

Fight the Future

Wheezing for air, Mike fell from Christmas Future's frightening embrace onto cold, rough concrete. Looking up at the spirit, it was impossible to see into the darkness of their hood, or to make out any features except for the pale hand that quickly withdrew into a long, dark sleeve. It was hard to tell if the digits were skeletal, or if the skin had simply withered to a thin, pale layer of flesh.

"Take me back." He tried to stand, but his limbs were still weak from his attempt to manipulate the North Pole's magic. "I need to get back to the others."

The spirit said nothing, then pointed over Mike's shoulder.

"Asshole," Mike muttered, then rolled over to look. They were on the sidewalk just outside his home, the front yard empty of life. The hedge maze had dried up completely, the husks of his bushes covered in dead leaves. The front windows were broken, and a piece of plywood had been nailed into place over the door.

The spirit pointed again, as if urging Mike forward.

"No, fuck you. Your boss sent you to off me, I'm not stupid." Mike stood, his legs wobbling beneath him like a newborn calf. "Have you seen your siblings? Not the hot one, but Christmas Past. All those centuries of Christmas, pissed on by a corrupted Santa Claus."

Christmas Future tilted their head, then pointed again.

"Nah, I'm good." Mike moved to lean against the stone wall surrounding his house, but Christmas Future seized him by the collar and dragged him toward the house. He kicked and punched, but the ghost simply shifted out of the way or moved so that contact was minimal.

Mike went limp, forcing the spirit to drop him. They picked him up and dragged him toward the house, but Mike closed his eyes.

"Even if you take me, I'm not gonna look! You can't hurt me if I don't—"

The air was knocked out of him as Christmas Future threw him bodily through the plywood. The wood shattered and Mike nearly lost consciousness, his brain scrambled from the impact. The spirit picked him up again and dragged him through the house toward the backyard.

Luckily, the backdoor wasn't boarded up, which meant that Mike was able to twist the knob to unlatch it before he was shoved through. They were in the

backyard now, and it was just as dead as the front. Aymone's tree was a jagged stump, while Naia's fountain was empty of water.

Mike closed his eyes again, but the spirit wrestled him into position and dug its fingers into his face, prying his eyelids open. He tried to bite the spirit, but the bastard moved out of the way.

"You know, I miss the days when people just told me my world was going to burn. Half expected to see it here, to be honest. So this is the future, eh? How far forward are we? Is *Winds of Winter* out yet?"

Christmas Future responded by shaking him and pointing Mike's face at the fountain.

"Okay, yes. I'm so sad, everybody is dead, boo hoo." Seeing these things would have terrified him, but he already knew that what the spirit showed him was only one possible future. "I'll change my ways, time to go back, I guess."

The spirit pushed him onto the ground. Mike got a mouthful of dirt, which he spat out.

"The future tastes like ass," he grumbled. Okay, so the plan to depress him had failed. Shouldn't the spirit have known that?

The ghost of Christmas Future kicked Mike in the ribs. The attack was so fast that Mike couldn't avoid it, but he was able to twist out of the way enough that the attack wasn't as effective.

"Oh, fuck, now I know why you didn't find me earlier." Mike tried to crawl away, his spaghetti legs doing him no favors. "You can see the future. You waited to nab me when I was all alone and would be weak—"

Another kick caught him in the rear, and he tumbled ass over head down the hill just past the fountain. He came to a stop, his eyes now on the gates to the Underworld. The lock was missing, and he could see the misty trees on the other side.

"Oh, you just screwed up." He army-crawled toward the gate, eager to get to the other side. Whether his body or spirit was in the future didn't matter. The Underworld would accept him either way, and he would come back with a fire breathing hellhound in just a minute.

Another kick missed him, and he managed to get his feet under him. The Underworld was so close, and the ghost of Christmas Future was hot on his heels.

Wait a second. Mike's hand had closed on the cold iron of the gate when he remembered that Christmas Future could see all possible outcomes. Shouldn't it be wary of driving him somewhere with potential allies?

Was Cerberus even on the other side of this gate?

Instead of passing through the gate, he waited just long enough for Christmas Future to catch up to him, then twisted to one side and yanked the gate open. The metal bars capable of restraining demonic hordes slammed into Christmas Future, knocking the spirit back. They fell on the ground, hood slipping down briefly to reveal that the spirit's face was a smooth mass of flesh with holes where the eyes and mouth should be. A dark mist leaked from each orifice, pooling beneath the spirit's body.

"Oh, fuck me," Mike whispered, watching in horror as the mist tried to curl around his feet. He took a step back, tripping over a small object. It was the lock to the gate, covered in enough dirt that he hadn't seen it. "You were going to lock me in there, weren't you?"

Christmas Future stood by planting their feet and leaning forward without using their hands in a move that would have made Nosferatu jealous. The spirit made a sound like someone inhaling a tremendous amount of air, but Mike didn't stick around to see what would happen next. He did a hobble-run toward the greenhouse that probably looked like he had ridden a horse all day and now had a major case of swamp ass.

Christmas Future teleported in front of him, its arms outstretched, but Mike was ready. The gate was proof that the spirit couldn't accurately predict what was going to happen, not all of the time. In fact, it had only been a last moment decision that had kept him from going through the gate.

It was similar to what he would do while playing Slap the Cyclops with Sofia. Focus hard on one intent, and then do something else, or even the opposite. He could take a swing at the spirit, or try to slip past him, but perhaps those were the actions he was most likely to take.

Focusing hard on taking a swing at the ghost, Mike changed his mind at the last second and tackled the spirit to the ground. They bounced and rolled across the yard, the world blurring around them. It was the house again, but the fairies were having a snowball fight with each other while a pair of gargoyles circled overhead.

“So what’s wrong with this one?” Mike demanded. The spirit responded by twisting behind him and smashing his face into the rock wall. Not only did it hurt like hell, but the gargoyles dropped down from above and an alarm went through the house. Streams of magic coalesced around them, and Christmas Future drove its knee into Mike’s solar plexus.

“Oof.” It was the only comeback available to him, but everything blurred again and now they were outside the burned out shell of his home. Mike gritted his teeth and tried to suck in some air as Christmas Future wrapped an arm around his throat and put him in a chokehold.

The tingling in his body was replaced by the roaring fury of his magic. Molten rage manifested as a blistering frenzy of electrical energy across his back, and Christmas Future blipped out of existence with a hissing sound.

Gasping, Mike crawled toward the home. He didn’t know how long it would take before Christmas Future returned, but something important had occurred to him. These futures were only single possibilities from a nigh infinite number of outcomes. Were they just complex illusions similar to what Christmas Past could accomplish, or was he actually in these potential futures?

If the latter, then his family could help him if he could get their attention. He needed to be inside the house, just in case—

Christmas Future grabbed him by the ankles and dragged him away from the home. The spirit picked him up and tossed him onto a massive stone that appeared as the future shifted again. Mike smacked his lip on the cold marble, then leaned back enough to see his own name carved into the rock.

Mike Radley

Beloved husband, father, and friend.

He looked at the bottom and saw that it was today’s date.

