

Canisfidelis presents:
Shiner and the Snow Globe

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Once upon a Christmastime, in the nights leading up to Christmas day, I found myself attending one of those parties that I would have rather have skipped.

I was not trying to be a Scrooge, as it were, but I knew few enough people here, and those I did know were engaged in their own conversations. Perhaps I should have used the opportunity to reach out to strangers, but frankly I just wasn't in the mood for it, and so rather than make the effort I busied myself with admiring my host's Christmas decorations. My eyes were caught by one particularly ornate snow globe.

It was beautiful, truly. It was a snowy sculpture of the North Pole, in the middle of which was a finely-crafted depiction of Santa's workshop. The miniature building even had lighting, and peeking in through the windows I could see the elves hard at work - building toys, carrying stacks of presents, tending to reindeer, loading the sleigh.

I had only picked the globe up as a diversion, but it was so gorgeous, so finely made, that I found myself genuinely fascinated by it. I gave it a swirl in my hands, sending the snow up in a blizzard around the workshop, and as I watched the flakes fall, I turned the globe over, staring intently into it, attempting to locate Santa himself.

Finding the jolly red saint proved to be more difficult than I expected, and as I turned the globe around and around, I shifted my stance. I must have stepped on something slippery, because I lost my balance, and felt myself tipping over. I could possibly have fixed my step, but my focus was on the snow globe, which I dared not let fall and break. So I let myself go as I pulled the snow globe closer, attempting to protect it as I fell. However, as I pulled it in, rather than go towards my chest, it went towards my face, and I saw the scene of the workshop grow. At first I thought it only seemed larger as it got closer, but as I continued to fall, I saw it unmistakably grow larger, until the snowy fields took up the whole of my vision.

By this point I had long expected to fall upon the house's wooden floor, but there was no floor, no ground to break my fall. Down below me suddenly was an endless plain of white,

rapidly drawing closer, and a workshop I was no longer really in a position to appreciate. I was idly curious if, behind me, I could see the roof of the house I had just been in, but it turned out to be quite hard to turn around in free fall, particularly when you didn't expect to be skydiving tonight.

I managed to keep nearly entirely from screaming as I plummeted, though mostly because I had very little time before I hit the ground.

I cratered into a pile of snow, and was immediately buried deep into the powder. It was incredibly soft, unbelievably so, like I had landed in a pile of the world's softest pillows. When I realized I was still alive, I carefully picked myself up and shook snow off my clothes. I shivered. The sweater I was wearing provided some heat, but it wasn't nearly warm enough to be outside in the snow. Thankfully, as I looked about, I saw I wasn't too far from the workshop. It looked even more beautiful seeing it full-sized, with its windows all aglow with that warm, inviting light, looking even more inviting with the promise of shelter from the snow. I picked myself up, brushed myself off, and started walking towards the workshop, shivering with every step.

Before I could even knock on the door, it opened, as though whoever was inside was expecting me. I found myself being greeted by a short, cheerful lad, bearing round rosy cheeks and festive red clothes, who promptly took me by the arm and pulled me inside.

"Come in, come in! It's cold out there, and you're letting out all the hot air," he said, quickly pushing the door closed as I stepped in.

I was shivering too much, my beak chattering too hard, to really appreciate the fantastic nature of my circumstances as I stepped in from the cold. Fortunately, my rescuer quickly pulled me over to a blazing fireplace, laid a warm blanket over my shoulders, and pressed a cup of hot cocoa into my hands - one of the most delicious cups of cocoa I had sipped in my life, with a heaping topping of whipped cream that left me with a white whipped cream mustache once I'd had a drink.

The lad laughed at my mess, but offered me a towel with a smile. "You had quite a fall, didn't you? Welcome to the North Pole, my name is Chief Elf Okami!"

"Ah..." I stammered, taking the towel and wiping my mouth. "...did you say you're an elf?"

Okami gave me a proud grin. "I did, and the chief elf in fact! I oversee toy production and distribution up here at the north pole, pretty much number two to Santa herself!"

"I...see," I said, still not entirely convinced but unable to argue with that logic, particularly to someone who'd shown me nothing but kindness. "In that case, thank you, and pleased to meet you, Okami, my name is Shiner. So, is that where I am? The North Pole? And I got here by falling into a snow globe?"

