

SANTA CLAUSTROPHOBIA

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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Santa Claustrophobia

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

A short story by
Steph Bennion

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SANTA CLAUSTROPHOBIA

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

Zotz and Aurora are stuck babysitting toddler Meuler in a Cayenne shopping mall on Christmas Eve. Their terminal boredom is shattered by the mall's world-weary Santa, who is not in a festive mood...

THE RED SLEIGH LURCHED TO A HALT outside the miniature cottage, the holographic reindeer between its drawbars still galloping as if in full flight. A portly figure in red climbed out and leaned heavily against the play area's three-dimensional printer, accidentally nudging the screen and causing a parade of freshly-minted stuffed toys to drop from the machine's hopper. The sleigh driver kicked away the fallen bears, stomped to the cottage and ducked through the child-sized doorway. The shopping mall's Santa Claus looked anything but jolly.

Zotz Wak decided it was the most exciting thing that had happened all day. He was sixteen and definitely too old to be waiting for his mother in the children's area of a shopping mall. His girlfriend Aurora, almost sixteen herself with choppy blond locks that looked much cooler than his own messy ginger mop, had repeatedly expressed the opinion that Christmas Eve was a time for letting their hair down and having fun. Instead they had been press-ganged into babysitting a sullen dark-haired toddler named Meuler, a boy whose idea of a twenty-third-century party was eating porridge and playing with robot dinosaurs. Zotz and Aurora had seen enough of both that afternoon to last a lifetime.

"Drunk in charge of a sleigh," Zotz remarked, as they watched the newcomer from the other side of the play area. "He's been knocking back the Christmas spirit."

"She, you mean," Aurora pointed out. She met his puzzled frown with a withering stare. "Didn't you see her face? Those Santa suits are padded and it was obviously a fake beard and wig. And I don't think she's drunk. She just looked tired."

Meuler looked up from where he sat on the sand. "I want a poo," he said solemnly.

"Yeah, nice catchphrase," said Zotz. "We took you to the toilet ten minutes ago."

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“Don’t remind me,” muttered Aurora, shuddering. “I can still smell it now.”

Zotz smiled, his stare still on the tiny play cottage and Santa’s abandoned sleigh. His first Christmas on Earth had seen far too many shopping trips for his liking. This particular retail mall was in the burgeoning city of Cayenne in French Guiana, South America; they had arrived just before lunch, bewitched by a leisurely aircar flight sixty kilometres north-west up the Atlantic coast from the Centre Spatial Guyanais at Kourou, the European spaceport where his mother worked as an engineer. Until four months ago Zotz had been living with his father, six light-years away in a lonely asteroid habitat orbiting Barnard’s Star. He was finding it hard to adjust to life on Earth, a crazy world with far too many people and painful gravity that was double what he had grown up with. Zotz had long decided that the worst craziness came from the inhabitants of humankind’s homeworld themselves, as the arrival of the mall’s Santa Claus proved. He hoped it was not contagious.

The children’s play area was a large domed room annexed to the main mall. Inside was a tongue-in-cheek fake tropical island, twenty metres in diameter, surrounded by the gentle waves of a holographic sea. A bamboo footbridge linked the island to the main entrance, though Zotz had already discovered to his disappointment that there was a solid floor just a few centimetres below the lapping hologram tide. The play area was dominated by the bright and noisy screen of the three-dimensional printer, its holovids luring young fingers to touch the screen and print advertised toys for real, debiting the cost from a parent’s account. Aurora had already hacked its programming in an attempt to keep them amused with her surreal and slightly obscene creations. Meuler, the four-year-old son of a friend of Zotz’s mother, showed a disturbing lack of interest in Aurora’s strange inventions. Afternoon was creeping towards evening and all other patrons had gone.

Muffled thuds of movement came from the rustic play cottage. The tiny building stood between fake coconut trees, offering seclusion for the shy and small beds for the weary, not that Meuler had shown any inclination to fall asleep. On the island too were padded climbing frames, a sandpit, virtual-reality gaming pods and a food molecularisor vending

machine, everything the designers hoped bored children could possibly want. Colourful festive adverts lined the walls of the room in a lacklustre attempt to decorate the island for Christmas. A ghostly holographic ship occasionally drifted past the island like the Mary Celeste. Zotz was disappointed it was not pirates.