“Nice touch, asshole.” He pulled himself over the headstone, just avoiding another kick to the head. Falling flat on the ground, he started laughing. After his dealings with Christmas Past and Present, he had expected a long, elaborate plan from the last remaining ghost. The bastard had even gone so far as to pick him off when he was vulnerable, but the plan had devolved into simply beating his ass the old fashioned way.

Christmas Future teleported on top of Mike, then tried to strangle him with long, bony fingers. Mike managed to take a deep breath, then released the

banshee's cry. Christmas Future fell over backwards, clutching at where its ears would be if it had them. Its whole body rippled, spilling dark mist onto the ground.

Mike made a break for it, but stopped when he saw that the house was gone. Instead, the land was empty, as if a giant hand had scooped it away. The danger sense formed in his gut just as Christmas Future barreled into him from behind, and both of them fell into the hole.

When they landed, the world shifted, and he was in his basement. Christmas Future did the creepy standing thing as Mike just laid there, huffing and puffing for air. It was clear that this was going to be a fight of attrition, and he was never even going to catch his breath if this kept up.

When Christmas Future crouched over him, Mike used his magic to see the spirit's soul. It was impossibly difficult to comprehend, like staring into a fractal projected inside an infinity mirror. His brain was desperately trying to interpret the concept of eternity in a being composed of space-time, and his mind latched onto the mirror analogy.

"Eat my dick, discount Slenderman." Instead of forming his magic into delicate fingers meant for weaving, he twisted them into a thick spike and jammed it into the mirror. The metaphorical glass exploded, sending each permutation of the spirit flinging outward into the room.

The ghost of Christmas Future screamed as the world tore itself to shreds around them. Reality spiraled in a literal sense, the two combatants bouncing off the walls as the room transformed around them. Cracks formed along the edges of the room, revealing a nothingness beyond that hungered for the light.

Despite the intense shifting of scenery, Mike felt himself enter a trance, as if he was driving a car on the highway. It had been so long since he had even driven a car, would he remember how? Whenever he tried to pull his attention back to the broken world around him, some stray thought would catch his attention, or he would forget what he was doing. It was simply easier to just go with the flow and pay no attention to the beings who were watching him. His body no longer hurt from being caught in a temporal spin-cycle, and he assumed it was because everything faded out shortly after fading in.

It could have been minutes, hours, or even days. Eventually, the room stopped spinning and he found himself back on the basement floor, shivering from the cold. He looked over his shoulder, but Christmas Future was gone.

Climbing to his feet, he made his way to the stairs and walked up. He pushed open the door and stepped out into the kitchen. It was empty, as if nobody lived there.

“Great,” he muttered, rubbing at the lump on his forehead. When he leaned on the countertop for support, it felt strangely sponge-like. Puzzled, he lifted his hand away and saw that he could see through himself.

“That can’t be good.” He walked out of the kitchen and into the dining room. The table had the usual number of seats with the ghost of Christmas Future sitting at the end, a small radio clutched in their hands.

“You really are a creepy fucker.” Mike tensed up, expecting the spirit to come for him. Instead, it turned on the radio, filling the room with the sounds of static. Long digits fiddled with the tuning knob, filling the room with a cacophony of sounds.

“Mi...ke...Rad...ley.” It was a mishmash of conversations and music, put together into a cohesive statement that Mike absolutely hated. Leave it to a time traveling ghost to pick the spookiest fucking method of communication.

“I take it you have something to say.” Mike sat down at the opposite end of the table, suddenly aware of how tired he was.

“I...win...”

“Whatever, dude. I’m still standing.” Well, sitting for now, but whatever.

Christmas Future twiddled the knob furiously, and Mike’s brain stitched the words together.

“Your actions...too unpredictable,” it told him through the radio. “Each moment...too many variables.”

“Should have put that on my tombstone,” Mike replied. “Or maybe something mysterious. I’m thinking ‘Here lies Mike. Chaotic sexy.’ I’ve got a one-eyed friend who can tell you all about how I subvert expectations, but don’t expect the same treatment I give her. That’s a different kind of fighting.”

“Couldn’t guess...outcome fast enough.” Christmas Future paused as if waiting for something, then twisted some more. Mike noticed dark lines of corruption on the spirit’s fingers. “Too many futures to see, not enough...time to adjust.”

“Haven’t you watched Terminator? You’d love it. It’s all about humans pissing all over the concept of you. Where’d you get the radio? I would be much happier with a Ouija board, or a Speak and Say.”

The spirit paused, then twisted the dial some more. “Took you to an improbable timeline, but you spotted the trap. Am not fighter. Was only chance to...beat you. I failed.”

“By trapping me in the Underworld? How would that work?” It had been a last moment thought back then, but now he was certain that Cerberus wouldn’t have been there to help. It had been explained to him once that the Underworld was multiversal. Even if he wasn’t in a timeline that made any sense, the danger to him would be very real and final.

Christmas Future nodded. “Very small chance, but had to obey...Santa.”

“That asshole isn’t really Santa.” Mike leaned forward and scowled. “It’s just the douchiest part of him wearing his skin like a suit.”

The spirit sighed and went still. Mike wondered if their conversation was over, but Christmas Future lifted their cowl as if looking at him.

“Needed drastic measure.” The ghost paused, whether for dramatic effect or because the next words weren’t going to be right, Mike would never know. “Had to obey, even though...consequences. Can’t take you back.”

“Excuse me, what?” Mike slammed his fist down on the table, and it felt squishy beneath him. “What do you mean, you can’t take me back?”

“No choice. Have to stop you before you stop Santa, but can’t actually stop you.” Christmas Future somehow found a sound byte of an audience gasping in surprise. “If I kill you, Krampus wins. Your family...revenge. Christmas...canceled. You had to die...someone else’s hand. I’m stuck in paradox...too weak now. Can’t fight any longer, can’t take you back. Christmas still gets canceled.”

The ghost nearly dropped their radio, but Mike noticed something else was wrong. The spirit had slumped over in its chair, more of that black mist leaking out of it. He inspected its soul, and was surprised to see that it no longer looked like a fractal, nor was it replicated. Instead, it looked like a tiny flame with ribbons of darkness attached to it.

“Wait a second.” Mike stood and moved a bit closer. “If Christmas is canceled, then...you can’t be the spirit of Christmas Future if...”

Somehow, that fucker found an audio clip of Jabba the Hutt laughing in response.

“No, you have to take me back!” Mike crossed the table, his magic lighting up the room and touching nothing as he got his hands on the spirit’s throat. It didn’t even respond, going limp in his fingers.

“Can’t.” Christmas Future pulled back its hood to reveal that the darkness on their fingers had spread into dark lines along their face. Only one eye hole still had any white around it. “All of this has already happened. Must let...events take...”

While Mike yelled threats at the spirit, it didn’t go beneath his notice that it dialed the radio to one more phrase.

“I’m...sorry...” The ghost shriveled up beneath its robes, leaving nothing but a black cloak behind. When Mike tried to pick it up, it turned into black mist and oozed along the floorboards before vanishing.

