

A Story Without Jam

"I knew it was either the squirrel or me," boasted Special Agent 00'Leary, "but the squirrel won in the end. It had a maximum bid of £7.32 which was 19p more than me and so I came away empty handed."

Mr. Brooks frowned. "You offered me a cup of tea and then came back with some garbled story about eBay. I feel that I have lost on all fronts."

"Well that makes two of us."

Mr. Brooks tilted back his trilby, revealing his full set of teeth. "My tea?" he proposed.

"Erm... no."

"Then I have a request for you. Could you possibly go back to your computer and bid for a whip, a cat o'nine tails, or similar?"

"No problem."

An optimistic smile replaced Mr. Brooks' pessimistic moustache. Since the deformation, or rather the de-formation, of the Rabid Squirrel Slayers several years previously, 00'Leary had been less and less inclined to take orders. At least things would be back to normal in the time it took for Royal Mail to deliver a second hand slave-driving implement. He consulted his handbook. Seven minutes. He could wait that long. Mr. Brooks idly gazed the room before him. The Master Hunter, hiding up the chimney, wasn't faring so well. He was either shell-shocked or unable to believe that the once threatening rabid squirrel population was now merely fertiliser to a forest of pine trees that could produce a future threatening population of squirrels. It was an enigma, make no mistake.

Mr. Brooks looked at his watch. It wasn't there. Probably 00'Leary had sold it on eBay like so much in headquarters. The television, the aftershave, Agent Beard... the list was endless. Still, Mr. Brooks estimated that it was about time for the Master Hunter's psychiatric therapy. Lo and behold, at that very instant who should burst into the room but Dr. Grog.

"It is time!" he called in his strong Pennsylvania-Dutch accent. "Master Hunter, your medicine is ready!" The Master Hunter removed himself from the curtain rail and sped to the bar for his two teaspoons of Tiger. But if he was on the curtain rail then who was up the chimney?

"Now then, now then," smiled Dr. Grog. "How are you getting on? Did you read 'Sally the Squeaky Squirrel and Siblings like I asked you to?'" At the mention of the s-word the Master Hunter whimpered and fell off his stool. He shrivelled up in a little ball, hugging his knees, and Doctor Grog's.

"Quick, we need more knees in here!" cried Dr. Grog. Mr. Brooks leapt from his seat and ran outside. He needed the toilet quite badly. Special Agent Myself entered the room seconds later. He had turned evil once but no one remembered that any more. "I'd offer you mine," he said, "but I left them up Mother Brown."

The doorbell rang. Eager to escape from his therapy, the Master Hunter ran to answer it. "You'd better go with him," muttered Grog to Myself. "He's still not himself."

"I'm not really myself either," said Myself. "Well, I am Myself, but not myself. My instincts keep my heckles raised. I still sleep with a nuclear weapon under my pillow."

"Really?" 00'Leary had come back. "I didn't notice when I did the washing this morning."

"Oh, it was tucked into my pillowcase, you wouldn't have noticed."

“Your pillowcase?”

“Yes.”

“The Batman pillowcase that I’m washing right now?”

“Yes.”

“Quick! Go to red alert! We have a potential nuclear explosion in the kitchen!” The three of them ran out of the room, completely forgetting the Master Hunter. It was Mr. Brooks that found him several minutes later, at the front door, covered in blood.

“Sir! What happened to you?”

“P-p-p-parcel for y-you.”

“Excellent - my whip! We’ll be drinking tea tonight!” He tore off the packaging and thrust his hand into the box.

“Gently!” came a strange squawk from within. Mr. Brooks carefully pulled out the contents. He revealed a green, flailing cactus of some kind.

“The Qat of Nine Tails! Long time no see old buddy!”

“No time for chit-chat!” replied the Qat. “I come bearing a grave warning!”

“Go on,” prompted Mr. Brooks.

“Tomorrow tombstones will increase in price by 200%!” said the Qat. “There’s a shortage of rocks, apparently.”

