

## The Cold Shoulder

Yuki stepped into the bitter cold of the Arctic, pausing just long enough to close the window behind her. The sloped roof above was covered in thick powder that had acquired a substantial crust of ice along the top, and her feet broke through the drift beneath her as she walked away from the house.

The Northern Lights were now obscured, casting the Christmas village into darkness. A majority of the light now streamed from the windows of Santa's home, which looked like a cross between an old lodge and a castle. The high, arched peaks of the house were decorated in sparkling lights, and a large wooden shield with a carved **SC** had been hung on the front of the house.

She was not surprised to see that it was much smaller on the outside. The exterior was only three stories tall with a small chimney up top that released a steady cloud of smoke. If she remembered correctly, the interior was at least five stories high, which made her wonder how the outside kept track of all the windows on the inside.

"Stay focused," she muttered to herself, turning away from the home.

The front walk was already obscured by snow drifts from the storm, but she navigated it without any problem. The snow moved away from her, clearing the path in case she needed to make a hasty retreat or find her way to safety. She could already tell that the storm itself was unnatural, but the sheer amount of power she felt off toward the horizon was slightly alarming.

It had to be Jack. There was no question about it. If she had said something to Mike, he would have demanded to help. It was so far below freezing that it was almost too cold for Yuki. He wouldn't last more than a couple of minutes outside, not unless Mrs. Claus had squirreled away a bunch of enchanted gear for visitors.

The street lamps were lit with magic, and more than a couple flickered, ready to go out. She sent out bursts of fox fire to the ones that were broken, bolstering the enchantment within so that they stayed lit. Whimsical buildings that looked to be made of gingerbread were frosted over, and some of the candy cane fencing had fallen over to shatter on the ground.

She closed her eyes and commanded the hair on her body to elongate, wrapping her in both warmth and safety. To an outsider, it would appear as a thick coat of dark fur, making her stand out on the icy tundra. Yuki didn't bother trying to hide. Jack would likely be able to sense a warm body from a mile away.

It was a long walk to the edge of the village. The silent buildings around her were reminiscent of mausoleums, though she did occasionally notice movement in the darkness. She hoped it was the elves, but wondered what other dangers lurked in the North Pole. One shadow in particular was very large, skulking around behind nearby buildings for a while before disappearing. Were there other forces at work here? Would they go looking for Mike if they knew he was alone?

Mike. She smiled, rubbing her lower belly. She was still sore from their rough lovemaking, though that wasn't the correct term. It hadn't just been fucking, either, there had been so many emotions involved. Not only had it been fun, but her entire soul had relaxed afterward, as if it had been stretched tight for the last couple of decades.

How could she pay back a man who not only saved her life, but maybe even her soul as well? Even now, she could feel that her magic had changed, like a friend who had gone away for many years, both familiar yet strange. So many aspects of it that had been closed to her now swirled within her, eager to be reacquainted.

When she got to the edge of the village, she took a deep breath in through her nose and smiled. Older magic radiated through her body, filling her with a warmth she hadn't felt in decades. For the first time since Emily, she was...complete.

After sex with Mike, something had changed inside of her. It was as though someone had picked up all the leftover pieces of who she used to be and put them back where they used to go. The pieces were still loose, and it would take time to glue them all back in place, but at least the whole picture could now be seen. It was why she wondered what he had acquired from her, because what she had received from him was peace.

Beneath her feet, the cold earth slumbered but responded with interest to her touch. On the day she had acquired her second tail, she had chosen the element of earth as her specialty. It had given her quite the array of magic, which she had used to protect herself and others.

On the day she had grown her third tail, her broken soul had latched on to the element of ice. It was cold and unforgiving, much as she had been. Recently, she had worried that her command over ice magic was slipping, but she knew better now. It wasn't that she had become weaker, but that her heart was now

stronger. She had relied so much on that sense of abandonment, on the anguish that had come with being broken to develop her bond with the ice.