Mike screamed in rage, then tried to grab the chair and throw it. Instead, it shifted less than an inch as his fingers passed through it. With the passing of Christmas Future, he discovered he could no longer interact with his environment.

He ran out into the living room and froze when he saw that it was empty. There was no furniture of any sort, the house stripped bare. What had happened to his family? Where had they gone?

Something cracked inside of him, and he leaned against the wall, sliding down until he was sitting. Tears of anger and grief rolled down his cheeks. Even though he had technically beaten the ghost, it had won in the end. Mike was stuck gods knew how many years in the future with no way to get home.

So many thoughts ran through his head at once that he felt disoriented. What had the others thought when he had vanished? Technically, he wasn’t dead, so the house wouldn’t have gone into hibernation...right?

Staring out the barren window at a cold, winter sky, he heard the soft ticking of a clock in his office. He wiped the tears from his eyes and stood, then walked cautiously toward the room. When he stepped inside, he saw that the office was clean, all the furniture removed. A cursory look into the sitting room revealed the same.

The shelves by the window had been built into the wall, and a small clock that had been left on the shelves let out a chime. The bell tolled three times, and then resumed its quiet ticking.

“Tick Tock?” He wasn’t sure why the mimic would be here, but it was the only thing that made sense to him. He walked to the shelves and tried to interact with the clock, but his fingers could only stroke the surface, accomplishing nothing.

There was a shifting sound behind him, and Mike turned to see a man standing in the doorway, wearing a white button down with a pair of black slacks. His arms were crossed, and there was a slight smirk on a face that looked very much like Mike’s. Auburn hair with streaks of white had been pulled back into a ponytail, revealing a faded scar along his forehead.

The face, however, looked very much like Mike’s. It felt like all the wind had been sucked out of the room as he took a step toward Callisto, one hand outstretched in both disbelief and awe. His son was not only an adult, but he was also in human form.

“Hello, father.” Callisto took a step into the room and rolled up his sleeves, revealing muscled forearms covered in thin scars. “Now let’s see how we can unfuck this situation, shall we?”

“I see a spot down there.” Lily leaned over the side of the sleigh, her tail hooked beneath the seat to keep her from falling. They were over Jamaica, and beneath them were the glittering lights of the coastal resorts.

To say that their delivery system had been truly fudged would be an understatement. The snow army that had been created on the east coast of Russia had been able to track them without any issue, effectively locking off anywhere in the Eastern hemisphere with snow. The Yule Lads and their blasted cat still tracked them, which had also hampered their deliveries. The sleigh, powered by Christmas magic, was no longer as fast as it used to be. This meant that there was a good chance they could be ambushed wherever they landed.

“Let’s try not to get sand in the sleigh this time.” Death tugged the reins, and Cerberus descended. They landed next to a rooftop pool where Lily hopped out of the sleigh and onto the back of Dancer.

The reindeer's arrival had been a pleasant surprise, but not as much as Christmas Present's. The giant ghost sat on top of Santa's bag, her arms buried deep as she pulled out gifts and handed them over to Lily along with a list.

"These are for the first floor," she said, then swatted Dancer on the hindquarters. Lily held onto the reindeer with her tail as they turned into a silvery mist and rocketed to the ground floor. Without her tail, there was no way Lily could have stayed on the reindeer's back.

Dancer, her body smaller than usual, kept watch in the hallway as Lily ran from room to room, tucking gifts beneath fake trees or just beneath pillows for kids who were traveling with families. Other than double checking her list, the only thing she kept her eye out for was trouble.

Once the first floor was done, she hopped on Dancer's back and they flew back to the roof. Christmas Present stood on the sleigh, her eyes scanning the rooftops.

"Done with the first floor." Lily held her arms out.

Christmas Present pulled a massive box out of the bag and handed it over. "It's the castle from the movie that just came out," she explained. "Hard to find this year."

"How the heck are they gonna get this home?" Lily asked, stretching her arms wide. "Hardly seems practical."

"I'm surprised. You're the last person I would expect to complain about a big load." The spirit licked her lips and Lily's little demon heart fluttered. Not only was this ghost sexy as heck, but she smelled so much like Mike that Lily couldn't help but feel a mutual attraction. Christmas Present kept flirting with her, which had been frustrating enough without an opportunity to act on it.

She also wasn't sure her Helper's Hat would let her. Swearing was a big no-no, and it seemed likely that a little light penetration was off the table as well.

"After we're done here, you and I can discuss who can handle the bigger load." Vague innuendo was the best Lily could hope for.

Christmas Present smiled, but there was a sadness behind it. "You'd better get a move on," she said, then turned her attention to the edge of the roof. Death climbed over the side, his robes dripping wet.

"What happened to you?" Lily asked.

“The presidential suite is poorly lit and has a pond inside,” he replied, shaking himself off. “But do not fear, the presents were safely delivered and the koi are unharmed.”

When Christmas Present had first arrived, she had been able to grab massive armfuls of presents and deliver them by teleporting into homes. However, the Yule Lads almost always showed up within minutes, which made everyone suspect that the Krampus was somehow tracing her magic. Now it fell on the giant to protect the sleigh while Death and Lily handled deliveries. Ever since adopting this method, the chances of running into those jerks had gone down significantly, but their delivery time was slow again without the giant to do the heavy lifting.

“Trade with me while you dry off.” Christmas Present hopped off the sleigh with an armful of gifts. She couldn’t teleport, but was capable of delivering gifts the old fashioned way.

“Thank you.” Death reached into the sleigh and pulled out a bat. “I shall protect them with every bone in my body.”

Cerberus turned to look at the Reaper and snorted, then made eye contact with Lily. Other than cracking a few heads, Death didn’t have many options. Cerberus, on the other hand, had ripped more than a few Yule Lads into tiny pieces. Apparently they tasted awful.

“Howl if anything happens.” Lily kicked her feet and Dancer was off.

They spent hours traveling Jamaica, and then moved to Haiti. They no longer followed any sort of logical flight plan, hoping to dissuade their pursuers. It seemed to be working. Lily hoped that the snow army would be unable to cross over to the Americas, making the western hemisphere of the world easier to deal with.

As for what to do with all the undelivered gifts, she had no idea. They would have to go back at some point, but that was a mess for later. Things had been tense enough for the last few weeks that Christmas Present hadn’t dared run any more messages to the North Pole. Her brief trip early on had been almost a day from Lily’s perspective.

Because of the warm, humid climate, Death’s robes remained wet enough that he was put on permanent sleigh duty until they could find a fire for him to dry off. He had argued, but without the spare bag, the only way for him to carry gifts was to hold them in his damp arms and that simply wasn’t feasible.

Back to island hopping, they landed on the biggest building they could find and set up watch from there. Cerberus would sometimes transform back into a human to keep their profile low if the building wasn't that tall. It wouldn't be hard for the Yule Lads to spot the massive hellhound from the ground.

Plenty of smaller towns and villages were without a proper landing site, so Lily and Christmas Present would wait for Death to toss gifts down to them, then run from door to door to get the presents delivered.

