

It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas

Jing stared down the guards in the packed hallway. They were all clean-cut suits, loaded with weapons. Fourteen in all. Four nunchucks, seven sidearms, and three machine guns. No problem. He tossed his green hat with a red bobble at the tip to the side and cracked his knuckles Bruce Lee style. Even though the man in front of him stood a full three feet taller, Jing had the advantage. He was an elf, and elves had a few tricks that humans did not.

The henchman twirled his nunchucks expecting an easy victory while the other guards laughed. Jing dodged the first blow and scaled the man's body. He caught the nunchuck and twisted it. Cinching it around the man's neck, the elf used the weapon to keep his target in a choke hold. Another goon pulled out his sidearm and fired.

Jing yanked his victim to the side and heard the bullet shredding skull and brain matter with a sickening crunch. One. He hopped from the body and, in midair, pulled bells from the festive pouch slung off the side of his belt. He threw them at two more thugs pulling their guns. They exploded on impact. Two. Three.

Meanwhile, he aimed his pointy shoes at the eyes of the one who had fired. The guy screamed when they jammed into his sockets. Jing popped his bloody shoes out before the body hit the floor and rolled to a halt. He eyed the other goons.

A machine gunner didn't take any risks and sprayed bullets at the deadly elf. Jing didn't waste a second. He ran up the wall out of the way of the fire and dashed towards the guy. He shot tinsel from his wrist, and it wrapped around his opponent's neck. One good tug sent the man whirling around with the gun blazing. Bullets tore through his comrades. Jing gave his opponent's head a final yank, and it popped off like a Christmas cracker. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.

Jing stopped the head from rolling with his foot. He noticed the man's pearly white teeth. It was good dental work. He turned back to the remaining henchmen. One nunchuck. Two sidearms. One machine gun. Jing rolled two red globe ornaments down the hall, and they exploded. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. One man with nunchucks survived the blast and surveyed the pile of bodies around him. He dropped his weapon and ran.

Jing pulled a candy cane communicator from the sack on his belt. "Santa, I'm through."

A booming voice came from the other end. "Good job, Jingles. I think you just saved Christmas. Now, don't go in there alone. Backup is on the way."

"Copy that," Jing said and stuffed the communicator back into his pouch. He stepped over the bodies to a black, iron door at the end of the hall. There was an electronic lock with a code box. He cursed under his breath and turned back toward the bodies. He shouldn't have let the last guy run away. However, it was the season to be charitable. Luckily enough, one of the goons was still breathing in deep, shallow gasps.

Jing stepped on the thug's shoulder that was shredded by machinegun fire. The man cried out in pain. Jing noticed this dude's teeth were also well taken care of. He leaned in and twisted his foot into the wound, "Who's your dentist?"

The goon writhed. "What? Why do you want to know?"

"Your teeth are quite good. I want to be a dental hygienist. I'm taking night classes for my Associate's Degree. It's never too early to start looking for practices to do my internship. So, talk."

"I just go with the highest ratings on Google. We get excellent benefits."

“You guys get dental?” Jing eased up on the pressure.
“Yeah, and medical, vision, life insurance. We even have pet insurance!”

“Pet insurance? Really?”

“Pets are our family members too.”

“Hey man, I get it. The vet bills Santa spends on his reindeer alone—”

“So, you’ll let me go?”

“Sure, but first, I’ll need a code.”

“To the door? I can’t give you that code!”

Jing narrowed his eyes and pressed into the wound. “I think you should reconsider.”

“You don’t know what the boss will do to me!”

“It’s nothing compared to what I’ll do to you.”

“I need this job man! My dog has diabetes.”

“You have three seconds to give me the code. One.”

The man’s shoulder made a sickening crunch as Jing leaned in closer.

“Please. We already met our deductible for the year!”

“Two.”

“My vet is in-network! If I had to switch jobs—”

“Three.” A hidden Christmas dagger ejected from Jing’s sleeve. With a flick of his wrist, the blade stopped short of the man’s neck.

“OK. OK.” The thug yelled. “The code is 5.3.0.9.”

“5.3.0.9.” Jing lowered the dagger. “Where have I heard that before?”

“The boss is a big Tommy Tutone fan. You know, 8.6.7.5.3.0.9, 8.6.7.5.3.0.9.”

“OK. OK.” Jing waved his hands. “Get out of here before I get that song stuck in my head.”

The thug forced himself to his feet and ran away. He yelled as he left. “You don’t know who you are messing with. We spent years looking for a vet in-network! Years!”