The cold that had once comforted her now felt like a stranger. She no longer sought its embrace, nor found comfort in the way it numbed her. Where she had once craved it, the desire was gone, and the ice knew.

However, as the ice withdrew, the earth remained. She could no longer rely on one aspect of her magic alone, because the grief powering it had largely diminished. The ice was only one aspect of her magic, and without most of her deck of cards, it was time to rely on an old friend.

The horizon was obscured by what looked like a massive fog bank, but Yuki knew better. It was a swirling mass of snow and ice, barreling toward the Christmas village with the ferocity of a hurricane.

“What are you up to, Jack?” She pondered the length of the storm, realizing that the power she saw didn’t agree with what she knew of Jack’s abilities. A massive storm was doable, given enough time. It was the moving shapes within that had her concerned. Controlling a storm on top of elementals?

Had she underestimated Jack’s skills? There had only been the one encounter, and Jack Frost had easily overpowered any control Yuki had over elemental ice, a feat which would probably be even easier now. But if Jack had always been this powerful, she should have easily defeated Mike and Yuki when they first met.

Yuki crouched, pushing her hand through the icy crust of the top layer of snow until her fingers touched the frozen soil beneath. Closing her eyes, she let the magic flow through her, spreading out across the landscape. She could feel the steady pounding of feet, the heavy vibrations traveling out from the coming stampede.

Jack hadn’t just raised a storm. She was bringing an army.

Frowning, Yuki reached into her sleeves and pulled out her tarot cards. Nothing in the minor arcana would help her, and she had very little in the major arcana. She had burned through most of them on her return to Earth, and they took a long time to recreate.

The Moon, Temperance, and Wheel of Fortune were the only ones she had. Scowling, she looked up at the approaching army. The Sun card would have been great, but she had used that to build a dimensional pressure cooker to blow up a

demon's pocket universe. The Lovers card could benefit her, but she had accidentally used that on Cerberus. Smirking, she thought of Mike, and all the crazy adventures he had already taken her on.

"Crazy human." She tucked the major arcana back into their secret sleeve and pulled out what was left of the minor arcana. Only a few cards had survived her trip into the furnace, and these wouldn't be much help.

It was time to get creative. Closing her eyes, she communed with the earth, curious what she could even accomplish here. Summoning pillars of ice was easy, because ice was fairly light and craved being sculpted, transformed into various shapes.

The earth was different. It was stubborn and heavy, and she felt it groan beneath her as it pushed its way up through the snow, forming a thick stalagmite.

"Oh, come on." She sent another tendril of magic down, feeling everything out. The ground beneath the Christmas village was solid bedrock, and would be hard to manipulate. She wasn't going to be able to do a whole lot with it on a large scale.

Still, there were plenty of tricks up her sleeve. She sank her mind into the earth and drifted through the frozen stone, examining its capabilities. Though the earth was loath to obey her commands, it was happy to give her its strength.

When she opened her eyes, the surface of her fur had taken on a crystalline sheen. It was a defensive spell, one she hadn't used in years. All around her, hundreds of small rock obelisks had formed. It was hardly the defensive wall that she had tried to summon, but it would do.

Hopping up onto the nearest obelisk, she created a tube out of ice. Crystals became lenses, and she used the makeshift telescope to get a better idea of what was going on.

"Holy mother of—" It was an army made of ice. Scanning the horizon, she found all manner of beasts charging toward her. Up in the sky, creatures zoomed about, carried aloft by giant wings. They were griffins with icy beaks and snowflake wings. Toward the back of the surge, giant abominations made of snow and ice lumbered along behind their brethren.

At the head of the pack was Jack Frost. Her blue features were determined, but were now lined with golden cracks that shed an immense amount of light. Cold, calculating eyes darted about with the gaze of a predator, and her icy hair

hung like a blanket of fog behind her. The bland outfit she had worn before was gone, replaced by a fancy gown decorated with lace and snowflakes.

“And they called me the white witch,” Yuki muttered, lowering the scope. What would Mike do in this situation? Yuki was all by herself, and didn’t have the first idea what she hoped to accomplish on her own.

