ball straight at Arnie’s face. “What took so long? Did you get it?”

Arnie ducked, and the ball bounced off the plank fence, ricocheting harmlessly off to the side. Neither boy paid any attention to it as Jayden focused his attention on the box under Arnie’s arm.

“You did get it!” he said. “Bring it here!”

“There’s a problem,” Arnie said, but then Jayden was grabbing the box and pulling it free, and Arnie decided he didn’t need to say anything. Jayden would find out for himself, soon enough.

Jayden dropped the box to the ground, fell to his knees, and tore open the cardboard flaps—and a foot and a half of angry elf jumped up and socked him in the nose.

“Hey!” Jayden said, and Arnie expected him to grab at his nose—Arnie knew that that’s what he would have done. Jayden, though, was made of sterner stuff, and instead he grabbed at Dimble’s throat, closing both hands around the elf’s neck.

The elf’s eyes widened in surprise, and he thrust a tiny fist at Jayden’s chin. It glanced off as the boy jerked his head aside.

“You wanna fight?” Jayden said. “Okay, let’s fight, then!” He stood up, his hands still locked around Dimble’s neck.

Dimble flailed wildly, kicking both feet at Jayden’s belly, both hands jabbing at his face. Jayden did nothing to avoid these blows, beyond blinking whenever one came near his eyes.

Arnie watched, not saying a word. It was quite clear that Dimble did not know kung fu, or have any sort of magical fighting prowess.

Jayden let the elf pound futilely for a moment, then turned, took two long steps, and slammed the elf against the fence.

“Owww!” Dimble squealed.

Jayden swung again, and a third time, and Dimble went limp. Arnie gasped. Jayden held his captive up and looked at it.

“Holy jeez,” he said. “It’s an elf!”

“Yeah,” Arnie said.

“Cool! Where’d you get it?”

“It was in the box instead of the gun,” Arnie said.

“No foolin’? Wow.” Jayden stared at the dangling creature. “That might be even better than a soaker!”

Arnie made a noise that he hoped Jayden would take as agreement.

“Here, you take it,” Jayden said, handing Dimble to Arnie. “I gotta show my mom, but she says never to bring animals in the house.”

“I don’t think an elf is—” Arnie began, as he took the limp elf from his tormentor.

“You hold on, okay? If you let it get away I’ll knock the crap outta you.”

Before Arnie could reply, Jayden had turned and was running toward the house, bellowing, “Hey, Mom! You gotta see this!”

Arnie stood, and watched him go. Then he looked down at Dimble, and saw one eye open.

“Is he gone?” the elf whispered.

“Yeah,” Arnie said. “But he’s coming right back.”

“Then let me get the heck out of here!”

“I thought you were going to thrash him.”

Dimble blushed. “I guess I misjudged a little,” he said.

“A little,” Arnie agreed.

“Come on, kid, let me go! Nobody’s supposed to know elves are still around. I can’t let him keep me prisoner—if I was gonna do that, I might as well have stayed home!”

“What’ll you do, though? Where will you go?”

Dimble let out a shuddering sigh. “I don’t know,” he said. “I guess I’ll head north.”

“Back to the North Pole?”

“Eventually, maybe. Come on, kid, don’t let him take me!”

“He’ll beat me up if I let you go.”

“No, he... I... oh, heck, kid, I’m sorry, but please...”

Arnie sighed deeply. He dropped Dimble to the lawn. “Merry Christmas,” he said.

“Thanks, kid—you are on the nice list!” Dimble tipped his hat, and then scurried away. He moved much faster than Arnie would have expected, and was long gone by the time Jayden and his mother appeared.

“Come on, Mom!” Jayden said, pulling at his mother’s hand. “You gotta see the elf!”

“I’m coming. Hello, Arnie.”

“Hello, Mrs. Abbott,” Arnie replied.

“Where is it, Arn?” Jayden demanded.

“Where’s what?” Arnie asked. Jayden wouldn’t hit him with his mother right here, he knew that. As for later, Jayden was already going to kick his butt for letting Dimble go; lying about it probably wouldn’t make it any worse.