Jing shrugged it off. He had been threatened a lot in his job as one of Santa’s Elite Fixers. Whether he was waterboarding a greedy toy manufacturer or responding to terrorists holding Rudolph for ransom, people always thought they could intimidate him. Maybe one of his dainty workshop kindred would be victimized, but not a SEF elf. They were a squad that made Navy SEALs look like a kiddie karate class.

Jing walked to the door and typed in the code. 5.3.0.9. The door clicked. 8.6.7.5.3.0.9. Jing cursed. Now he had that song stuck in his head.

Jing kicked open the door and jumped through. Eighties music blared in his mind.

He spun through the air and landed behind a cluster of more goons. A man in the most expensive three-piece suit money could buy stood at the center. They were inspecting a factory full of children. Chained to their workstations, the kids were wrapping presents in sparkly red and green paper that came down a giant conveyor belt.

One of the children stumbled and fell. He heaved with exhaustion. A man screamed at the boy and shoved the kid back on the line. The child’s hands shook as he tried to finish wrapping a present. The man yelled at him to go faster and raised a menacing club above his head. “You know what happens on the Naughty list, boy.”

Before the man could whack the kid, a snowflake ornament with razor sharp edges zipped toward him and stuck in the man’s throat. He toppled to the ground.

“Are you going to let those kids go?” Jing said. “Or am I going to have to put you on the Naughty list?”

The boss in the three-piece suit turned to see the intruder and said in a Minnesotan accent, “Why the H.E. double hockey sticks do I pay for pet insurance if I can’t even have one secure doorway?”

A large man with a deep voice said, “Boss Hansen, studies have shown that more comprehensive benefit packages attract higher-end talent.”

“So why is there an elf standing right there! My father always said you got to shovel during the snowstorm to stay ahead of it. This is not staying ahead of the storm!” Boss Hansen stated.

“As your HR Director, I warned you about putting the new guys on the frontline,” The deep-voiced thug said.

“This is my fault now? You want me to cancel the free pop in the breakroom or Hot Dish Wednesdays?”

“Ahem,” Jing said. “I said, *are you going to let those kids go? Or am I—*”

“*Going to have to put you on the Naughty list?*” Boss Hansen said. “I heard you the first time. Some people have no respect for corporate structure, and they make the meetings all about themselves.” Boss Hansen glared at his HR Director and continued, “But it seems that you are a single elf, and if Santa wants his factory back, he’s going to have to do a lot better than send an adorable little guy like you. What’s your name? Candy Cane? Smiles? Silver Bell?”

“It’s Jing.”

“Jing? Is that short for Jingles?” Boss Hansen laughed.

“Jingles is my birth name.”

“You mean—hee hee—that you’re going to tell me—haha—that Santa sent an elf named Jingles! That’s just too much.”

Jing whipped out the Christmas dagger, leaped over the wall of goons, and held it to the boss man’s throat. The thugs pulled out their guns in response. Jing counted about fifty of them. He could probably take them out, but he didn’t like the odds. He lowered his weapon.

“Now that’s a cute little thing.” Boss Hansen took the dagger and waved his top goon over. “Do you use it to cut fruitcake? I think there could be a real market for this.”

“Yes, boss,” The HR Director said.

“Take some notes. Who doesn’t like a good dessert? We bring out special plates during the holidays, why not cutlery?”

Before the boss was able to finish his thought, a team of SEF elves descended from the ceiling on holiday garlands of tinsel. Glitter, Curly, Angel, Kolache, Cider, and Starlight were all there. They each gripped a henchman’s neck and twisted them until they broke with a crunch. The SEFs pivoted the bodies and used them as shields when the remaining thugs fired at the intruders. A battle raged between the army of goons and the elite unit. Jing used the confusion to recover his dagger. He snatched it from the befuddled Boss Hansen’s hand and held the blade to the man’s neck.

The HR Director yanked Jing away with one hand and smashed him on the ground. The elf bounced several times and slid to a halt. The dagger skittered away. Jing lay, stunned by the attack and aching all over. The giant lumbered over and attempted to finish the job with a huge boot.

Jing rolled to the side and out of the way of the HR Director. While the man was turning for another stomp, Jing shot tinsel at the man’s neck, and it wrapped around the guy’s throat. Jing pulled it tight, but the giant was unfazed. After a good yank, the deadly decoration snapped.

