

Gus's Big Plans for the Little Christmas

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“What a mess I’ve made, again! Augh!”

Gus, the young tomte-in-training, sat invisibly on the front steps leading to the Jonasson’s farmhouse, pouting. “Ok, so there are some challenges in the world that are not . . . a good idea. The Tomte Manual clearly states that we magical beings are to get along with every sort of weather. And I guess the chubby-faced storm cloud wasn’t so bad after all.”

“This is the night before Christmas and we tomtar are supposed to find something good to do for others. ‘Step through and do something new’ is all over the airwaves. Everybody is saying it. So maybe I can start with a little human. How could that possibly go wrong?”

He looked over his shoulder at the front door and smiled. “And they have a cool library, which might just be one of the perks while I do something nice for someone else.”

“What to do, what to do?”

The tomte smoothed his bright blue coat and patted his chest where the inside pocket held the magic communicator currently folded flat like a Christmas card, knowing he wasn’t very good at using it yet. He pulled the bottom edge of his gray pants below his knees and straightened his amazing red and white striped socks, making sure they were even from one leg to the other. Then Gus stood up, still lost in his thoughts. His chunky red boots and long matching sock hat would be the perfect picture against the white snow if anyone could have seen him just then.

It wasn't long before Gus could hear a clear '*clutt*', *clutt*, ring through the silence of the heavy blanket of white snow covering the farmyard and the spruce forest beyond. "Now, who would chop wood at this late in the day and so far from the house?"

"I must investigate," Gus said glad to have something to turn his thoughts to.

He appeared in the branches of a thick ancient spruce and watched a young boy gather the loose branches with the fan of limbs, bright with green needles, and throw them onto a miniature-sized sled.

"Go on ahead of me Sven, yah?" the lanky older man said to his son who looked to be about six years old, in human years, tousling the boy's mop of blonde hair.

"Got it, Pappa," Sven answered, tightening a belt around the thicker end of the branches closest to the rope he was ready to pull.

The small procession of Sven, sled, Sven's father, and tree made an interesting track down the hillside past the barnyard and across to the three-story farmhouse.

"Sophia, my love, we're back," Sven's father called, and the front door opened.

A pleasant lady in a cleverly patched dress welcomed her men home.

"We'll get the tree ready after dinner, Jonas?" Sophia said ushering them into the small foyer, which reminded Gus of a mud room as they shed their coats above the bench just inside the front door with four glass panes.

Gus posed, leaning on the doorjamb that led into the kitchen, and watched in surprise as Sophia served the evening meal. Just a bowl of soup and pancakes. Yet, the small family was smiling and talking away as if they were having dinner fit for a king.

"Your pea soup is always amazing!" Jonas said dabbing his scruffy winter beard.

"Wait until you see what I have in store for our Julbord, our Christmas buffet!" she said with a secretive wink as she cleared the tureen, careful to hold it by the thick handles on each side and set it gingerly down on the attached footstand equally decorated with Swedish hearts and vines.

"I so love this time of year when I get to bring our few family treasures out to be used."

"My, my, my. She thinks a fancy serving bowl is a treat?"

While the tree sat on the porch that Sophia had swept clear of snow before the men found a tree, Sven excitedly bounced around the living room in anticipation of what would happen next.

The family of three worked together to bring the tree, as tall as Jonas himself, through the front door, cut end first. Jonas and Sophia stood it up and nestled it into a well-worn stand, while Sven filled the deep bowl at the base of the stand with water.

Next, Sophia opened a large dusty box and showed Sven how to hook the old ornaments gently into the boughs of the magnificent tree.

As Gus watched, the invisible tomte stumbled slightly backward and into the table.

“What is this pile?” The tomte stroked his beard as he admired the small stack of colored paper next to a large pair of scissors. Gus had forgotten that he could be heard and checked to make sure he was still invisible.

Little Sven heard the sound near the table and moved in that direction, his eyes searching everywhere.