They worked their way south, eventually landing in Barbados. Death asked if they could keep an eye out for some tea, as he was quite tired of hot cocoa at this point. Some of the enthusiasm of delivering presents had dimmed, but Lily imagined that was because he was stuck in the sleigh. For him, the joy was in seeing the world and actually placing the presents, not in acting as middle management.

It was in one of the fancier resorts on the southern coast that Lily stopped to take a break. It was a family resort, and plenty of kids had been brought along to celebrate Christmas by the ocean. The months or maybe even years all caught up with her, and she slumped against a nearby wall.

She missed Mike. Other than brief interludes in the Dreamscape, the real Mike was still at the North Pole, doing whatever or whoever. There had been a few more Santa stops, but nothing too drastic. Read a book to Tanisha, give Andre advice on how to handle bullies, things that probably could have been handled by their parents.

Staring out at the water, she was surprised when a pair of hands wrapped around her waist from behind. The strong scent of candy canes surrounded her as Christmas Present put her chin on Lily's shoulder.

"Caught you slacking," she whispered in Lily's ear.

"Hardly." Lily morphed backward through her own body, her back becoming her front so that she now faced the giant. "I'm fairly certain labor laws would claim I have a right to a break. I've been busting my butt for your boss, and now that we aren't being bothered by the Reject Potatoheads, it's time for a breather."

"I see." Christmas Present's eyes lingered on Lily, and she broke into a grin. "Maybe you're right. A break is long overdue."

The ghost gave off a growing sexual energy that surprised Lily. Other than the occasional flirting, she hadn't detected anything tangible from the spirit.

“Can I tell you something?” Christmas Present ran her hands up Lily’s waist, then placed one on Lily’s breast. The hand was big enough that Lily’s boob vanished beneath it. “You’ve been on my mind all day.”

“It’s been a long fudging day,” Lily muttered.

“It’s the best day of the year.” The spirit paused for a moment, admiring Lily’s décolletage. “When I was born this morning, I thought that my life would be a simple collection of festivities and love. I hardly expected to be conscripted into the war on Christmas. When the Krampus corrupted me, I was allowed a brief moment of fear before being forced to obey. But a miracle happened, and it’s all thanks to that man of yours. His magic gave me a chance to escape, to live the life I was destined for. Not only that, he showed me...things that fell outside my expectations.”

“He has a habit of doing that.” Lily pointed up at the roof. “Cerberus used to be a regular hellhound until they met him.” It was okay to say the H-word when referring to Cerberus. It wasn’t a swear word when she used it like that.

“It was that magic of his. I was pure potential, hunting him down in the vents of the North Pole, when I got a full dose of his magic. It changed me, making me into the woman I am. Gave me an appreciation for...” Christmas Present paused, then stared hard into Lily’s eyes as she rubbed Lily’s nipple through her top. “The finer things.”

“Oh? And I’m one of those finer things?”

The spirit’s eyes were full of hunger. “There’s something you should know about me. You see, I only live for one day. And it is a glorious day. When time restarts, I will travel the world, be everywhere at once as people wake up to discover these gifts we’ve brought them. I’ll enjoy the finest meals, the most wonderful company, and when the day is over...I shall die.”

“What?” Lily hadn’t expected that.

“It’s how the ghosts of Christmas Past are born. Everything about this day will be burned into me. I’m just the paper on which today’s story will be written, and when my day is done, I shall be folded up and put on the shelf.” Christmas Present slid her hand down Lily’s body, then rubbed her crotch through the lightweight pajama pants the succubus now wore. It was hot in the tropics, and she had gone with something comfortable. “I would prefer to have a few memories of my own.”

Lily almost laughed. The last few months had been absolutely ridiculous, but now the ghost of Christmas Present was making a pass at her as they were trying to deliver gifts for Santa while avoiding an army of trolls and treacherous snowmen. She had been stretched thin emotionally, and was now like a rubber band, ready to snap.

But she didn't. It wasn't just lust in the spirit's eyes, but a quiet desperation. Lily hadn't known about the spirit's limited mortality. With everything else that was going on, she might have declined. What they were doing was too important to be screwing around.

"I don't know. Romeo is pretty good at what he does, but you're asking to break into the big leagues now." She licked her lips, her tail coiling around Christmas Present's waist. "Do you think you can handle all this?"

"Please. I nearly broke your boy toy in the middle of a Christmas party, and I was holding back." Christmas Present grabbed Lily's tail and twirled it around her finger like a stray length of hair. There was incredible strength in that single digit, and Lily's stomach fluttered in response.

"Nearly broke him, huh?" Lily smiled, then reached up behind the giant and gave her hair a tug. "You can be as rough with me as you'd like."

"I think you underestimate my strength." Christmas Present took a deep breath, her body now taller than before, then picked Lily up by the shoulders and pinned her against the opposite wall. "I am the embodiment of the season, stuffed full of joy and goodwill. However, I am also fueled by the animalistic lust of the man you love."

"Hey, now, I've never once said the L word to him," Lily countered.

"It would be a shame if he never heard it from you. His feelings for you run deep."

"Are we gonna talk about boys, or are you gonna fuuu...fuuu..." Lily screwed up her face. "I swear to Santa, if you pull my pants off and my genitals are missing, I'm going to let the toaster bite off my darn head."

"Let me check." Christmas Present held Lily against the wall with one hand and slid her hand into Lily's pants. The succubus gasped when the giant's thick digit teased her clitoris, then slid along her outer labia.

"Oh, thank Santa." Lily grabbed the giant's face in both hands and pulled her in for a kiss. Another wave of erotic energy washed over her, and she could

definitely feel the magic undertones of Mike's presence. It was akin to smelling his cologne, if he ever wore any. His natural scent was so heightened by the nymph magic in his blood that if he could bottle it, he'd make millions.

The kissing was gentle, and Lily was having none of that. She grabbed a handful of Christmas Present's hair and gave it a tug. The giant responded by pressing her finger against Lily's hungry opening and relaxing the pressure that held her against the wall. The succubus now had her entire body weight pressing down onto the giant's finger, the pressure amplifying that butterfly sensation in her tummy.

Butterflies? Tummy? She couldn't wait to ditch her helper hat.

Lily summoned a flood of lubrication, her legs spreading open as she slid down almost an inch before bumping into the tip of Christmas Present's other finger. She broke the kiss and stared at the giant.

"Eh?" Lily wiggled her hips, but was surprised to discover that the spirit had clustered her fingers together, preventing her from descending any further. "You do know I can just stretch myself out, right?"

"I would rather you didn't." Christmas Present licked her lips. "I want to watch your face as I stretch your pussy out with my fingers."

"Wish granted." Lily altered her genitals, making her vaginal passage even smaller. "But you're gonna have to work for it."

"I love a challenge." The spirit grinned and planted a free hand on Lily's shoulder. She pushed down on the succubus, causing Lily to gasp as that first finger penetrated her all the way up to where her womb would be. Shivering in delight, she pulled open the giant's robe and buried her face between the spirit's breasts as she rolled her hips from side to side.