“Damn, damn, damn,” she muttered, her magic shifting drastically inside of her. Maybe this wasn’t a battle she could win, but then what? Go back and warn the others? They could flee to safety, but it would mean abandoning the North Pole. Mike wouldn’t do that, not while he knew others needed his help.

Even if her ice magic had been at full strength, Yuki couldn’t take Jack on in a head to head fight. Lifting the scope to her eyes once more, she saw that Jack was staring back, eyes brimming with power. Her face had twisted up into a wild snarl, the look of an unhinged woman ready to snap. It was a feeling Yuki knew very well, that sense of all-consuming rage.

Yuki tried to zoom in on those golden lines, but an icy fog enveloped Jack and her army, obscuring them from view. Even this far away, she could feel the magical pressure that came from Jack. It was an entirely different sort of energy, orders of magnitude greater than what she had felt from the woman before.

Somehow, Jack had gone through some form of apotheosis. It was a process Yuki planned to undergo someday if she could live to be a thousand, but there was a reason that the process took a long time. Tapping into divine energy was like putting rocket fuel in a go-cart—the vessel was far more likely to explode before it could even accelerate.

The how and why didn’t matter. She couldn’t let Jack reach Mike.

Smiling to herself, she summoned hundreds of images of herself on top of the obelisks. Calling out to the earth, she got it to feed thermal energy into the stones it had given, which would confuse Jack’s ability to sense heat differences. The mirages of herself were simple illusions, a spell she had learned along with foxfire. They were incapable of creating sound and were easily distinguishable from the real Yuki in bright light. It was a spell she hadn’t bothered with in years, preferring to lean on her ice magic.

Things were different now. It was as though a band of light was holding her together, reminding her both of the person she used to be and the one she could

become. The best parts of her were ready to step forward and protect the man she saw as her friend and lover.

A battle of magic would be easily won by old bitch winter. But a battle of intellect? Yuki fingered the cards in her sleeve with a smile, then summoned foxfire into her hands. All across the snowy landscape, her copies did the same.

Jack was about to find out what happened when you fucked with a trickster.

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The wind carried Jack across the low hills of the North Pole as she rode the edge of the storm. The plan was to send her army into the buildings and chase out anyone hiding there, be they elf or otherwise. She didn't trust anybody, least of all that grotesque woman, Grýla. The giant was loyal to the Krampus, and would not take kindly to Jack's coup.

Once the north was firmly in her grasp, she planned to lay a trap for the demon and catch him when he returned. If she could get him to divulge where he had hidden Santa, she planned to give the fat man a piece of her mind before informing him that she was now in charge. If he was willing to work with her, Christmas could even remain a reality.

But the stories about it? They were long overdue for an update. If Santa wanted to survive, it would be at her service. She had that much figured out. Was she still even Jack Frost? Or perhaps a better name was in order?

"You could always use our old name," the mysterious woman whispered, using Jack's mouth and a slightly different voice. "We were loved and respected, why not return to the old ways?"

"Old ways? What were the old ways?" Jack tried to ignore how disturbing it was to have her own face hijacked.

The woman chuckled, then twisted up her face. "We were loved and adored, long before the fall of Asgard. Some still believe, though we have become little more than stories."

"Who was I? Or is it we? Am I really you?"

"You are little more than a fragment of former glory given time to wither and die. Old man winter, indeed, you settled for the first measly scraps offered! If I had my way, this version of you would be cast out entirely!"

“Well then it’s a good thing you don’t get your way,” Jack snarled, then turned her attention forward. Lights, dozens of them, dotted the landscape just outside the village. Had the elves been freed? No, these were too tall to be elves. Perhaps Grýla was up to something?

Moving closer, she saw the kitsune she had last seen disappearing down into the furnace. Copies of her stood everywhere, all of them staring directly at Jack.

“A deception so simple, even a child could see through it”. The woman grinned.

“Agreed.” Jack tapped into the cold, and was surprised to see that each of the illusory copies had an identical heat signature. How had she done that?