“Ah, min son,” Sophia said as she closed the empty box and joined Sven at the table. “This will be a paper chain to decorate our tree this year.”

“We cut them in strips like this,” she said, cutting through 4 stacked sheets at a time, creating long strips of various colors. “Again and again. And now we have just what we need to start.”

The new project quickly distracted Sven from pursuing the voice as Sophia showed him how to build a paper chain. “Each strip will make a link. Take one end, thread it through this finished link, and then finish the new circle by overlapping the small ends, securing it with a dot of glue. Choose your next strip and do the same. And the next.”

Sophia continued to cut strips while young Sven tried it himself.

“I get it!” Sven said, eyes wide while the chain grew with his help.

As night approached, Sven’s father lit the small fire in the fireplace and sat back, recalling stories about tomtar that he remembered his father ‘Old Jonasson’ telling ever since he was a small boy. As the stories grew, so did the colorful chain.

“I did save some corn kernels from the summer and we can pop them and string them as well,” she said, smiling at the enthralled young boy.

“And don’t forget the flags, my love,” Jonas said carefully taking the long string of tiny flags of Sweden out of the box of Christmas things used over again each year.

Blah, blah, blah, Gus thought watching them create something out of nothing. *What kind of Christmas is this? I can figure out something to do. 'Step through and do something new' . . . but what? I don't know how to do much of anything.*

Gus left the small, cozy room and appeared in his full glory in the barn talking to the two horses there, Henesy and Margo. “What am I going to do, I ask you?”

“I know, I'll sneak into their kitchen late at night. After all, I did take a baking class not all that long ago.”

Margot, with her dark brown nose, shook her head letting her black mane flop back and forth. Then she stretched out her nose to the corner.

The golden head of Henesy appeared over the top of the half-door of the next stall, and she motioned to the same corner as well.

“There is only a broom. What, you want me to sweep them up a present?”

Henesy shook her white mane and rolled her eyes. She blew a little, making an exasperated noise.

“Oh yes,” Gus said, and remembered an earlier . . . *lesson* . . . he had learned. “That man, the upside-down broom, and stuff in it for the birds, right?” And both of the thick work horses nodded as if he were a child that had finally understood them.

“No, no, no, my idea is much better. What could go wrong?”

“I'll make cookies. That's got to be easier, right?”

Before either horse could answer, Gus pulled out his grandfather's antique Snow Globe Communicator and tried to bring his friend Tindra the tomte into view.

“Gus, life can be simple and still be exactly perfect,” she said as his thoughts continued to grow his greater plan of a kitchen, floor to ceiling, full of the extravagant baked goods he was so willing to make.

“Gus, are you listening?” Tindra said with a sigh.

Gus was on a roll, totally and happily lost in his grand plans to show the Jonasson family a huge Christmas, much like he remembered himself as a child with 12 siblings and a famous grandfather.

That night, he snuck into the small farmhouse kitchen; every spoon, pot, and pan neatly in its place.

“Oh, my, my, my. Where shall I start?” he said with a glimmer in his eye and big expectations exploding in his head.

He promptly took off his sock hat, tucked it in his belt and replaced it with his chef’s hat from his baking class and wrapped the oversized apron around his middle, careful not to step on the very long front of the white cloth.

He carefully unfolded the first recipe he had written down and opened each cupboard to see where the things he would need were stored.

In the bottom deep drawer, he found an oversized bowl like he had used when he made a Swedish braid in his class. He pulled out the whole nest of bowls and cringed when they banged on the kitchen counter.

“Flour. Everything needs flour,” he murmured to himself as he searched the tall pantry cupboard.

“And eggs,” he said balancing the canister of flour in one arm and opening the refrigerator with the other. “Top shelf. No problem.” He stood on his tip-toes just barely able to reach the tray of eggs. “Just a little to the left,” he said as he balanced on one toe to gain the last inch. “And . . . got it!” he exclaimed as he grabbed the edge of the shallow tray that held a dozen eggs, loosely arranged.