The pain was exquisite. It was like the fiery sting of bourbon when it first hits the lips, followed by the sweet, full body burn. It was common knowledge that you needed to check your bourbon before making eggnog, and—

"You can't take this hat off me, can you?" Lily pulled her face out of the giant's breasts. "I will eat your butt for days, or whatever it is you want me to be into."

“Nope, sorry.” The giant shook her head, her long trusses brushing against Lily’s shoulders. “Only Santa can take it off early. I don’t even know why you put it on.”

Mentally cursing the Grim Reaper with a collection of words that would be allowed on a PBS special, Lily buried her face into breasts the size of her head, playfully rubbing the spirit’s large nipples. The hat was obnoxious, but a pair of breasts like these were once in a lifetime, and she planned to enjoy them.

Christmas Present continued to force Lily onto those thick digits. Not to be outdone, Lily circled giant’s waist with her tail, slipping it beneath her robes. Christmas Present’s bottom was firm and fully rounded, and Lily explored it for several minutes before moving on to tease the edges of her butt crack.

“Oh.” Christmas Present blushed, then looked down at Lily. “That feels surprisingly ticklish and good at the same time.”

“I love how innocent you sound while trying to wear me as a muppet.” Lily bounced up and down, savoring the sensation of a third finger entering her tight passage. Each finger was roughly the size of a regular penis, and she was already sore. When they were done, she could easily dismiss the sensation, but maybe she’d keep it as a reminder.

“Maybe I’m being too gentle.” The spirit winked, and her body expanded again. She was now almost nine feet tall, and it wasn’t lost on Lily that three of the spirit’s fingers were still inside her.

In a move that surprised both of them, Lily came. Her legs went stiff, the nerves in her pelvis sending lightning and fire through her gut as her vaginal canal was stretched wide. Spasming out of control, she flopped around uselessly until she spotted a fat nipple in front of her face.

Two can play at this game, Lily thought. Leaning forward, she bit the nipple at the same time that she coated the tip of her tail in lube and slid it into Christmas Present’s bottom.

“Oh. OH!” The giant’s free hand slipped off Lily’s shoulder, and the sheer tension in Lily’s body caused her to rise up until only the tips of Christmas Present’s fingers were still inside her. “Oh, wow, that feels...different. I can feel you inside me. It feels so hot!”

“Mmm-hmm.” Lily expanded the tip of her tail, making it as thick around as her wrist. If the giant wanted to play size games, then she had picked the right partner.

Christmas Present grunted, then pulled her fingers out of Lily’s vagina. Her fingers were coated in succubus fluids and cum. She licked her fingers clean, then grabbed Lily by a horn.

“Eat me out,” she demanded, forcing Lily to her knees. The spirit threw her robes aside to reveal an impressive vagina with a large clitoris. Christmas Present grabbed Lily by the head, her fingers separating out around Lily’s horns, then forced her into position.

Lily was not surprised at all that the giant’s vagina tasted like candy canes.

“Mmf.” Lily made a show of struggling as the giant pinned her head and body against the nearby wall, loving every moment of it. The force was tremendous, and she wondered if the time lock was the only thing keeping the wall from buckling as the giant lost control of her hips. She continued to penetrate the giant’s buttocks, expanding her tail a little bit with each stroke.

“Oh, yes!” Christmas Present put a hand behind Lily’s head, then ground her pelvis into the succubus hard enough that Lily had to reset her jaw. “This sensation is glorious! More! I demand more!”

Lily put her hands on Christmas Present’s butt cheeks and split her tongue in two. The top half of her tongue worked the labia and the clitoris. The bottom half penetrated the vaginal canal, expanding rapidly until the giant let out a gasp.

“How are you...oh! OH!” When the giant came, she clenched her legs together so hard that Lily’s skull fractured. She dismissed the break, forming layers of super dense bone as she double penetrated the giant with her tongue and tail. Christmas Present was shaking now, letting out cries of delight that turned into actual sobs. She was actively humping the wall hard enough that it sounded like someone was beating the stucco with a sledgehammer.

A mouth formed on the back of Lily’s neck, which she used to speak. “This rough enough for you?” Lily stood, her strength easily capable of lifting the giant. In effect, it was similar to what Christmas Present had done to her, but now the giant’s head and shoulders were pressed into the ceiling.

“YES, FUCK ME!” The spirit pressed her hands against the ceiling, generating tons of pressure between the two of them as the giant came again, coating Lily’s face in peppermint cum.

Lily kept at it until the giant was a sobbing mess, making quiet pleas for her to never stop. Eventually, she tackled the giant to the ground and broke away long enough for her tail to wrap around her crotch and form into a massive penis covered in candy cane stripes. It was over a foot long, and so thick it would destroy a regular mortal.

“Beg for it,” Lily demanded, waving her pseudo-penis. She even made the penis curve for a moment to emphasize the design

Christmas Present was in a state of dishevelment. Her hair was a mess, and her robes were soaking wet. There was a frantic look in her eyes, catching Lily by surprise when she rolled forward and tackled the succubus to the ground. Christmas Present pinned Lily’s hands over her head, then stood up just long enough to line herself up on top of Lily’s penis. When she sank down on it, her eyes rolled up in her head.

Lily, unable to do anything else, expanded the penis some more. When she thought she was at Christmas Present’s limit, the ghost expanded to become bigger.

It became a game of who could outgrow who, and Lily finally had to give up when Christmas Present had become large enough that her back pressed against the ceiling. Lily’s penis was easily two feet long now, absolutely unusable for anyone with a normal anatomy. It was plenty big enough for the massive woman who now humped the succubus like a single college girl with a stiff body pillow.

The grunts and rhythmic slamming made a noise like thunder. Lily felt her body reach the limits of mortality so many times that she lost count, but she didn’t care. This was silly, unrealistic, and a total parody of any sex she was used to.

And she loved it. Breasts twice the size of her head smashed into her as Christmas Present came so loud it sounded like a foghorn, rupturing Lily’s eardrums.

The giant clutched the succubus as if clinging to a life ring in the ocean, the world silent through deaf ears. Lily regenerated her eardrums and was surprised to hear Christmas Present crying again.

“Uh, hey. You good up there?” she asked.

Christmas Present nodded, her thighs quaking when an aftershock struck her. The spirit diminished in size, deflating like a balloon until she was only ten feet tall. Lily accommodated the transformation by removing her tail, and was surprised when the giant shifted her position and just held her for several minutes.

“This will be my favorite memory this Christmas,” the spirit whispered in Lily’s ear. “I’m just so happy that I get to live in this moment forever. Thank you.”

Lily said nothing. Instead, she leaned up and kissed the tears away from the giant’s eyes, and then held her as if they were lovers. It was the least she could do.

Nearly half an hour later, the two of them separated. The spirit cleaned up in much the same manner Lily did, her robe reappearing on her body and her hair now tidy once more. Lily swatted the giant on the butt as they went back to the sleigh to face the music. There was no way that Death hadn’t heard them.

When they got back to the sleigh, Lily was stunned to see that Death was wearing a massive pair of star-shaped headphones. When he saw the two of them, he waved in delight and took the headphones off.