The banging inside the cottage stopped. Aurora took a hesitant step forward, looking perturbed. Meuler shuffled towards Zotz, his wide-eyed stare moving from the sleigh to the cottage and back again. He looked quite comical with a toy dinosaur in his mouth.

“Is it a robber?” he asked, his words muffled by the miniature brontosaurus.

“It’s Santa Claus,” said Zotz. “Here to see if you’ve been bad or good.”

Meuler thought about this. “Santa Claus is not real,” he declared.

“Really?” queried Zotz. “What does Santa look like?”

“He’s a big fat man in a red suit with a white beard and white hair,” said the toddler, proudly showing off his knowledge. “He has a sleigh pulled by flying cows with horns.”

Zotz grinned mischievously. “So you know what he looks like, but he doesn’t exist?”

“Santa brings me presents,” Meuler said sulkily.

“Don’t you agree that Santa Claus must exist on some basic metaphysical level?” suggested Zotz. “He may be no more than a mythical supernatural entity lodged in the collective consciousness of western society, but does that make him any less real?”

Meuler stared at him, looking ready to burst into tears. Aurora gave Zotz a shove.

“Don’t tease him,” she scolded. “Should we see if our visitor is okay?”

“Is it wise to disturb Bad Santa? She looked angry.”

“Think she’s a bit Morgan le Fay?” Aurora retorted. Orphaned young, she had grown up with a riverboat tribe in London with an odd affinity for Arthurian lore, though had now been unofficially adopted by Zotz’s mother after he and Aurora became friends. “What happened to you and me, heroes flying to the rescue? We had fun back then.”

“We did,” he admitted. “I wish I had my birdsuit with me now.”

“You don’t need a fancy costume and mask,” she said slyly, reaching for his hand. “Come on! The worst she can do is bite our head off.”

Meuler stared at her, looking distraught. Aurora had earlier hacked the room’s hologram programming terminal to show huge sharks in the surrounding sea, the sight of which had made him cry. Conscious of their babysitting duties, Zotz extended his free hand and grabbed the toddler’s chocolate-smearred digits. Philosophical debates as to whether Santa existed or not were quickly forgotten.

“We’re going to the cottage,” said Zotz, easing the boy to his feet.

“Porridge?” squeaked Meuler, his face brightening.

“You didn’t eat the last lot from the ’risor,” Zotz chastised him.

They cautiously approached the play cottage. It was little more than a wooden shed, painted to look like it had the white lime-washed walls and black oak beams of an English Tudor home, with a fake thatched roof possessing all the flair of a scarecrow’s wig. Aurora crept to a window and peered inside. The cottage only had one room; the window was near the bunk beds, offering a view through to the seating area at the far end. The bedraggled Santa Claus sat squashed behind the table, gazing forlornly at the three bowls of porridge Meuler had insisted on ordering from the food molecularisor. As they watched, the woman pulled off her red hat, beard and white hairpiece, tossing them wearily aside. She was younger than Zotz expected, perhaps in her late twenties, with pale skin and a mass of blond hair that fell free as she removed the wig. She looked tired, her face creased in pain.

“Porridge,” she murmured, speaking English with a pronounced French accent. Picking up Meuler’s discarded spoon, she wiped it clean on her Santa outfit, dipped it into the nearest bowl and brought it to her lips for a taste. “Mon dieu! Too hot!”

Scowling, she shoved the bowl aside and reached for the next. Zotz glanced to Aurora, who frowned. Meuler looked most upset to see the woman eating his porridge.

“Merde! Too cold,” she hissed, pushing away the second bowl. Her spoon was already digging into the third. “Crazy children eat stupid food. Ah! This one is just right.”

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Zotz, Aurora and Meuler continued to stare as the stranger hungrily devoured the porridge. After a moment's consideration, she scooped second helpings from the other bowls into her empty dish, mixed the hot and cold porridge together and finished that too. She ate with the vigour of someone who had not tasted proper food for days.

“She looks fine to me,” whispered Zotz. “We should go.”

“She ate my food,” complained Meuler, his face a picture of comic fury.