“Jack!” The kitsune called to her. “I just want to talk.” She held the flickering light in her hands aloft, and it briefly formed into the shape of a dove.

“Lies!” The woman screamed.

Jack shook her head, the woman’s voice ringing in her ears. All around her, the creatures of ice and snow paused, awaiting Jack’s commands. With a thought, she could have the kitsune destroyed, and continue on her way.

“Then just do it!” the woman yelled. Jack hovered there, buoyed by the winds and contemplating the fox demon below. She had been moments away from crushing her with a hand made of ice, but the woman’s belligerent tone made her pause. It wasn’t that she cared what the kitsune had to say, or that she had a change of heart.

Nobody told her what to do. Not anymore.

“Then speak,” Jack called, summoning a staff made of ice.

“It looks like you’re getting ready for a war,” the kitsune responded, gesturing toward the army of snow. “I would know who you plan to fight with these creatures.”

“Whoever I damn well please!” the woman shrieked.

“Anyone who would stand in my way!” Jack shouted right after.

“That’s technically two answers.” The kitsune frowned, then crossed her arms, the flames flickering overhead. Every copy of her performed an identical

movement, some flickering briefly as the illusion adjusted so that they all faced Jack. "It sounds like you're out to get everyone."

"Look around you, little fox. The north has fallen, and is in need of new ownership. Someone who can protect it, someone who can guide it, someone who..." Jack paused. Did she really want to be in charge of the North Pole? What was she even doing here? Did she want to fight this woman? Pain flared right behind her eyes, and the golden light seeping from her veins intensified.

"You're stalling," the woman growled.

"No, I'm waiting for you to properly answer my question," the kitsune replied, thinking Jack was talking to her.

"I wasn't talking to you!" The woman raised a hand and one of the snow leopards, a beast nearly eight feet at the shoulder, charged into the kitsune. It leapt into the air and brought its claws down, only to shatter apart on impact. The kitsune had vanished, replaced by a smooth monolith made of stone.

"That wasn't very nice," the kitsune muttered, all of her copies briefly regarding the exposed monolith. "And I'm the only one here. Who are you talking to?"

"I didn't mean to do that," Jack replied. "I don't know why I did that."

"Because you are weak!" The woman's temper flared, and Jack clutched at her head again. "You have made us weak! This place is to become our new home, and we will protect it as the Queen of the North!"

"So, what? Kill the Krampus and let us all go?" The kitsune pondered the answer. "I still don't get your end game here."

"Oh, yes, we will kill that evil bastard!" Jack's mouth went numb as she lost control of her lips to the woman. "And we will kill the giant, and all of her disgusting children. And when people learn what we have saved them from, they will give us the love and adoration we deserve!"

"What about Santa? The elves? The people I came with?"

"Sa...Santa will be fine," Jack spluttered. "The elves and Santa will be fine." She wanted to be loved and remembered, not universally loathed. Now that she thought about it, would enslaving Santa create the same problem? Her head hurt so much, she couldn't keep her thoughts straight. Having the kitsune ask such a



simple question was punching holes in her logic, but every time she looked, all she could see was that molten light inside her.

“You and your friends can leave,” the woman added, as if to placate Jack. “It is clear you are not with the Krampus, so I shall allow you the grace to leave and spread tales of my benevolence. But that man you came with, the one named Mike. I sense a fearful power in him, a power I will cut short.”

“Wow. I think I finally understand what’s happening now.” The kitsune shook her head, then waved her hand. A massive barricade of icicles appeared, spreading across the frozen ground, and the ground trembled, shaking loose ice and snow. Giant glittering clouds billowed outward, only to be sucked up by the storm. “Here I was, hoping we could have some super chill girl talk, but you went ahead and brought your backup bitch to do the talking for you.”

“Nobody speaks to me that way!” The woman held out Jack’s hand, summoning a massive amount of magic. The air swirled around them, visibility dropping. The kitsune’s flames still burned, making each of them an easy target.