“Clever, I am so clever,” he said as he wobbled but righted the tray bringing it down to chest height and sliding it onto the rectangle table in the middle of the kitchen. Only the glow from his SGC lit the space as he awkwardly settled the canister of flour next to the bowls.

He selected a few eggs for the cookies and went about collecting the other ingredients. As he turned to set them too on the center table, his sock hat stuck in his belt nudged the tray of eggs a little closer to the edge. When Gus swept back around with a knowing grin, seeing before him the vision of brilliant and beautiful loaves of bread, piles of cookies, and mounds of tasty nuts, his elbow caught the corner of the egg tray that had shifted and balanced precariously over the edge.

‘Clack. Splat,splat, splat,’ was followed by ‘Clatter, clatter, clatter, clatter.’

Dead silence!

“Boom!” A storm outside let itself be known. Gus sighed, hoping the storm would cover the sounds of his efforts.

“Never have I been so glad to hear you, my friend,” he said out the window to the storm cloud as the next boom shook the house.

The creaks and a couple of footsteps he had heard coming from upstairs stopped, retraced their steps, the bed creaked again, and all was quiet.

Looking from the tray next to the slime of eggs on the floor to the hot oven to the bowls holding various steps of creation, he shook his head. “Not now,” he confirmed. “I’ll clean it up when I’m all done. Time can’t be wasted on mere maintenance just now.”

Gus returned to work. He had yeast rising in the largest bowl. In the middle green bowl, butter and sugar were mixed together, ready for the eggs to be added for the cookies. The smaller blue bowl held the cinnamon mix in which the pecan halves—toasting in the small frying pan on the stove—would be coated, creating a heavenly treat.

Gus was waving his wooden spoon around the room like an orchestra leader, moving from one project to the next and the next as each got a little closer to the finish line.

“Two sheets of cookies into the oven,” he said kicking the oven door shut with a fancy swing of his boot.

“Ah, look at these golden-coated pecans; they are perfect, of course.” Gus held the handle of the small frying pan with a padded oven mitt. As he shook the nuts around in the butter, he happened to notice something odd rising in the biggest yellow bowl. The tan foaming mix of yeast, water, and sugar bubbled high above the edge and threatened to run down the side. “Not yet, not yet,” he stammered, dropping the pan with the nuts back to its place on the stovetop.

The little tomte took a breath and smiled. He saved the day and the bread, when he added the three cups of flour mixed with his own stash of cardamom, the rest of the sugar, and salt and stirred vigorously until the swelling foam deflated and became part of the thick batter.

“One hundred strokes,” he said to himself, counting with his head nodding with each count.

A quiet ‘ding’ sounded from the small timer sitting near the sink next to the oven. The first batch of cookies was ready to come out.

“Seventy-five . . . hold that thought,” he said to himself as he left the spoon in the bread mix, wiped his hands on his apron and reached for the oven mitt.

“Oh, the nuts,” he said, turning off the burner from under the pan and juggled himself in the narrow space, careful to avoid the long handle of the pan as he opened the oven door below.

“Perfect,” he said with a contented sigh bringing out the first sheet of two and looked around for a place to put his prize . . . stunned to see there was hardly an inch of room on any countertop or the table.

“Oh, no. no, no,” he said, his eyes bulging out of his head.

He turned back to the oven and set the one cookie sheet on top next to the pan of nuts. When he turned back around to the center table, he rammed his shin, housed in brilliant red and white striped socks, against the still-open oven door. The low door slammed shut as Gus hopped around on one foot, holding just below his knee with both hands, his face writhing in pain.

Favoring the hurt leg, he grabbed the wooden spoon and tucked the yellow bowl in the crook of his arm and turned the spoon violently around the inside.

“Seventy-six, seventy-seven,” he started counting again in a painful mutter.

“One hundred,” he said fulfilled, and started dumping the rest of the flour in sequence: scoop, stir, scoop, stir until it was too thick for him to stir.