“Well, you shouldn't have left it,” hissed Aurora, keeping her voice low. “The poor woman looks worn out! Why is she here and not heading home?”

Zotz glanced at the time display of his wristpad and saw it was nearly five o'clock. The mall would be closing in an hour. Not for the first time, he wondered what was taking his own and Meuler's mother so long. His gaze went to the red sleigh outside the cottage, its holographic reindeers still flickering at full gallop. It looked almost boat-like with its sweeping bow and stern, though still small enough to navigate the mall's walkways on wheels hidden behind long runners either side. Zotz felt Aurora's hand tighten around his own. Further sounds of movement were heard inside the cottage.

“She's coming this way!” whispered Aurora. “Hide!”

The woman, wearing a pained expression, wriggled free from the table and approached the bunks. Aurora pulled Zotz away and dragged him around the back of the cottage to the next window. When they looked inside again, the woman was trying to ease herself into the first of the narrow beds. After a while she paused, unzipped her costume and pulled free the stomach padding for the Santa suit. When she did finally manage to lie down, she was clearly not impressed.

“This little bed is too hard,” she moaned, climbing back out. “Nom de dieu! They break the backs of poor children!”

The woman went to the next bunk and gingerly lowered herself down. A loud twanging of springs greeted her as she sank heavily into the mattress.

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“Too soft!” she complained. She hurriedly clambered free and tried the third bunk. “Ah, magnifique! This is just right. Now I rest my poor bones.”

“See?” whispered Zotz, peering through the window. “She only wants to sleep.”

“In a children’s play area?” retorted Aurora. “Is that allowed?”

“It’ll teach mewling Meuler not to leave his food,” Zotz grumbled. He realised the boy was no longer clutching his hand. “Hey, where’s he gone?”

He stifled a groan. Inside the room, the inquisitive head of a toddler poked through the doorway. Aurora grabbed Zotz’s arm and hastened towards the door, too late to stop Meuler shuffling inside. Reaching the doorway, they found him pointing an accusatory finger at Santa. The woman, having barely settled into the bunk, looked up in disgust.

“You ate my porridge,” Meuler challenged in wavering piping tones.

“Oh la vache!” she muttered, raising her head from her pillow. “Go away, tiny boy.”

“Meuler!” hissed Zotz, hesitating in the doorway. “Get back here!”

“You’re sleeping in my bed!” Meuler persisted, facing the woman sternly.

“What will you do about it, little one?” remarked the woman, pushing a tangle of blond hair from her face. “Is mommy and daddy bear here to chase me away?”

Meuler considered her question. “I want a poo,” he said.

Aurora pushed passed Zotz and entered the cottage. Taking the toddler’s hand, she faced the woman squarely. Zotz cautiously sidled after her.

“Hey Goldilocks,” said Aurora. “You shouldn’t be in here.”

“I am tired and hungry,” said the woman. “Leave me be!”

“Can’t you go home?” asked Zotz. “The mall is closing soon.”

The woman seemed to realise she was destined not to get any sleep and wearily rose to sit on the edge of the bunk. With the padding removed, the Santa Claus costume hung loosely from her skinny frame.

“I am between houses,” she said defiantly. “I could not pay rent. I clean shops, I work in a bar, I play at being Père Noël, but still it is not

enough. So I sleep in mall until I find somewhere else. You must tell no one!”

Zotz hesitated. “What’s your name?” he asked.

The woman managed a smile. “What’s yours, little boy?”

“Zotz,” he replied, frowning. “And I’m not a boy, I’m sixteen.”

“All men are boys,” she replied sagely. “My name is Chia.”

“I’m Aurora,” said Aurora. “This bundle of joy is Meuler.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” said Chia. “Now go away.”

Zotz shuffled forward and took Meuler’s other hand. His first four months on Earth had been a crash-course in new social conventions. Questions around property, personal space and what constituted trespassing were very different to what he was used to in the commune-like asteroid settlement back home. The little cottage in the play area had been empty and Zotz saw no reason why the woman could not use it as a quiet place to rest. Nevertheless, Chia’s wariness suggested Aurora was right. She was not supposed to be here.

“You might get into trouble if the security guards find you,” he suggested.

Chia glared at him. “You would tell them I am here?”