“Ugh, I have no idea how Mike puts up with this shit.” The kitsune’s voice now came from everywhere, bouncing between the flames. “So I guess I’ll level with you. That guy you wanna kill? He’s done nothing to you. And based on your shitty Gollum impression, nothing I say is going to convince you otherwise.”

“I am no golem!” Beneath Jack, the army surged forward, running, flying, and swimming through the snow. It looked as if the ground was boiling, the storm’s fury coalescing around the illusionary kitsunes. “This body may be but a pittance of my former beauty, but know now that I am what remains of the goddess of War, Freya!”

“Freya?” Jack’s lips twitched as she forced the words out. She used to be Freya? The name sounded so familiar, but this anger? That wasn’t who she had been...right? That small voice in the back of her mind was practically screaming now, and she could no longer see out of one of her eyes.

“Freya, huh? I’ve heard of you.” The kitsune growled, summoning a handful of flames. “If you’re good, maybe I’ll put that name on the other side of your tombstone, you crazy—”

Freya screamed, and the ground exploded. Creatures of ice and fury tore into each of the illusions, shattering themselves on hidden stone pillars as icicles erupted from the ground. None of the illusions left their posts, instead sending out fire and ice to destroy their attackers. The spikes slowed down Jack’s larger

warriors, the giants she had created from the ocean ice. Massive limbs smashed the icicles into powder while the smaller warriors advanced. These ones were either pierced by more ice, melted with flames, or shattered themselves on the hidden stone beneath the illusions.

“I don’t know what you were expecting,” Jack snorted as she landed on the ground. Between the storm and all the snow that had been kicked up, visibility was nearly non-existent. “Your power with the ice is nothing compared to my own.”

“I will piss on your corpse, little dog.” Freya summoned a ball of golden energy and smashed it into the nearest kitsune. She winced and puffed out of existence, leaving a stone pillar behind. “You hide behind cheap tricks, you have no honor.”

“And you do?” The kitsune’s laugh was high-pitched. “Tell me, Freya, if that’s even your real name...”

“I AM FREYA!” When the goddess screamed, that golden light radiated outward, suffusing dozens of Jack’s minions with divine magic. The creatures affected stumbled as if disoriented, then went into a blind rage, attacking those who were unaffected.

“No, stop!” Jack cried, but Freya bit down on their shared tongue, filling their mouth with blood. She tried to press back against Freya’s control, but her presence was now too strong to resist.

“Thilenth! I’m thick of your weakneth!” Freya lashed out with their staff, smashing it into a nearby kitsune. The illusion shattered, leaving behind another stone monolith. “Now where are you? I will make you beg for your life, you thtupid animal!”

Jack’s blood boiled, the golden cracks on her body widening to reveal molten flows that spilled onto the ground, melting the snow away. Rays of light emerged from her body, blasting away the storm as Freya’s rage took over. In a moment of revelation, Jack saw that this wouldn’t bring the love, recognition, or adoration that she sought.

It was simply madness. Freya was casting magic at random, sending pillars of light into their phantom attackers, and screaming in pain. Their shared body was building up heat, and Jack’s cold hands tingled as the light burnt her flesh away. As more of Freya emerged, Jack realized that the goddess was fractured in a way she couldn’t comprehend. It was as if only the angry part of her had been

able to manifest, the one desperate for survival and revenge. Was this really who she had been?

Because if it was, it definitely wasn't who she wanted to be.

"DIE!" Freya threw their staff at the last remaining kitsune, who widened her eyes in fright. When the staff struck, the kitsune exploded outward, transforming into the stony remains of yet another monolith.

"COWARD!" Freya lifted their hands, golden light coalescing between her fingers. "I WILL BURN THIS PLACE DOWN TO FIND YOU!"

As they passed a nearby monolith, it blurred, the air distorting as the kitsune emerged, a single card in her hands. She was fast, her hand slapping Jack in the chest so hard that Jack fell backward into the snow.