Jing's eyes went wide, and his adversary kicked him so hard that he skidded across the floor. He came to a halt near a pair of black boots, red pants, and a big pot belly. Santa leaned down to inspect his fallen elf. Chewing on his trademark cigar, Jolly old St. Nick gestured at Jing with a fully automatic AR-15. His voice boomed. "I told you not to go alone."

Jing picked himself up and brushed off. Santa tossed the battered elf his dagger. Jing waved his recovered weapon. "I embody the spirit of Christmas." He smiled.

"Ho. Ho. Ho," Santa bellowed. "That's why you are my best."

Five henchmen broke from the battle and ran towards them. Kris Kringle gunned them down in a hail of bullets and glory before they even got close. The HR Director and Boss Hansen were the only ones left standing after the last thug was dropped by the other SEF elves. The elves closed in on the pair, but the giant tossed them to the side like dolls. The SEF squad leader, Starlight, called out frantically, "Tinsel! Tinsel! Now!"

All the SEFs shot their tinsel wristbands at the large man. They wrapped every limb in garlands of silver and green. The HR Director grunted but couldn't shake the tangle of tinsel. Boss Hansen used the distraction to make a break for it.

Santa took aim but couldn't get a clear shot with all the SEF elves and the sizeable struggling man. Jing turned to his leader and said, "Throw me."

"Elf tossing?" Kris Kringle said, "Isn't that offensive? I mean I wouldn't want to be—"

"Throw me!"

Santa heaved and rocketed Jing through the air. The elite elf streamlined his body so he would act as a missile flying towards its target. He held the dagger out. The weapon dug deep into the boss's belly on impact and knocked him to the ground. Jing pulled it out and wiped the blood on the red part of his sleeve. Christmas colors were at least good for this.

Boss Hansen gurgled and spat, "You think you've won, but Christmas isn't about Santa or gift giving. It's about online shopping and Black Friday sales. Money rules the holiday. It doesn't matter how many slaves you—"

Santa blew the man's brains out and said, "Good work. Jingles."

"What was he saying about slave labor?" Jing asked.

"You know how it is. Elves work for gumdrops."

"Yeah, that's how I got my house. It's just how commerce is done."

"In the North Pole maybe, but not the rest of the world. I'm afraid gumdrops won't get you much outside. They mostly use Canadian Dollars. Look, let me worry about the geopolitical state of the world. You've done enough for us and deserve a little break. I'll make sure your husband gets some time off from *shelf duty* as well. Why don't you go to Australia or something? I hear they have great hiking trails."

Jing laughed. "I also hear crocodiles eat elves."

"You're acting as if you just didn't take down a room full of them!"

Jing laughed again, "No, it's just that it sounds like it would be way too hot. I think we'll go to Norway this year."

"You always go to Norway."

"I like Norway."

Santa and Jing parted ways. Elf cleaning crews flooded the place and began to remove the mess. Donner, one of the reindeers from the big sleigh itself, was led into the factory floor by a thin elf with bucked teeth. The SEFs had their hands full attempting to load the struggling giant onto the beast's back. The reindeer groaned as elves pushed him up. Starlight yelled, "Be careful! Santa has plans for this one!"

Just as Jing stepped out the door, the kid he had saved earlier tugged on his sleeve. "Take me with you," the child begged.

Jing grinned, "Don't worry. You're safe now. Santa will take you back to your parents."

"It doesn't work that way. I'm naughty," The kid said.

Jing smiled. "Don't believe what that man said. He can't hurt you now."

An elf with brown hair poking through his hat came to collect the kid. "Come with me. We will get you sorted proper."

The elf grabbed the kid by the wrist. The child broke away, grabbed Jing, and wailed, "No, no! I won't go! No!"

"Come on, kid. You don't know what's good for you," The elf yelled.

"Whoa!" Jing said. "That's no way to talk to a child!" He leaned down to the kid and patted his head. His voice softened. "Go with the elf for me. I promise he won't hurt you."

"Promise?" The kid whimpered.

"I promise," Jing said, and the child loosened his grip. "What's your name?"

"Johnny."

"Well, Johnny. Tell you what. I have Santa's ear. Why don't you tell me what you want for Christmas this year? I'll put in a good word for you."

"I want to see my mommy and daddy."

"Consider it done."

"Really?"

"Yes, just go with the nice elf here, and he'll get you back to your mommy and daddy."

Johnny nodded, and the elf with the brown hair took the kid by the hand and led him to the others. Leaving the compound, Jing went into the cold night air.

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