“No, of course not,” Zotz said quickly. “But they patrol the mall.”

“Je m’en fiche!” she retorted. “Okay, I will go! Maybe I will get peace and quiet when you meddling kids have gone back to your nice house and family!”

Chia abruptly rose from the bunk. Looking angry, she grabbed her fake beard and wig from the table, sending Zotz, Aurora and Meuler scurrying back through the door in alarm. They watched as the woman stomped from the cottage and across the fake island to the exit bridge. Zotz, his heart thudding in his chest, was relieved to see her go.

“Poor woman,” murmured Aurora.

“She ate my porridge,” Meuler said defiantly.

Zotz sighed. Justice was simple through the eyes of a four-year-old.

* * *

The downtrodden Santa did not go far. Chia crossed the bamboo bridge and went no further, moping near the archway to the mall like the last of Scrooge's ghosts. Zotz anxiously scrutinised the time on his wristpad, wondering what had happened to his mother. Meuler pulled free of his grip and went to work sullenly kicking stuffed toy bears into the holographic sea. An irritable toddler was bad news for everyone.

"We should go and find my mum," Zotz suggested to Aurora. "I can't stay here with that woman watching. It's creepy."

"She's homeless," said Aurora. "I've been there myself. It's not nice."

"Yes, but what can we do?" he protested. "At least if we leave, she can hide here in peace without Meuler accusing her of grand theft porridge."

Aurora sighed, then nodded and followed him to where Meuler squatted by a fake palm tree, watching a small robot crocodile chew the head off a skinny plastic doll. Zotz took the toddler's hand and together they went to the bamboo bridge. Chia's stare followed as they began to cross the holographic sea. Zotz's heart sank as she moved to block their exit.

"Who's that trip-tripping over my bridge?" remarked Chia, her eyes blazing.

Aurora halted in the middle of the bamboo walkway, stopping so suddenly that Zotz and Meuler walked into her, almost knocking her down.

"Stand and deliver!" challenged the woman. "Your money or your life."

"Really?" Aurora replied wearily. "You're robbing us now?"

"You are rich people," said Chia. "This mall is not for the poor."

"I'm no richer than you," protested Aurora. "Steal from someone else!"

"I want a poo," piped up Meuler.

Zotz bit back his own retort. Aurora's remark bothered him. His mother, a well-regarded engineer on a specialist rocketry project, was reasonably well-off by local standards. Meuler's parents were genuinely rich. Both were senior managers on very nice salaries at the space centre

where Zotz's mother worked. He hoped Chia would not have the stupid idea of holding them for ransom.

"Meuler's mother has pots of money," said Aurora, instantly shattering his hopes. "We could fetch her here."

Zotz groaned. Aurora had a strange way of talking herself out of trouble. Meuler cowered behind him on the bridge, trying to wriggle out of sight. Zotz wondered if the toddler's parents had been confronted before by desperate mall workers in Cayenne.

"Mum might be able to help," he admitted. "Though we're not rich. Honest."

Chia looked at Meuler. "What do you say, tiny boy?"

The toddler shrank closer to Zotz and wordlessly held up the headless doll he had rescued from the robot crocodile. The woman stared disdainfully at the offered gift.

"Leave him alone," said Aurora. "He's too young to understand."

"Are we being robbed by Santa?" asked Meuler, instantly undermining her assertion.

"No, I am here to eat you up," Chia told him. "You would make a tasty snack."

Meuler stared into the woman's mocking gaze and burst into tears. Zotz lifted the toddler into his arms and gave him a comforting hug. Chia had a point about the boy's nutritional value. Meuler was heavier than he looked.

"Is that how they teach you to greet children at Santa school?" he protested.

"Je plaisante!" Chia retorted. "Your girlfriend would make a better meal. Please, I am desperate! I will take whatever food or credits you have."

"Don't push it, Goldilocks," snapped Aurora.

"Let them through," Zotz said wearily. Meuler had stopped sobbing. "We've nothing to give you. Aurora can fetch my mother and she'll help you out."

"I don't like to beg," Chia said sadly. "Père Noël should not threaten children."

“I’ll stay here,” Zotz reassured her. Meuler was wriggling in his arms and it was with relief that he lowered the toddler to the floor. “They won’t be gone long.”