"HOW DARE YOU, YOU FUCKING—"

"My name is Yuki." The kitsune winked as a ball of sparkling light appeared just over her chest. Jack stared at it in wonder as it expanded, creating a haze between them. The haze solidified into a tendril of light that reached for Jack. She followed the line, surprised to see a card depicting an angel pouring water from one cup to another tucked into the bosom of her gown. "And I'm the goddess of kicking your ass."

A beam of silver light connected the women, and Jack screamed as the golden energy was sucked from her body, spiraling along that connecting thread and entering Yuki. The smug look on the kitsune's face faltered as a third line appeared, diverting the energy to someone hiding beneath the snow.

Yuki let out a groan of agony, doubling over in pain.

"NO! THAT'S MINE!" Freya's shrill cry became a sob. "Give it back, please!"

"Eat...my...ass!" Yuki barked out a single laugh, and then screamed in agony. All around them, Jack's surviving minions fled into the village, disappearing from sight as the storm finally died.

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Mike was in the middle of one of the Tom Clancy novels when Mrs. Claus appeared above the stairwell. She looked tired, and several more wrinkles lined her face.

“You two look comfortable.” A wistful smile appeared on her face as she looked down at Mike. Holly had snuggled in next to him, her head on his lap. She was asleep, letting out tiny moans as she dreamed about sugar plums fairies, or whatever it was that elves dreamt of.

“She wanted to stay close in case the ghost who shall not be named arrives.” Though his tone was light, he felt a certain level of dread knowing that the ghost of Christmas Future was lingering somewhere, potentially ready to pounce. The first two ghosts had found him quickly, and he didn’t dare attribute it to dumb luck that the third hadn’t.

“I see.” A few strands of hair had come loose, framing Mrs. Claus’ face. “If I were to make an assumption, my guess is that a spirit who can see the future is waiting for the perfect moment to strike.”

“I hate that assumption.” Mike jostled Holly, who bolted upright as if an alarm had gone off.

“Nutmeg!” She yelled, then blinked her eyes and looked up at Mike. “Hey, there,” she purred, then noticed Mrs. Claus. As if a bucket of ice water had struck her, she was all business again. “Are the maps done?”

“They are.” Mrs. Claus waved them up.

Mike and Holly ascended the stairs, then walked down a long corridor that smelled like fresh cut cedar. The oaken double doors at the end were heavy, and when he walked inside, the smell of wood shavings took him back to the one semester of high school woodshop. He had been an average student, his birdhouse sufficient enough for the finch that had moved in. It only took one harsh winter for the structure to fall apart.

Santa’s personal workshop was the size of a three-car garage. Tools hung in carefully labeled places along a back wall, and a massive clamp at the end of a workbench held an alphabet block together the size of Mike’s head. A large letter M was carved in the visible side. Half completed projects had been pushed to the side, and a large sheet of drafting paper had been spread on one of the benches. Tink and Kisa were sitting at another table with smaller sheets of paper, the goblin using a pencil to make notes on it.

“Here it is.” Mrs. Claus tapped the larger sheet, then sat on a nearby stool. “This is about as accurate as I could make it. I don’t think there’s anything I missed.”

Mike stared at the map in awe. It looked like something that had been drawn up by an engineer, each of the buildings clearly labeled.

“You did this from memory?” he asked.

“I did. When you live somewhere for hundreds of years, you get to know the place.”

“Wait, hundreds?” He turned to Mrs. Claus. “I didn’t think you were that old.”

“You have to remember that time flows differently here,” she said, adjusting her negligee. “When you go to sleep on Christmas Eve, it can be months or even years for me here. Also, I wasn’t born an old woman, but created with years of pseudo-memories from around the North Pole, otherwise I would have been like a child. You keep forgetting I’m an extension of Santa’s magic.”

“I forget a lot of things,” he admitted.

“Maybe you should stop.” She chuckled, then slid the map toward him. “You’re going to want to keep this safe. I don’t have it in me to make another copy.”

Curious, Mike examined Mrs. Claus’ magic again. What had once been a bright light of energy was now just a dim glow, with dozens of massive threads unraveling from her body.

