

Very Good Elf by Rupert Huxter (adult category)

Santa slammed his phone down. The elves in the workshop – many fewer than usual at this time of year – held their breath.

“That’s it,” Santa said. “It’s over.”

His secretary, who had rushed to his boss’ side, waited for the storm that would undoubtedly follow.

“Me? A category one risk?” Santa exploded. “How dare they? Because of ‘my age’? My ‘tendency towards weight gain’? I am not going to be prevented from doing my job.”

“People worry about you, sir,” the elf secretary replied soothingly. “And,” he added, “it’s not as if things have been going especially swimmingly this year anyway, is it?”

“Meaning?” Santa asked sulkily.

“Well, sir, look around you. With COVID-compliant work conditions only 35% of the elf service can work in the workshop. We are weeks behind with our wrapping. Most of the world has now imposed Deer 2 or 3 restrictions, meaning it is illegal to have a sled pulled by nine reindeer. And anyway, the reindeer are threatening strike action because our harnessing system makes it impossible to work two metres apart. Plus Rudolph is throwing a total wobbly and saying his nose is an unacknowledged COVID symptom.”

Santa groaned. “That’s it. I worked through two world wars. I cope with winter storms, population explosions, and people forgetting to put the fire out in the grate so I spend half Christmas morning wiping glowing embers off my burning bum. I survived the Spanish ‘Flu. But this coronavirus has done for us.”

The elf secretary allowed himself a little smile. “Fear not, sir. I have a plan.”

Santa scrutinized his aide quizzically.

“It’s the vaccine, sir. They couldn’t stop the virus spreading. They couldn’t look after people in lockdown. They couldn’t stop businesses going to the wall. And now they have a vaccine they have not the faintest idea how to distribute it.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Santa asked.

“Everything, boss!” the elf explained. “They want to get the vaccine distributed worldwide by Christmas. DHL can’t do it. FedEx can’t do it. ParcelForce hasn’t got a prayer. No, the only hope is the world’s most tried and tested global just-in-time delivery service.”

"You mean..." Santa started.

"I mean," the elf continued, "we get the contract. It's just a few more parcels for each household on the night!"

"That's all very well," Santa replied morosely. "But we are down on elves and the reindeer situation is a total horlicks. And the contract really should be going out to tender. We can't do it."

"You are wrong, sir", the elf replied boldly. "We have special dispensation. We will get the vaccine early. We can administer it to the elves, and the reindeer, and you of course. We will be cleared to operate between 23 and 27 December. We can get back on track."

Santa gave his aide a rib-threatening hug. "You're very good, elf!" he exclaimed. "Let's get cracking!"

"I think you just did," the elf secretary replied, wincing and holding his side.