Chia looked downcast, then nodded. The fire had gone from her eyes. She retreated from the bridge and watched as Aurora wordlessly led Meuler across the bamboo walkway to the exit. Reaching the archway to the mall, Aurora glanced back and with a wink raised a thumb, a gesture that left Zotz less than reassured. Moments later, they were gone.

“I am a horrible person,” Chia said sadly. “They will put me in jail.”

“No they won’t,” said Zotz. He suspected otherwise.

Chia sighed and sank despondently to the floor, coming to rest with legs outstretched and her back against the end of the bamboo bridge. Zotz hesitated, then followed suit, sitting cross-legged a few metres away. The minutes crawled by, the hush tainted by the squeaky chatter and terrible music drifting from the three-dimensional printer as another toy advert hit the screen. A stray robot dinosaur waded into the holographic sea.

“Mon dieu,” murmured Chia, sighing. “This life is stifling. I am hounded on all sides. It is, how you say it? Claustrophobic.”

“Santa Claustrophobic?” suggested Zotz.

The woman managed a wry smile. “You are a good boy.”

“Not really,” he admitted, grinning. “I set fire to the old Parliament building in London. It’s a long story,” he added hastily. “It was an accident. Honest!”

“The kelpnut riots,” she said, nodding. “I saw the news. We have kelpnut here too.”

Chia fell silent once more. Zotz had not heard of kelpnut before he came to Earth. In London, it was the name of nutrient bars distributed free to the poor and homeless, but which he and his friends discovered were secretly laced with mood-stabilising drugs. He had helped an angry Aurora to expose the truth, but four months on free kelpnut bars were still being given out exactly as before. The government’s crime of drugging citizens had been brushed aside by the media, who saw no reason to make subscribers and taxpayers feel guilty for not needing to rely on state handouts themselves.

“London was horrible,” murmured Zotz. “People were sleeping on the streets.”

“They do not choose too!” Chia retorted.

“I know that,” he replied testily. “I meant it was horrible that no one wanted to help. Where I’m from, people always have food and a home, no matter what. My dad says you can judge society by how it treats those who struggle to get by. Back home in the hollow moon, everyone helps each other out, no matter what. That’s how it should be.”

“Your father is a wise man,” she told him. “I once worked in Kourou. I was manager of a restaurant at the space centre for many years. Then the union got the corporation angry and everyone lost our jobs. I lost my home. Now I am here.”

“Mum told us about the strike,” said Zotz. “She said there was shooting.”

“Corporation agents had guns,” said Chia. “People got hurt. Good people who wanted fair wages for what they did, who do not have good jobs and houses with magic toy printers and ’risors that make food. Mon dieu! My family is too poor to shop in this mall.”

Zotz looked back at the fake tropical island and the three-dimensional printer by the abandoned sleigh. Toy advertisements continued to roll across its screen, the machine poised to create endless distractions for a regular supply of credits. Back at Barnard’s Star, such printers were highly prized and reserved for engineering. He could not imagine what it must be like to be a child growing up in a wealthy household with a device like that at home.

“They have not seen me pretending to be Santa Claus,” Chia continued sadly, waving a dismissive hand at her red and white outfit. “I am sorry, little man. I do not mean to frighten you. I should not have to ask children for money and food.”

A sound of scampering footsteps drew his gaze back to the archway. Aurora and Meuler, looking furtive, were back from the mall. Zotz noted with disquiet they were alone. Chia clambered to her feet as they approached, Zotz doing likewise.

“Aurora?” he called. “Where’s mum?”

“We couldn’t find them,” she replied, pausing short of the bamboo bridge. “But we are your knights in shining armour!” she added brightly, whisking a paper carrier bag from behind her back. “We brought Goldilocks some food!”

“I had a poo,” added Meuler, pulling at his trousers and looking serious.

Aurora sidled forward, lowered the bag to the floor and retreated. Chia hesitantly picked it up and examined its contents. Zotz saw it was mainly packaged snacks of the type convenience stores would sell straight from a food molecularisor, stodgy stomach-fillers that were no substitute for a proper meal. Chia’s expression suggested she was trying hard not to say anything rude about Aurora’s generosity.