“Are...are you okay?”

“I’m not.” Mrs. Claus opened her mouth to say something, then slumped forward on the table.

“Mother!” Holly ran to Mrs. Claus while Kisa and Tink abandoned their work to come over as well. Mike moved to the other side of the table and easily picked the woman up in his arms. She was much lighter than she should have been, definitely less than a hundred pounds.

“Let’s get her to the bedroom,” he said. He carried the frail woman to her room, and Holly adjusted the pillows while Kisa pulled the blankets back. Once she was properly tucked in, Mike watched in horror as the woman briefly flickered out of existence like a faulty light.

“Whoa!” He examined her magic again, a cold chill going through his body. In the time it had taken him to carry her up, most of her magic had unraveled like

a massive ball of yarn. Out of protective instinct, he summoned his magic and went to work, tucking the threads back in.

His legs went numb beneath him, but Kisa was there, pushing him into a seated position on the bed before he could fall. Tink yanked the goggles off her head and slid them over his eyes, and he went from blindly working to suddenly understanding what was needed. He paused, his spectral fingers now weaving the frayed edges of Mrs. Claus' magic back together, forming a technicolor rope that he wove back into place.

"Will she be okay?" Holly asked.

"I don't know," he muttered, sweat pouring down his forehead. His magic, sensing his determination, had formed into motes of light that tugged and pulled Mrs. Claus' magic back into place before popping out of existence and leaving him drained. Groaning, he slid the goggles up to his forehead.

Everyone watched as the color came back to Mrs. Claus' face, and she let out a sigh of relief, then opened her eyes and looked at Mike.

"I don't have much time," she said.

"But you should have more," he replied. "You're unraveling faster than before, I don't understand."

"I don't either." She turned to Holly. "But it can only mean that belief is weakening."

"That's bullshit," Kisa growled. "The world is frozen, remember? It's not like people can stop believing when they're just sitting there, doing nothing."

Mrs. Claus took a deep breath, then closed her eyes. When she spoke, her eyes remained closed. "Time is a fickle thing," she whispered. "You have to stop thinking of it as a line, especially here at the North Pole. Whatever is happening now means that the outcome will be bad once the spell ends. Change the outcome, change my fate."

"Like Back to the Future." Mike snapped his fingers in revelation, then looked at the others. "We're operating outside of time right now, which means everything is in flux until we rejoin the timestream."

"Ugh." Tink shook her head and moved away from the bed, checking her toolbelt. "Husband still catching up, maybe figure out eventually."

“What, like you properly understand?” Kisa rolled her eyes at the goblin.

“Tink understand perfectly. North Pole like big box. Santa like cat. Until open box, Santa both dead and alive.” Tink pulled her map out, refolded it so that it fit better in one of her pockets, then retrieved a cookie she had tucked between her breasts. “Tink fix furnace, help keep cat alive.”

Holly frowned at Tink. “Are you talking about...?” Her eyes flitted over to Kisa, then back.

“No. Tink have no time, maybe explain quantum shit later.” She climbed onto the bed and grabbed Mike by the face before planting her lips against his. She tasted of chocolate and gingerbread. With a grin, she pulled the goggles off his head and put them on her own. “Help save Christmas, get big present from Santa. Husband keep everybody safe.”

“Be careful,” he told her, then wrapped his arms around her. She hugged him back, pausing just long enough to bite him before breaking away.

“I’ll check in every couple of hours,” Kisa said. “Or try to, at least. Try to stay out of trouble.”

Mike looked at Holly, then back at Mrs. Claus. “Yuki will be back soon,” he offered. “I’ll let her know she’s in charge.”

“Good.” Kisa smoothed some of the hair away from his face and gave him a kiss as well. “There’s a vent in the pantry behind the kitchen just big enough for us to squeeze through. Tink is going to get me into one of the other buildings, and then I’m going to try and figure out what that...jerk is up to. That and find the elves. I’ll let you know before I make any big decisions.”

“Good.” He pulled her in for a hug.