“Nobody dies these days. It’s out of fashion.”

“What about that poor delivery man? He needs a new grave.”

“What delivery man?”

“The one the Master Hunter just viciously ate.” Mr. Brooks and the Qat of Nine Tails turned to the Master Hunter, who looked a little sheepish.

“I-I-I thought he was a s-s-s-“

“Say it, man!”

“S-s-s-“ A large explosion from the direction of the kitchen saved the Master Hunter from having to elaborate. Feathers of fire and plumes of blaze filled the air. It was very pretty but quite devastating and so tucking the Qat under his arm, Mr. Brooks ran to the vicinity.

“You feel good,” said the Qat. “Been working out?”

“I’m not comfortable with this conversation,” replied Mr. Brooks, adjusting the Qat under his arm.

“Sorry, but you have a really nice underarm. What fragrance do you wear?”

Mr. Brooks put the Qat on the floor and dashed onwards. He arrived at the scene of the grime to discover Dr. Grog and 00’Leary blackened but unhurt.

“What happened?”

“Well,” replied Grog, “00’Leary put a nuclear weapon into the washing machine. We sped out to stop it and arrived just in time to remove it before the spin cycle. We had just drained it and placed it in the sink when the living room blew up. We ran back in to discover a second nuclear device had been planted in the Jacuzzi, which had destroyed the entire room.

“Hmm,” said Mr. Brooks, thinking of the mysterious stranger he had spotted in the chimney earlier. “Where did you say the first nuclear weapon was?”

“On the sink just th- it’s gone!”

“Permission to flee, sir?” asked 00’Leary.

“No, you stay here and make the tea. Grog, quickly, follow me!”

The second explosion was pretty much like the first one, only hydrogen-based rather than helium-based; Myself being something of an old-school nuker.

“Woo, that was close,” said Grog. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a waterfowl lesson to attend.” He ambled off.

Mr. Brooks wasn’t entirely sure what to do. He needed guidance, he needed leadership, he needed...

“I’m back, baby!”

The Master Hunter. He appeared to have regained a little of his lost confidence. He stood high as he studied the blast site. “Two nuclear explosions?” he observed. “Looks like Fuzzball’s work. I’ll get you, blasted squirrels.” He spat on the ground.

“You look better sir,” observed 00’Leary, who had somehow escaped the bomb.

“Less talk, more tea!” snarled the Master, whipping 00’Leary with the Qat of Nine Tails. 00’Leary returned instantly with five steaming mugs, just like the old days. “Now, we need a plan,” said the Master Hunter, sipping his brew. “Mr. Brooks, take Special Agent Myself and disguise yourself as squirrels. Then I want you to go to the nearest rabid squirrel base and see if you can extract any information.”

“But sir, the rabid squirrels are extinct.”

“Just do it, man! I won’t accept cowardice in my ranks. 00’Leary, you come with me.” The Master Hunter strode towards the bombsite with 00’Leary hopping in his wake. Slayer Headquarters was completely devastated; it would take more than Changing Rooms to get it back on track. The Master Hunter was looking for clues. He suspected Fuzzball, but he had no hard evidence at the moment. He entered the remains of the living room.

“Now, Watson,” he said to 00’Leary. “Do you notice anything unusual about this scenario?”

“I’m afraid not, Holmes,” said 00’Leary. “It looks like your bog-standard nuclear bombsite to me.”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t follow, sir.”

“Precisely.”

“I still don’t follow, sir.”

The Master Hunter strode over to the chimney. He gestured to it with his beard. “Look here – what do you see?”

“It’s a chimney, Holmes.”

“Now look around you. What do you see?”

“Complete devastation.”

“Indeed. And does this strike you as odd at all? Why would a chimney survive a nuclear explosion when nothing else in the vicinity remained standing? The only logical conclusion is that the squirrel that set off the bomb must be hiding in this chimney.”