“Probably!” Okami said, giving a goodhearted shrug. “There’re lots of ways people get here - the sleigh is the most common, but there’s been a few magic doodads that bring people here over the years. We even used to have a train that ran straight here, so a snow globe doesn’t sound too weird now.”

I nodded. “I see...well, while I hate to ask to leave so soon, do you know how I can get back home? My friends and family will wonder where I’ve disappeared to.”

“Oh, sure,” Okami said. “The boss will probably know how to get you back. I’ll take you to her - do you mind if we take a bit of the long route? We’re in our last-minute rush and there’s work I can do on the way.”

I didn’t wish to be an inconvenience, so I nodded. I quickly finished off my cocoa and went to follow him, quickening my pace to keep up - for being a shorter fellow, this Okami had quite a quick stride.

After a brisk stroll down a corridor, we passed through a wide set of double doors into a toy workshop, where people in elf clothes took up seats down long tables, building, polishing, packing, and wrapping toys of various sorts. It was a flurry of activity, and I watched with amazement at how efficient some of them were.

Okami went off to check on one of the stations as I watched, so I took my time, scanning over the scene, when my eyes fell on one particular elf. She was a young lady, with very fluffy hair under her hat, and she was crying. Without thinking, I hurried over to her side.

“Hey, hey - what’s wrong?” I asked.

The girl could hardly reply between sniffles. I looked down at her work station and saw she had been building a remote controlled car, and a piece of the frame had broken.

“I don’t...” she sobbed. “I can’t fix it, everyone else is too busy, and it’s for a boy who’s been very nice this year...”

I gently patted her on the back, my eyes scanning over the table. I didn’t have much experience making toys, but I was a bit handy, and as I examined the toy and the tools she had available, I formulated a plan.

I took the toy car and worked quickly, adding in a few extra supports and some glue to fix the break. That would be enough to hold it in place, but the crack was still visible. To fix that, I added a bit more paint to the more subtle areas, then covered most of it with a racing stripe that went down the length of the car. The end result looked as good as new - no one would see where the break was if they didn’t know it was there already.

I passed the car back to the girl, and was surprised as suddenly every elf down the worktable suddenly cheered and applauded for me. As for the girl, she wiped her eyes and took the toy, thanking me profusely as she wrapped her arms around me in a warm, tight hug.

I barely had time to tell her “you’re welcome” before Okami was at my side again, beckoning me onwards to his next stop, so I waved the workers farewell as I followed him on.

Our next stop appeared to be the reindeer stables, where the elves were giving a last check over the deer before they left on their big trip. Okami was off quickly to talk to the stable hands, so I went to peruse the stalls, watching the reindeer as they watched me right back.

My attention was pulled off to the side as I heard the sounds of exertion. One of the elves, a young boy who was shorter even than my guide, was attempting to climb up a tall shelf to reach a case far too high for him or even for me to reach.

“Whoa there,” I said, stepping over. “No sense climbing up there, I’d hate for you to hurt yourself so close to Christmas. It’ll be a lot safer if one of us stands on the other’s shoulders.”

“Oh, good idea,” the boy replied.

When I’d said that, I’d thought it was rather obvious that I’d meant for him to stand on my shoulders, given that I was taller. So you could imagine my surprise when I saw the elf crouch and try to pick up my foot to place on his shoulders.

“Ummm...” I hesitated.

“Come on - I really need that box!” the boy insisted.

I still wasn’t certain, but I decided to humor the boy. I set my foot on one shoulder, then carefully lifted the other - and found myself surprised to see the small elf stand straight up, with myself perched on his shoulders.

I was shocked by how strong the boy was, but decided to act quick so as not to test his endurance. I reached up, attempting to grab the box, finding it to be mere inches away from my fingertips.

“I...can’t quite reach it...” I said. In reply, the elf took my feet in his hands, and suddenly pushed up, holding my entire weight in his hands as he lifted me the last few inches for me to grab the box!

I quickly grasped it, then braced myself as he let me down, letting me go to land on top of a nearby bale of hay, which was surprisingly soft, much more than normal hay. Back once more on the ground, I opened the box, glancing inside to find...