“What’s that smell,” he said opening the kitchen window over the sink as the room seemed to be filling with a burnt aroma.

“The cookies!” he said with a start and wildly yanked the oven door down, smoke pouring out, and the smoldering round discs shriveled on the second tray lay there, unsalvageable. Gus pulled the cookie sheet out with the oven mitt protecting his hand, and dumped the forlorn objects stuck to the metal sheet into one side of the kitchen sink. He stood there and just listened to the metal sizzle. With the dark globs attached the sheet looked somewhat like a climbing wall.

Gus slammed the oven shut. As he lifted his arms in exasperation, he accidentally hit the handle of the pan with all the nuts and butter. It flipped into the air, some nuts landing in the cinnamon mix, but most landing all over the things on the table and the floor between it and the counter with the sink.

“Boom!” And the house shook a little and then nestled back into the slumber of the night.

“The bread?” A mound of off-white was building in the yellow bowl. The cookie dough in the green bowl was starting to settle — the butter in the mix being too warm from the oven which will ensure very flat cookies, and Gus was in a dilemma as to what to do first.

“Gus?” came a sound off in the distance, emanating from his Snow Globe Communicator.

“Tindra,” Gus said, glad to hear anything happy, as he certainly was not.

“Take a breath,” she said, trying to hide the shock as she looked through her SGC into the room surrounding her friend.

“Be there,” she said, and she was gone.

When Tindra appeared in the Jonasson’s kitchen, Gus quickly said, “Don’t stand there! You’ll slippppp!”

But it was too late. The tomte in purple with paisley designs was surfing across the top of the eggs that covered part of the floor, stopping when she slid into the corner cabinets.

“Now,” Gus said looking at Tindra, motioning for her to stay where she was. “I need to find a broom.”

“I’m not sure that a broom will help with butter and nuts or the eggs,” Tindra said sliding the cookies from sheet one onto the rack that she had found and crammed on the counter near the sink. She calmly went about preparing the next batch of cookies for the oven.

“Good point,” he said scooping the nuts up with a metal spoon and throwing them in the trash. Using a bit of soap on another dishtowel, he set about scrubbing the floor free of the greasy layer.

Gus was at her feet scooping up egg yolks, whites, and a combination of the two, sliding the seemingly moving muck into a bowl and dumping it into an empty pail next to the trash. With more fresh towels, Gus and Tindra worked to wipe up the slime. They rinsed and wrung out the towels, added a tad bit of soap and wiped again. Then once more with just water until there was no sticky stuff left.

Throwing the towels into the deep sink in the laundry room just beyond the kitchen, Gus said, “I’ll be back. Just need to make a visit to the flower hens in the barn. I need to replace all the eggs I broke. I’m sure they won’t mind.”

“I’ll work at this end, and you keep doing whatever you’ve got to do, Gus. This was a great idea, for maybe when you’re a little more advanced in training. But you had the right intent, and that was to make someone else come first . . . to make their day.”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes, but what a mess!” he said, glad for the company but ashamed of the reason for it.

When Gus reappeared, he had feathers of white, blue, rust and gold stuck here and there in his beard. But he did have a tray of eggs. “The hens were not all that happy with me waking them up, no matter how quiet and sneaky I tried to be. But, in the end, they let me have enough for Sophia to start the morning.”

Tindra chuckled under her breath as she watched Gus comb his fingers through his beard, removing colorful feathers and trying to get them to float down into the trash can.

Undaunted, Gus washed his hands and was ready to start again.

“I’ll have to move the bowl with the bread dough to have enough room to work enough flour into it so it will hold its shape, and then I have to braid it, and then . . .” Gus got shorter and shorter the more he considered all he still had to do.

“It doesn’t have to be a braid,” Tindra said as she slid the cookies from sheet one onto the rack. She set about putting the next twelve dabs of cookie dough in three rows on the cleaned sheet and slid it back into the oven.