Jayden stared at him. “What are you, retarded? Where’s the elf?”

Arnie was committed now. “What elf?” he asked.

“Don’t be stupid,” Jayden said. “The elf. The one that was here! The one I beat up!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jayden stared at him, then turned to his mother. “It was here, Mom, I swear! A real elf, with a funny hat and jingle bells on its feet!”

“Jayden, elves aren’t real,” Mrs. Abbott said. She sounded worried. “You’re old enough to know that.”

“But I saw it, Mom! One of Santa’s elves! It tried to hit me, so I picked it up and knocked it around, and I gave it to Arnie to hold, and he let it get away!”

“There are no elves, Jayden. Santa isn’t real. We told you that.” She glanced at Arnie, her expression momentarily even more worried. She probably thought she shouldn’t have said that in front of him, but it didn’t bother Arnie; he’d heard grown-ups say Santa wasn’t real before. He figured it was just more weird adult stuff, like all that politics talk, or the kissing thing.

“But I saw it!” Jayden insisted. “I held it in my hands! I hit it against the fence!”

She turned back to her son, her expression still worried, but now angry as well. “You did what?”

“I hit it against the fence. It was kicking me!”

She turned to Arnie. “Did you see this?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Did he have an animal of some kind that he was abusing?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. I didn’t see one.”

“Did you see an elf?”

“No, ma’am. Of course not. Elves are just baby stories.”

Jayden’s mouth fell open as he stared at Arnie. “You liar!” he said.

Arnie didn’t say anything; he just tried to look innocent.

Mrs. Abbott grabbed Jayden by the arm. “I’ve had enough of this,” she said. “We’ve put up with you being rude and destructive too long, because boys will be boys and we thought you’d outgrow it, but now even your fantasies are about hitting things! I don’t care what your father says, Jayden, you are going to see a therapist, and you are going to stop telling stupid lies, and you are going to start behaving like a civilized human being. It’s Christmas, and here you are making up stories about hurting Santa’s elves!” She looked at Arnie. “Arnie, go home, please. I’m afraid Jayden is not going to play with you today.”

“Okay, Mrs. Abbott.”

“I think Jayden may be going to a new school soon, too.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Arnie lied.

“Run on home.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Arnie turned, picked up his empty box, and headed home. As he walked, he heard Jayden screaming wild protests about elves and stolen water guns and Santa cheating.

He saw no sign of Dimble. He hoped the elf was okay.

As he arrived in his own yard his mother was standing by the back door. “Oh, there you are!” she said. She saw the open box in his hand. “How’s the squirt gun?”

“Fine,” Arnie said. “I let Jayden borrow it.”

She frowned. “I’m not sure that was a good idea,” she said. “Oh, I found this in the wrapping.” She held out a booklet.

Arnie took it, and saw it was the instructions for the Super Mega Soaker. It was sticky on the back—apparently it had been stuck to the outside of the box. “Thanks, Mom,” he said. He opened it, mildly curious about the toy he hadn’t gotten.

There was handwriting in it, in green ink. Startled, Arnie glanced up at his mother, but she was already walking back into the house. If she had written a note in it, Arnie thought she would have stayed around to watch him read it. He looked down at the instructions.

“Arnie—” the note said, in unfamiliar, old-fashioned handwriting that was surprisingly easy to read. “You didn’t really want the Super Mega Soaker anyway, did you? And Dimble needed a chance to see the world. Hope it works out. Don’t worry, I’ll find Dimble and pick him up before he gets into too much trouble. Merry Christmas!” It was signed, “Santa.”

Arnie stared at it, and almost tripped as he walked into the kitchen door.

“So did you like your present?” his mother asked from where she stood by the sink.

Arnie looked up at her, and broke into the biggest grin he’d worn since the Abbotts moved in up the street. He looked at the empty box, at the instructions, and at the box again.

“I loved it!” he said. “Best present ever!”