00’Leary thought for a moment. “Sounds logical to me,” he said.

“00’Leary, go and get backup, some smoke, a net and a pot of tea. And be quick about it.”

“No problem, sir. I’m already highest bidder on some backup.”

00’Leary trotted over to his computer only to discover that it had been blown up. He wandered around aimlessly until he found Special Agent Myself chatting animatedly to Dr. Grog.

“But what worries me,” said Myself, “is the radiation from the bombs. What if the radiation poisoned and mutated some squirrels?”

Stroking their chins in thought, the pair turned around. “Ah, 00’Leary!” observed Dr. Grog. “How’s things?”

“I need some backup. There’s a squirrel in the chimney.”

“Splendid. I have nothing to do now that my waterfowl lesson was cancelled. The teacher never turned up, can you believe it?”

“I can’t, no. We also need some smoke and a net. Dr. Grog, do you have a spare hair net?”

“Of course! And we can use Myself’s Cuban. Lead on, little one.”

00’Leary scampered back to the chimney, his colleagues meandering behind him. Upon reaching the chimney, Dr. Grog was ordered to climb it and cover the top with his spare hair net and Myself was instructed to sit in the fireplace and smoke his cigar. They set about their jobs with glee and gusto, glad to have something to do in their lives other than watch Bargain Hunt. Soon Myself’s cigar had produced a great cloud of smoke, and a quacking, coughing noise came from within the chimney.

“Excellent – we’ll have it caught soon!” exclaimed the Master. “Keep smoking, Myself.”

Myself puffed and sucked with added vigour. To the surprise of Dr. Grog a small creature burst from the top of the chimney with immense speed, knocking him to the floor. His hair net had done the job, however, and the creature was trapped and held to his chest. He untangled himself from the remains of the sofa and held up his prisoner for all to see.

The Master Hunter shivered. “No... it can’t be!” He took a step back.

00’Leary frowned. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “It’s just a duck!”

“It’s not just a duck,” said Mr. Brooks. “It’s *the* duck. The Master Hunter’s one true fear. Ring any bells?”

“Haven’t got any.”

Dr. Grog peered at the bird in his arms. “Hang on,” he said. “This isn’t the duck. This is Professor Duckstein, teacher of my advanced waterfowl course!”

“Duckstein is dead, doctor,” said Mr. Brooks. “The duck must have killed him and taken his place in order to get close to you, knowing that you would lead it to the Master Hunter so that it could finish the job it started many years ago.”

“D-d-d-duck!” stammered the Master Hunter. “K-k-kill it!”

Dr. Grog took out his best butchering knife and aimed for the duck’s scalp. He took a big swing and missed entirely.

“That’s odd,” he said.

He took another swing and again missed the duck. He handed the knife to Mr. Brooks, who also missed the duck, lock, stock and barrel. All of the Slayers, excepting the Master Hunter, had a swipe at the duck, but they all merely thinned the air.

“It-it-it’s controlling your m-minds!” stuttered the Master.

“Don’t be silly,” said Dr. Grog, handing the duck the knife, his wallet and all his clothing. He gave the duck a little kiss on the cheek, blushed, then undid it from the netting and set it free.

“Why did you do that?” asked 00’Leary.

“Do what?” asked Dr. Grog, awaking from a trance.

“Set it free?”

“Sorry about that, don’t know what came over me.”

Only the Master Hunter knew what had really come over him. He had fought the duck on several occasions, and had never come away the better. He retreated to

the remains of the living room, built a sofa out of ash and then hid beneath it. He didn't surface again for a long, long time.

As for the duck, it settled on top of the chimney. It didn't move as the Rabid Squirrel Slayers rebuilt their headquarters around it. It didn't move during the boisterous and extravagant housewarming festivities. It didn't move during the great earthquake of '72. No matter how long the Master Hunter remained in hiding, the duck was always waiting, just out of reach.

Then 00'Leary sold it on eBay.