“Look what I found in the sleigh!” he exclaimed, shaking the headphones around. “Santa has a bunch of audiobooks by someone named Tom Clancy stored on these headphones. I never once considered the benefit of having a book read to me! I can pilot the sleigh while listening to a story, isn’t that wonderful?”

Lily and Christmas Present looked at each other, both of them grinning.

“The book I’m listening to right now is about a spy.” Death set the headphones down. “It was far more interesting than listening to the two of you having consensual sex. It sounded like a construction zone. I was worried you were under attack, but Cerberus explained it to me.”

The Christmas Spirit turned an impossible shade of red. Somehow, all three of Cerberus’ heads (in dog form) looked at them smugly.

“So you aren’t mad that we stopped working?” Lily asked. “Abandoned you to watch the toys?”

Death tilted his head. “Should I be? You two are my friends. If you needed a break, you should have just asked. I may be the Grim Reaper, but I’m not

heartless.” To illustrate his point, he opened his robes and knocked on his sternum. “Metaphorically speaking.”

“Death?” Christmas Present leaned forward to inspect the Reaper. “Your robes aren’t wet anymore.”

“They certainly aren’t.” He chattered his teeth. “Perhaps I just wanted a break of my own.”

Stunned at this revelation, Lily just shook her head and asked for the next round of gifts. She and Christmas Present worked double-time trying to get them placed. On the odd occasion that they ran into each other, they exchanged smiles. Perhaps Death would allow them to have another break in a day or so. It had certainly been good for morale.

Eventually, they were done with the island of Barbados. Taking to the sky, they turned southwest toward the Grenadines. As they flew, Death listened to his audiobooks while Christmas Present sat on top of the presents, leaning forward to play with Lily’s hair.

Lily felt warm inside. Maybe it was that she had finally let her hair down for a bit, or maybe it was getting laid, but she was actually looking forward to the rest of the trip. It certainly helped to know that she had a bone buddy and a buddy for boning.

She tried to rip off the hat for perhaps the thousandth time. Being unable to curse was awful, but thinking in puns was crossing the line. Stupid fudging hat.

“What’s that?” Christmas Present tapped on Lily’s shoulder, then pointed north west.

Lily squinted. At first glance, it looked like a shooting star that had broken apart in the atmosphere, but she knew that couldn’t be true. Even if frozen in time, they would have seen it several islands ago. Currently it hovered over the island of Saint Lucia.

“Tick Tock. Telescope.” Lily held a hand out, and felt the mimic hop into her palm. She lifted the gilded scope to her eye and focused it on the hovering lights.

“Mother fudging snack eater!” She nearly dropped the telescope. It was another sleigh, one that looked cobbled together by spare parts. In front, a team of seven warped reindeer pulled it. “Death, land, hide!”

With the snap of the reins, the sleigh descended with Dancer flying hidden behind them. Lily spread her wings, taking to the sky as Death landed the sleigh. Using the telescope, she watched in horror as the mad figure whipping the reindeer flew low over a group of buildings and then vanished. Within a minute, he had returned to the sleigh, clutching the spare bag they had lost earlier. It was the Krampus, his mouth open wide with laughter as he moved across the island of Saint Lucia in record speed.

“No, no, no...” Lily flew down to where Death had hidden the sleigh. “It’s the Krampus. We need to get off this island, maybe fly out over the ocean before he spots us.”

“The Krampus? Here?” Death stroked his chin. “I don’t suppose we could just beat his ass?”

Christmas Present put her hand on Death’s shoulder. “I would rather go back to Russia and be forced to deliver presents by myself while fighting the Yule Lads, their cat, and an army of snowmen than to try and tackle him even with you all by my side. Lily is right, we must flee.”

Death kept the sleigh low to the water. Dancer flew along the side of the sleigh, and Christmas Present jumped onto the reindeer’s back.

“If he spots us, we’ll try to lead him away,” the spirit told them.

“I’m going up to keep watch.” Lily leapt from the sleigh, telescope still in hand. She would have no trouble tracking Death down with the assistance of her hat, so she spiraled high into the sky, shifting her clothing until it blended with the starry night above her.

The Krampus was fast, visiting the entire island in a quarter of the time it had taken them. When he left, he headed straight for Barbados. Lily was concerned that he would correct his course for Death, but the Krampus disappeared in the shadows of the island.

Lily watched for nearly an hour before descending. She was worried that the Krampus had spotted her and was just waiting to strike. She flew north, able to meet up once again with Death and Christmas Present. They were hovering in between a pair of massive swells, largely hidden from view.

“What is he doing?” Death asked. “Is he coming for us?”

“If he was, we wouldn’t be able to get away.” Lily looked at Dancer. “The reindeer are much faster than Cerberus.”

“I think we should go see what he did on Saint Lucia.” Christmas Present pointed in the general direction of west.

“It may behoove us to travel even farther north to a different island.” Death tapped a finger against his teeth. “I do not wish to run afoul of him during take-off or landing. Whatever vile deed he had committed will surely be evident there as well.”

In agreement, they took the long route, flying low to avoid notice. More than once, the runners of the sleigh skimmed the waters of the Caribbean, sending a fine, salty spray into the air behind them.

They settled on Puerto Rico, landing on the north side of the island. Death stayed behind with the sleigh as Lily, Dancer, and Christmas Present went to check on the homes they had delivered to.

In the first house she visited, it was immediately apparent that the Krampus had stolen the gifts from Santa, even the ones the parents had bought and gifted in his name. Stunned, Lily wandered from home to home, checking underneath each tree she had left gifts.

“He’s stealing Christmas,” she muttered. How cliché was that? Jerk may as well be wearing a green body suit.

“He isn’t just stealing Christmas.” The ghost of Christmas Present startled her, and she spun in place to see the spirit holding a plate of cookies. “We’ve been making sure to either take them all, or at least eat a few, but this plate is full. All of them are.”

“What? Why?” Lily grabbed a cookie and inspected it. “I don’t understand the purpose of doing this.”

“When these children wake up in the morning, they will find no presents from Santa, and the cookies will be untouched.” The giant shook her head, her features suddenly angry. “This will damage belief in unimaginable ways. The Krampus is stealing our gifts, and he will know soon that we are nearby. We must flee.”

Lily inspected the cookie, then took a bite of it. It tasted fine at first, but there was a strange pepper aftertaste.

“I think these are poisoned!” Lily spat the cookie on the floor, her mouth tingling. “What kind of monster is he, we can’t just leave these here!”

“And we won’t. But for now, we must keep our freedom.” Christmas Present took Lily by the hand and led her outside. The two of them hopped onto Dancer’s back.

“I just hope that man of yours has a plan,” the spirit said as Dancer flew them back to the sleigh.

“If I know Romeo, he probably doesn’t.” Lily clenched her teeth together, fighting the rage that was building up inside. It wasn’t just that months of work had been taken away from her. The innocence of a child was precious. It wasn’t something she had appreciated until she had held and helped so many of them in the guise of Santa Claus, listening to their troubles and reassuring them that there was still good in the world. Each of the children they had visited personally would be ridiculed and mocked by their peers when they bragged about Santa’s personal visit. Parents would feel like failures, thinking they had forgotten to get gifts for their children.