"...peppermint bark?" I asked.

The boy, who seemed not the least bit tired for having shoulder pressed someone twice his height, nodded. "Mmm-hmm! The reindeer love it, and it gives them lots of energy. Here - hold some out."

I had reservations about feeding peppermint bark to animals, but I suspected that the professional stable hand would have more experience feeding magical reindeer than I did, so I poured off a handful of bark into my palm as the boy opened some of the deer pens.

About half a dozen deer came out, walking towards me. They regarded me with suspicion at first, but then started sniffing me, then nibbling at the bark in my hand. They were surprisingly polite, taking turns rather than crowding in, and a few stepped closer to lick at my cheek as if to offer their thanks. I cautiously lifted my free hand, and was delighted when the deer bent their necks, allowing me to pet their cheeks and stroke their ears.

"Making some friends there?" I heard behind me. Okami had finished whatever his tasks were to sneak behind me while I was feeding the reindeer. "Glad to see they like you, but I've got to move on. Say farewell, and let's keep walking."

A few last pets, and I bade the reindeer and the boy farewell, as we moved on to our next destination, the loading bay. In the center of it all was an absolutely gorgeous red sleigh, which elves were constantly working around, organizing presents, checking charts, and loading gifts into the massive sack that took up the entirety of the back of the sleigh. As large as the sack was, the amount of gifts around the bay completely dwarfed it - colorfully wrapped gifts were arranged in stacks nearly two stories tall, which struck me as rather hazardous. In fact, as I observed the towers of presents, a draft blew by me, and I noticed one of the towers beginning to teeter. I tended, and noticed one of the workers, a girl with bright blonde curls, walking past it without noticing, her eyes locked on her ledger. She was completely oblivious as the tower started falling towards her.

In a flash I sprinted, charging at her with as much speed as my legs could muster. I grabbed her around the middle, causing her to yelp, then dived out of the way, landing just in the clear as hundreds of presents plummeted down where she had been standing a moment before!

The loading bay was silent for a moment, the only sounds I could hear being the quick breathing of the girl on my shoulder as she recovered from the shock. She and I shared a quick glance as I released her. She blushed - then quickly leaned in, planting a kiss on my cheek, before getting up and scurrying off.

She left not a moment too soon - Okami began barking orders, getting the elves moving to clean up the spill and reset the tower, demanding that they be more cautious this time. They started moving with amazing efficiency, picking up and piling up gifts much quicker than I would have expected.

Okami approached me, a tower of presents half a dozen boxes high held in his arms. "Hey - amazing reflexes there, Shiner. I need to take these to get rewrapped. Fortunately, the Boss's office is on the way, I can drop you off there. Come on."

I followed, dusting myself off, gently touching my cheek as I walked, when suddenly we came into the grandest room of all. What must have been what Okami had called an "office" was almost more like a throne room. My guide and I had emerged onto a balcony overlooking the wide open room. A big, soft chair rested in the center of the floor. It was just about the only furnishing, as most of the rest of the floor space was taken up by various presents and an unbelievably long golden sheet of parchment, on which were written more names than I could hope to count.

The list was being read and reviewed by the one who sat on the chair - a woman, on the older side though still very pretty, wearing festive red clothing and a smile bright enough to light up the entire snowstorm outside. There was no doubt in my mind she was the 'boss' that Okami had spoken of earlier, just looking at her gave me a sense of peace, warmth, and belonging.

"Hey, it's impolite to stare," Okami said, snapping me out of my trance. "Go on down, the stairs are right behind you there. She's expecting you, but do try not to take up too much of her time, okay? She's got to get all around the world tonight."

"Ah, right, sorry," I said, shaking my head to regain my focus and turning around to head towards the stairs.

"Oh, and, Shiner?" Okami called.

I turned. The elf gave me a bright, happy smile.

"Congratulations - and merry Christmas," he said, giving a smirk and a wink, before turning back and hurrying off, heading back to work.

I smiled, and headed down, holding a golden handrail as I descended the staircase that curved along the wall of the round room. I stepped lightly when I reached the bottom, careful not to step on anyone's presents, nor on the list. The woman kept at her work, humming a jolly tune, but glanced up as I drew near, adjusting her golden spectacles.