“Where did you get the credits to buy those?” asked Zotz. Aurora and himself were not registered citizens of French Guiana and had to rely on his mother for everything. His heart sank. “Aurora, you didn’t...?”

Meuler giggled. “She hacked the ’risor.”

“Poetic justice,” Aurora said defiantly. “Steal from the rich to give to the poor.”

Chia’s eyes went wide. “Merde! You should not do such things!”

“She’s right,” Zotz chastised. “That shop owner is innocent.”

“I got them from one of those automated kiosks,” Aurora retorted. “I know a handy trick to bypass the payment screen on the machines. No harm done!”

“Santa will put you on her naughty list for stealing,” Chia said solemnly, wagging an admonitory finger at Aurora and Meuler. She looked wistfully across the bridge to the sleigh. “I do not deserve your kindness. But you are right, giving to the poor is good. If only I was Père Noël! I would take my sleigh to houses where they have nothing and hand out gifts to the children. They should not be punished for the troubles of their mothers and fathers.”

Zotz’s gaze followed hers to the sleigh, the holographic reindeer still racing furiously between the drawbars, then to the three-dimensional printer beyond. An idea formed in his head, undoubtedly illegal but somehow right. He glanced to Aurora and caught her mischievous smile. He loved it when they were on the same wavelength.

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“There might be a way to do just that,” he said to Chia, grinning slyly.

“You start on the sleigh,” Aurora told him. “Leave the hacking to me.”

Chia looked confused. Zotz hesitantly stepped forward and whispered his idea in her ear. Chia’s eyes went wide, her gaze darting from Zotz to the sleigh and back. As he finished, her expression broke into a broad gleeful smile.

“Merde!” she exclaimed, her eyes gleaming. “You could do that?”

Zotz reached into his pocket, withdrew his prized multi-tool penknife and flicked open a screwdriver blade. It had been a while since he last used it for mischief.

“Oh yes,” he boasted. “Just watch us.”

* * *

Zotz and Aurora were so busy putting the final touches of their plan into place that they did not immediately notice the two security guards arriving from the mall. Chia was nowhere to be seen as the guards crossed the bamboo bridge to the play area. Zotz retrieved Meuler from where he was smashing a stuffed bear against a palm tree and lifted him into the sleigh, depositing the toddler next to where Aurora was hurriedly helping to finish a rewiring job. Zotz hoped the guards did not notice the conspicuous gap in the tropical scenery where the three-dimensional printer had stood.

“What are you kids still doing here?” asked the first guard, a short rotund man whose blue uniform looked several sizes too small. “It’s six o’clock. The mall is closing.”

“We’re just leaving,” said Zotz, smiling innocently.

Aurora looked up and slyly signalled she was ready. The second guard, a tall woman with a fierce scowl, shot her a suspicious glare.

“Have you come for Bad Santa?” asked Aurora. “She’s hiding in that cottage.”

“Is she now?” remarked the woman, scowling. “She abandoned her grotto and...”

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A loud piercing scream cut through the air. A figure in a plump red suit burst from the open door of the cottage and ran across the island, away from the security guards by the bridge. Startled, the two guards looked at one another and gave chase. Zotz hopped into the sleigh and took a seat next to Aurora, lifting Meuler onto his lap.

The runaway Santa reached the far edge of the island and hurtled onwards into the holographic sea, rapidly sinking from sight. The guards stumbled to a halt at the edge of the play area, clearly confused. Within moments, Bad Santa had somehow disappeared beneath fake waves just a few centimetres deep.

The sleigh was moving, trundling clear of the cottage in a tight arc towards the exit. Zotz gave the bemused guards a friendly wave as Aurora piloted them across the bamboo bridge and onwards through the arch into the mall.

In no time at all they were accelerating hard past straggling shoppers through the brightly-lit shopping area, the holographic reindeer bouncing furiously as the sleigh rolled across the floor. A couple of lurching turns later and the main entrance to the mall was ahead. Zotz nervously tightened his grip on Meuler. The toddler watched in glee as the world of retail raced by.

“Is this thing supposed to go this fast?” Zotz asked nervously.

“Depends who’s driving,” replied Aurora. She sat before the controls like a demoniac jet pilot, a huge grin on her face. “Santa has a lot of deliveries to do tonight.”