The Krampus was out here now, with them, and it sounded like there wasn’t anything they could do to stop him.

“But when he does come up with one,” Lily continued, staring straight forward. “It will be something completely unexpected and brilliant.”

“I hope you’re right.” They got back to the sleigh and gave Death the bad news. The Reaper said nothing, lifting the reins and guiding them all into the sky once again.

The mood remained dark as they fled the Caribbean, heading north toward the United States.

“How...can you see me?” Mike stared at his son, all grown up. It was impossible to determine how old he was. Based on looks alone, he could easily be in his thirties. However, there was a certain confidence he projected that made Mike believe he was much older.

“To answer your first question, no, I can’t see you.” Callisto walked along the edge of the room and picked up the clock. Mike immediately noticed how

smooth his son's gait was, and could even see the thick band of muscles pressed against the inside of his pants. What sort of man had his son become?

Callisto flipped the clock over and looked at the back. "It's important that you remember the number twenty-three."

"Why?"

"Also, I can't hear you. Think of this whole situation as a pre-recorded message that hasn't been, well, recorded yet. Sure, we could have prepared a better means of communication, but you'll understand why we didn't in just a minute." Callisto took a marker out of his hands and started walking around the room. He paused at certain intervals, then drew odd lines on the various surfaces that didn't appear to be letters or symbols that Mike recognized.

"So how do you know I'm here?" Mike asked.

"If you're wondering how I know you're here, it's because you've told me all about what happened at the North Pole, including this." Callisto stuck his hand in the air and pulled a book out of nothingness. "I'm about to dump a bunch of information on you. Some of it might not make any sense, but you need to pay attention and remember as much of it as you can, because, well, you're gonna have to tell it to me later."

"I...okay." Mike looked at his son in awe. It was weird seeing a version of him that was so grown up. "Maybe I'll remember to tell you that a chair would be nice."

"Oh, right. Almost forgot." Callisto stepped into the sitting room, revealing a thick horse tail pulled through a hole in the top of his pants that matched his ponytail. His shirt had been tailored to drape around it without catching, which made it essentially invisible from the front. When he returned, he was holding a chair. "You're going to want to sit right...here." He set the chair down in the center of the room. "Oh, and once you're there, try not to move."

Mike had so many questions for his son, but the first one was the most important. "What happened to everybody?" he asked, sitting in the chair.

"I suppose you're worried about everybody, but you should rest assured that they're fine. Everything you see here is a precaution." Callisto had gone back to making marks around the room. "You see, you're in the true future, which shouldn't make any sense. The future is malleable, correct? You and I watched Terminator enough times that the lesson sunk in.

“So why is the house empty? Well, that comes back to what’s happening now. Aunt Ratu came up with a whole theory about how it worked, actually. You see, this isn’t the first future you experienced.”

“What?” Mike tilted his head in curiosity. “I don’t follow.”

“She believed that in the first iteration of the future, you found some way to make it home. Regardless of what happened between you and Christmas Future, you still made it back.” Callisto turned to face Mike, tapping the marker against his chin. “But time travel is a fickle mistress. Even the act of sharing what transpired worked to change what happened today. For instance, maybe Aunt Ceci found you a month after you got stuck, then sent you back after weeks or months of researching a spell that could do it. Well, once we knew what happened, she found you even faster on the second go around. Why wait and make you suffer when she knows you’re already here? You will always return to roughly the same time you left, because the method by which you get sent back is likely the same.”

“I guess I follow.” In a way, it made sense. It was a temporal butterfly effect. Anything that went wrong could be easily fixed the second time around.

“So for everyone else right now, time is a straight line, but your timeline has a circle in it. With each permutation, more details get leaked, and the process by which we send you home becomes simpler. So instead of a massive circle, you’re going to get a tiny one instead where you spend just a blip of time here. We’re expecting you, we know how to send you back, and it’s going to happen very soon.

“Which brings me to why the house is empty. You see, Aunt Tinker had this theory that time itself is a form of energy. Unless disturbed, it wants to rest in its ground state. It will always tend to the path of least resistance, meaning every other timeline where you get sent back is destroyed before it even exists. Spooky, right? I could try and explain the math she showed me, but it was all above my head. The best way to describe it is kind of like how the first three Terminator movies are deleted by the reboot, which I won’t even go into right now.”

“Agreed.” Mike chuckled, and then they spoke the next sentence at the same time.

“They should have stopped at T2.”

Joy flooded through him. Whatever was going on with his son in the past, they were going to overcome it. They still had a future where things would work out.

“Anyway, the empty house is the path of least resistance. You see, it’s so important to preserve the timeline that we moved all of the furniture out of the house to prevent any sort of temporal tampering. Even knowledge that a lamp may get broken could cause you to be careful and avoid breaking it. I’m the only one here because my skills will allow me to activate the spell my sister put in place. Honestly, she would be a better fit for it, but felt it was important that you two meet properly the first time around. Since I was only a child when last you saw me, any physical changes you see in me won’t gain you information that could further change the timeline. The nymph magic in my blood has kept my appearance youthful, so I could be eighty years old and you wouldn’t even know it.

“Also, I’m far less likely to blab. For me, history must take its course, requiring only that I survive to see you through this process. The radio, the mimic, and myself are all that are allowed to be here. Well, and the chair, too. Oh, and the dining room table. Not that we could even get that out of the house if we wanted to.”

Callisto let out a heavy sigh, then made a couple more marks on the wall, double checking his book. “I will admit some hesitancy to complete the spell to send you back. It was created over the span of several years, tapping into the power of the house itself to send you back where you belong. We worked on it for a long time. We even found the clothes you lost after the incident with Christmas Future! Those were used as proof of concept, so no, you won’t see those again. They’re in a display case in the library. My sister was so proud of herself.

“Anyway, my hesitancy in this act is knowing that you’re actually here. I have an extra chance to say goodbye. You see, you have been gone for some time, and... I won’t tell you how long. In fact, we waited until after your passing to devise a means to discover the year, using a random number generator. Hence the number twenty three. It will be meaningless to you, but we’ll know what to do with it in the future.”

“Wait, I’m dead?” A chill ran through him, and he hugged himself. “How did I die?”

Callisto frowned and hung his head. "If only you had seen that herd of elephants."

"I was trampled by elephants?" Mike almost stood from his chair, then noticed the stupid grin on Callisto's face.

"Man, I wish I could see your face right now." Callisto laughed, then wiped a tear from his eyes. "It wasn't elephants, Dad. I'm just fucking with you."

Though the joke had been funny, Mike made a mental note to avoid elephants in the future. *Just in case.*

Callisto drew another line on the wall, and then the daylight was sucked from the room as the spell was completed. Instead of the office, they now sat in darkness, the space lit by an elaborate series of spinning runes that occupied each direction. Light flowed through symbols that Mike hadn't seen before, but he recognized that most of them contained the shapes his son had drawn on his arrival.