"Ah, hello, there..." I stammered, not entirely sure I could believe who I was talking to. "Forgive me if I ask the obvious, but, are you...Santa Claus?"

The woman smiled warmly. "I am. Santa Eleanor Claus, though you may just call me Santa, darling. And, your name?"

I swallowed, but tried to return her smile. "Ah - Shiner, Santa."

"Hold on, just one second," she said, smiling cheerfully. She set her quill pen aside and began pulling along the list, moving back through the names, checking over them.

"Let's see here...Sam, Sengir, *Sebastian*..." she placed a lot of emphasis and love on that word. "...Ah, Shiner. Yes, you're definitely on the nice list...though I can't help but notice you fell here. Not something you're likely to do if you're filled with cheer. Feeling a bit withdrawn this Christmas?"

I rubbed my forearm, feeling a bit exposed. "It...can be hard to connect with strangers, sometimes," I said, defensively.

"Mmm-hmm...but you seemed to have an easy time of it here," she said. "You connected with my elf in the workshop, my deer in the stables, and then you saved someone's skin in the loading bay. Am I not correct about that?"

I started a bit at all she knew, but I was put at ease by her bright smile. "They, well...they needed my help."

"And you saw that, and you provided...and you touched someone's life, even if in just a small way," she said, smiling brightly. "If you can do it in my workshop, you can definitely do it at a house party."

"I..." I scratched my head. "...there's not always a tower of presents to save someone from, you know?"

"But there's usually someone lonely, who would like to talk to someone. Or someone who has some joy they're eager to share," Santa countered. "You've got eagle eyes, I'm sure you'll see an opportunity, if only you're looking for it."

I considered...and smiled. "You're right."

"Of course I am," she chuckled, as she raised an arm to beckon to someone behind me.

I turned to look, and there before me, stood three elves. The young lady with the fluffy hair, the short lad, and the girl with the golden curls. The three were standing shoulder to shoulder, holding a gorgeously-wrapped package.

"Thank you so much for your help!"

"Yeah, thank you!"

"We got this for you...Merry Christmas."

The three held out their package, and revealed my name on the tag. I smiled brightly, offered my warmest thanks, and started to tear through the wrapping, opening it.

Within was a snow globe, beautifully made. As I looked inside it, I noticed something about the decoration seemed familiar. After a few moments of studying, I realized what it was - the scene inside the snow globe was a replica of my friend's house, the one in which there was a party I was supposed to be attending.

"Wait, is this..."

I tried to turn, but my foot snagged on a length of Santa Eleanor's list, and I tripped.

"Whooaaaa!" I shouted, pulling the snow globe close, trying to keep it from shattering...

...and once again, accidentally pulling myself inside it.

The replica of my friend's house grew before my vision... and the wind was knocked from my lungs as I landed, flopping on the hardwood floor of the study, having apparently broken through the roof.

I glanced around. No sign of the workshop could be seen, no elves, no list...just a decorated study, the door of which was opening, as my friend and host peeked in.

"Shiner? Are you quite all right?"

Blushing slightly, I pulled myself up and brushed myself off. "Yes, I'm alright, thank you. I was lost in thought and I tripped, but no harm done. I hope I didn't break anything..." I said, though in truth my concern was a pretense to check back on the shelf, looking for the snow globe, the one that I had initially held earlier.

There it was, sitting there, as beautiful as ever, miniature elves still hard at work, reindeer being wrangled, the sleigh preparing for its journey...and as I turned it, I saw her.

"Huh. There's Santa...I couldn't find her earlier."

"You couldn't?" My friend asked, stepping to my side. "Weird. She's right in the middle of the workshop, she's hard to miss."

I hesitated, considering that...but smiled. "Huh. You're right. Sorry."

"Nothing to worry about. But I just wanted to make sure you were all right. If you need some alone time, I get it, but there's plenty of people out there who'd love to talk with you - and we're just starting to pour a fresh batch of cocoa."

I smiled, returning the snow globe to the shelf. "Thank you - I've had a nice little break, and hot cocoa and conversing sounds great right now."

I stepped out, following my friend back out into the hall...

The end~