The huge double doors ahead slid open as they approached. The sleigh hurtled onwards into the humid twilight. Speeding across the mall forecourt, they rolled to a halt near the auto-taxi rank. Zotz groaned and slumped in his seat, holding his stomach. Aurora twisted around, reached behind her and pulled an empty sack from the back of the sleigh.

Their stowaway raised herself from the floor and blinked. The bulky mass of the three-dimensional printer wedged in the back of the sleigh had not left a lot of room for smuggling passengers. Chia stared across the courtyard at the brightly-lit mall.

“Nom de dieu,” she breathed. “This is a crazy plan!”

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“Genius, you mean,” Aurora said proudly. “The hologram we recorded of you in your Santa suit jousted the guards well. It’s up to you now. Drive this sleigh to town and give the children a Christmas they won’t forget!”

“The printer is wired to the sleigh’s batteries,” added Zotz, gesturing to the machine in the back. “If you find a road-side recharging point you should be able to keep it running for hours. There’s enough spare cartridges to keep printing all night.”

Chia leaned forward and gave Zotz and Aurora a hug.

“Merci!” she cried. “This is so naughty, but so very good! You both have kind hearts.”

Zotz grinned. He climbed from the sleigh, lifting Meuler out after him. On the other side, Aurora had already clambered onto the footpath. Chia slid from her hiding place and settled into the driver’s seat. Reaching into her Santa suit, she pulled out her white beard and wig. As disguises go, it was a good one to have when driving a stolen sleigh.

“Merry Christmas,” she said. “Père Noël is coming to town!”

She put on the wig and beard. With a final cheery wave, she was gone, driving across the courtyard towards the road in a blur of holographic reindeer. Zotz glanced back at the mall and saw a dark-haired woman before the doors, furiously waving at them. A shorter woman in an expensive coat and hat stood nearby, looking stern. His own and Meuler’s mother had finally finished their quest for last-minute gifts on Christmas Eve.

“My Lancelot!” said Aurora, looping her arm through his as they slowly walked back to the mall. “Was it naughty what we did?”

Zotz shrugged. “Chia’s story was sad,” he said thoughtfully. “And it’s the season of goodwill! But it’s probably best if we don’t mention this to our mums,” he added sternly, looking at Meuler trotting beside them. “Is that clear?”

“We helped Santa Claus!” Meuler said brightly. “Am I an elf?”

“Of the warrior kind,” Aurora reassured him. “Vive la révolution!”

THE END

About the Author

Steph Bennion is a writer, musician and part-time Westminster civil servant, born and bred in the Black Country but now living in Hastings after finally escaping the black hole of London. Her stories are written as a reaction to the dearth of alternative heroes amidst bookshelves swamped by tales of the supernatural, not that there's nothing wrong with a bit of fantasy now and again. *Hollow Moon*, the first novel in her space-opera tales of mystery and adventure, was published in 2012. *The Avalon Job*, the fourth book in the series, was published in 2020.

As **Stephanie M Bennion**, she has written speculative fiction for older readers. *The Luck Of The Devil*, a tale of supernatural transgender angst in 1990s Ireland, was published in 2018. The time-travelling romp *The Battles Of Hastings*, a novella inspired by her adopted town and the 950th anniversary of the eponymous battle, was published in 2016.

THE AVALON JOB A novel by Steph Bennion

Ravana O'Brien is confronted by her past in more ways than one. Secret agent Kedesh is back on the scene, seeking help for a mission to Alpha Centauri. Artorius, the young boy taken by Que Qiao agents after fleeing the Dhusarian Church, has been traced to a shadowy American base on the moon of Avalon. A second alien portal has been found, a mysterious ancient machine that can twist space and time.

Avalon is no ordinary world. The moon hosts the vicious celebrity show *Gods of Avalon*, where players fight to survive against cyberclone beasts. Infiltrating the secret base means getting past the game arenas, but Ravana cannot trust the slippery Kedesh and has enemies old and new out to see her fail. The rejuvenated Priest Taranis has a new chosen one, a man called The Raven who seeks Ravana's doom. A rumour of hidden gold is sowing confusion. Artorius is the key to those who want the alien portal open. Watchers are playing the ultimate game.

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