"Anyway, before you go, I just wanted to say thank you. Thanks for never giving up on me, no matter how many times I..." Callisto shook his head. "I can't say much. Causality is a bitch. But I'm sure you can guess that we'll have our differences. All families do. When all is said and done, I look back at you with a fondness that has yet to diminish over the years. You were a fantastic father, and I was lucky to have you in my life."

Blinding light now filled the room, but Callisto didn't seem to notice. He stood in front of Mike, his arms crossed. The runes became fire, spinning so fast that they buzzed. Mike gazed up into the eyes of his son, trying to memorize every detail. There was a chance he would never get to see this version of his child, and of all the things he had just experienced, this was the memory he wanted to carry with him the most.

"One of the first things you ever taught me is that you don't fuck with the Radley family." Callisto smiled as if lost in a memory, but then his eyes dropped to where Mike was sitting. Recognition dawned on his face, his eyes suddenly full of tears. In those shimmering eyes, Mike saw his own spectral reflection.

He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but Callisto shook his head and put a finger to his own lips.

"This is more than enough. Don't you ever dare tell me about this part. It's the best Christmas present I have ever received." Up above them, a tunnel

formed. The fiery runes were pulled into it, forming a swirling ribbon of light. Callisto looked up, noticing the tunnel, then back at Mike.

“I love you, Dad. Give them Hell.” There was a flash of light and Mike was pulled along the runes, his heart both heavy and light as the runes took him back. Shooting through a tunnel made of stars, he caught glimpses of impossible creatures just beyond the tunnel, beings that slipped from his mind the moment they were out of sight. He could only hope that the attention they paid in return also became forgotten.

The light at the end of the tunnel was blinding. He closed his eyes, amazed out how much the light leaked through his own eyelids. Crying out in pain, even his own hands couldn't block it anymore.

And then he was back. Moving his hands from his face, he was once again staring at the North Pole. The room looked just as he left it, except the amount of magic in the pole itself had dwindled even further. Stunned, he looked at his hands, then stomped on the floor to make certain he wasn't still a time-traveling ghost. The clomp his foot made echoed off the far side of the room.

“We're going to fix this,” he swore, turning so sharply that his coat flared out behind him dramatically. Determination fueled him as he climbed the steps back to the home above, bursting through the door to see Yuki helping Jack/Freya look out the window. Yuki's ear twitched, and she turned to look at him.

“Where the hell have you been?” she asked. “You said you'd be gone for just a minute and it's been hours!”

“It's a weird story, but never mind right now. Where's Holly?”

“Here.” The elf's head popped over the edge of the couch. She was clutching a pillow in her hands, her face lined with worry.

“We need to get out of here,” he told them, crossing the room. “While we still have time.”

“Yeah, well you haven't been around.” Yuki gestured at the window. “That cranky bitch is back, and she's just standing out there, waiting.”

Sure enough, when Mike looked outside, he saw that Grýla was outside carrying a large sack. All around her stood her children, who had started a snowball fight with each other.

“I see you, food.” Grýla’s eyes lit up from within when she saw Mike. The ground rumbled beneath them. “It won’t be long now.”

“Holly, can we use this fireplace to leave?” Mike gestured at the waning flames.

“I suppose so,” she admitted. “But what about Mrs. Claus?”

He shook his head. “We can’t take her. As long as she’s in this building, we still have hope. What we’re going to do is use the fireplace to go somewhere on Earth. Time moves much slower out there. Minutes here could be days out there, you understand?”

“Days for what?” Freya asked.

“To fix you. No matter what happens next, we need you back on your feet. Let’s be honest, this mess is at least partially your fault, and we need your strength to fix it.” He moved over to Yuki and put his hand on the small of her back then kissed the back of her head. “And yours, too. A few days would allow your wounds to heal, and maybe even allow you to paint some new cards.”

“I...” Yuki thought for a moment. “No, that actually makes sense. We could come up with something other than waiting here to potentially get eaten.”

Mike turned to Holly. “I know it’s hard, but for Mrs. Claus, we will only be gone for a few hours. That will give us maybe a week, or even more. We just need to find somewhere to lay low and figure out a better plan than sticking around here.” Noticing the fancy scroll holder by the fireplace, he picked it up and walked over toward the map on the table. “Tink and Kisa are doing their part. It’s time we do ours.”

“You seem...very assertive all of the sudden.” Yuki studied Mike for a moment. “Did something happen down there?”

Mike smiled while rolling up the map and putting it inside its fancy new case. “You’ll hear all about it, but later. Every minute we spend here is an hour we lose out there.”

“We should go somewhere without any snow,” Jack said. “I gave Grýla magic ice crystals which may have been used to create an army.”

“That you gave that creature any kind of magic...” Freya added, disgust in her voice.

“If you two don’t stop bickering, I’m gonna make you wear the friendship shirt.” Mike studied them for a moment. “I guess anything you wear is technically the friendship shirt, honestly.”

Freya/Jack stared at him in confusion. Oh well, his humor wasn’t for everybody.

Yuki cracked a window and used her magic to barricade the outside of the door with a wall of ice. She and Mike pulled all of the curtains shut, determined to keep Grýla and her ilk from looking inside while they were absent.

Jack and Freya argued with each other for a bit before summoning a pair of frosty humanoids. It took both of them working together, and the icy homunculi began pacing the lower floor.

“It’s to make the home look occupied,” Jack informed them.

“But they will only last a few hours because it’s so warm in here,” Freya added.

“Perfect. Kevin McAllister would approve,” Mike said.

“I do not care if this Kevin McAllister approves,” Freya grumbled.

“Who is Kevin? A friend of yours?” Yuki asked.

“That’s a Christmas movie we’ll all watch tomorrow.” Mike ran up the stairs and down to Mrs. Claus’ bedroom. When he opened the door, he heard the woman grunt in her sleep. He knelt by the side of her bed and put his hand on her forehead.

“We’re not abandoning you,” he told her, desperately weaving what was left of her threads back together. “If all goes well, you’ll wake up in the morning and have your husband back.”

Mrs. Claus sighed, her face tightening into a scowl. He wasn’t even certain that she heard him.

When Mike got back downstairs, he saw that Holly had strapped the map across her shoulders while Yuki carried Jack/Freya on her back. The kitsune was easily strong enough for the fallen goddess.

“Are we ready?” he asked.

“This will take us to the fireplace in main lobby of the Workshop,” Holly informed him. “But once we arrive, we’ll need to turn around and go somewhere else. Do you have any ideas?”

“No. But I know that we can’t stay here. Take us somewhere nice.” He gave the elf a nod, and Holly threw a handful of magic dust into the flames. They burned bright as they all ran through, stepping back into the lobby. It was even darker than before, and the cold sucked the air from his lungs.

Coughing, he waited for the flames to die down, then watched Holly throw another handful of dust into the fire. Making eye contact with Yuki, the group ran through together, leaving the North Pole behind.

“I’ll be back,” Mike muttered below his breath, the flames bending away from his skin. “And when I am, I’m going to kick some ass.”