“You can set it to rise as one big loaf once you’ve got enough flour in it.”

“Are you sure?” Gus said peering through squinted eyes to see if she really knew or was just trying to be kind.

“Yep. It won’t be as fine and fluffy, but it will taste great all the same,” she said confidently as she struggled to get the burnt globs off the second sheet in the sink.

“Ok then,” he said standing on a chair to make himself tall enough to knead the rest of the flour into the dough. “Up, over and push down in the middle, turn . . . ,” he chanted.

“Now, you can use sheet two,” she said pointing to the drip-dried cookie sheet.

The dinger dinged and she pulled out sheet one full of cookie treasures and shoveled them onto the rack.

Gus checked the recipe and dutifully buttered the very large center of the sheet and plopped his dough ball on the prepared space, covering it with a clean dishtowel he had found in a drawer.

“Ok, now I can use the table for more cookies to cool,” Tindra said admiring the complete job Gus was willing to do.

“And look at that, a few nuts actually made it into the cinnamon sugar! Win!”

“I’ve got it from here,” Gus said, pulling the next sheet of cookies out and sliding his mound of amazing-looking bread dough into the oven.

“I don’t think I can thank you enough,” he said, turning red, knowing she knew how unusual that statement would be, coming from him.

“Step through and do something new,” she said as he helped finish the statement. “See you next time.”

And she was gone.

An hour later, with the kitchen clean and the tantalizing smell of bread filling the small space, he, too, disappeared. The pile in the laundry room sink had risen to a mountain with almost every towel from the kitchen drawer. Gus was turning off his SGC when he heard the Jonasson family starting to stir.

“I’ll start the coffee, min älskling,” Jonas said as he sleepily sauntered into the kitchen, his feet encased in roughly knitted thick green socks with the repeated hearts designed into the pattern.

Gus hid just inside the laundry room and watched as the man automatically went about preparing the coffee, never noticing the odd offerings set on the table in what Gus thought was a creative display. The rather dark-crust round loaf of bread sat on one of the fancy plates, surrounded by small handfuls of cinnamon nuts. The soup tureen was open, piled with cookies of various colors of toast, but full nonetheless.

Jonas ruffled his fingers through his thick mess of white hair and rubbed his eyes and reached for three mugs from the cupboard. Only then, when he turned around to put them in their usual places on the rectangle table, did he notice the display.

“Sophia! Sven! I think my eyes deceive me,” he said, his eyes being three times the size they were just moments before. “We must have a tomte, just like min far—Old Jonasson—told stories about.”

Gus chuckled and happily disappeared returning to his friends in the barn.

“God Jul, Merry Christmas mina vänner,” Gus said greeting each animal with a caring brush of his hand, hobbling just a bit. “It’s a lot of work making something out of nothing. Much more than I thought. It is a gift of time all by itself,” Gus said contentedly.

Later that morning, as Gus was petting Jordy, the yellow-striped cat, the animals of Jonasson’s farm heard the front door slam.

Jonas was whistling a familiar song as he made his way through the fresh snow to the barn. He was quickly followed by the young Jonasson who was balancing a bowl of something steaming with what looked like a pat of butter on top.

“Mamma made Risgrynsgröt for breakfast,” Sven said into the open air.

“We want to share our porridge with the tomte of our barn,” Jonas said, as his son set down the bowl on the workbench at the back of the barn.

“Tack så mycket! Thanks so much and Merry Christmas morning. You have certainly made ours, yah?” Jonas said.

“Jul god! Herr Tomte!” young Sven said wiping his hands on his coat.

The morning was a sharp contrast with the brilliant blue sky above the glistening white snow covering the yard, the fields, and as far as the eye could see.

“How simple and complete gift-giving can be. I ‘stepped through and did something new’! I feel as if *I’ve* been given the world!” Gus nodded with his hands resting on his hips.

“Jul god! Merry Christmas,” Gus said though his words floated freely away on the slight breeze. “Oh, yes, yes, yes!”