“Try not to fuck Santa’s wife,” she whispered, so he alone could hear. “Santa might shove lumps of coal up your ass, or something.”

“You have my word,” he replied, dropping his hand to her lower back and scratching. He felt her shiver in delight before stepping away. Her eyes held a certain intensity to them, and he instinctively knew that she wasn’t just going out to spy on the Krampus. “Just promise me that whatever you’re looking for, you’ll remember the most important thing is that you make it back to us.”

Kisa opened her mouth as if to argue with him, then changed her mind when she realized that he had essentially given her permission to do her own thing.

"I will," she said, then bid farewell to Holly before moving away from the bed. Tink was already at the bedroom door, but she blew Holly a kiss before she and Kisa left.

"I hope they'll be okay," Holly muttered, then looked back at Mike. Her eyes moved up and down his body, and a grin appeared on her face. It occurred to him that it was essentially just the two of them now, and Holly was looking at him like he was the last present under the tree.

"They'll be fine." He turned his attention to Mrs. Claus and brushed a stray hair from her face. She flinched, then let out a sigh.

"I knew that this day would come," she whispered.

"What do you mean?" He asked.

"The end of Christmas." A weak smile appeared, and she opened her eyes. "Everything is inevitable, Caretaker. There would come a day where mankind would become extinct, and their gods and traditions would go with them. I thought it would be much farther into the future than this."

"Christmas isn't over," he told her, then took her by the hand. "Not yet. No matter what happens today, my family will celebrate it every year, no matter what."

"One family's faith won't be enough to sustain a tradition." She squeezed his hand. "But I appreciate the thought."

"Nonsense," Mike told her. "If there's one thing I believe, it's that every miracle begins with a single person. You just watch, everything is going to be all right when this is over."

Mrs. Claus smiled, then closed her eyes. "Perhaps you are right, Caretaker. Holly?"

"Ma'am?" The elf moved to her side.

"No matter what happens next, never lose faith." She patted Holly's hand. "As long as you survive, everything can be made right. But you have to keep believing."



"I..." Holly looked at Mike. "Of course I would, why would I stop?"

Mrs. Claus didn't respond. She had slipped into a deep sleep, her chest rising and falling with a slow rhythm that was unnerving to watch. Mike inspected her again, horrified to see that her magic was even smaller than before.

"I don't understand," he muttered. Where was her magic going? Determined to get an answer, he sat with the old woman and scrutinized her magic with a determined intensity. He didn't have the goggles anymore, but what he had learned earlier had been enough for him to understand the basics. It was like digging through a website's code for the first time to learn how it functioned. That was a skill from his old life with sudden relevance, which surprised him a little bit.

He had come so far. The timid man content to live alone and run websites for people was long gone, so it was interesting to delve into his old skillset once again. Examining magic wasn't as simple as lines of code, because they were constantly changing as he watched them. Still, he got general ideas from them, and he did his best to tuck a few more back into place.

"Will she be okay?" Holly asked as she took Mrs. Claus' glasses off and set them on the nightstand.

"I don't know," Mike admitted, then turned his gaze onto the elf. Where Mrs. Claus' magic looked like a bundle of unraveling threads, Holly's looked like the star one would put on top of a Christmas tree. When she looked at him, he saw strange colors insert themselves into her magic, then radiate outward in playful loops that caressed his body before vanishing like smoke.

"Oh, shi—shoot," he whispered, realizing the truth of what he was seeing. What he was seeing wasn't just magic, but the very essence of who Holly was as a person. In hindsight, it made so much sense, but he marveled at the sheer beauty of her soul, and how the magic that had created her bound the whole thing together in beautiful red ribbons with silver bells on the end.

"You're staring," she said with concern. "And...crying?"

"Yeah, I'm having a moment, sorry." He wiped the tears from his eyes, and blinked a few times to chase the image away. Was this what it was like for Cecilia? The banshee could only see souls, for the most part. Holly's had been uniquely beautiful, and he felt like he could stare at it all day without getting bored.

Holly seemed dubious of his answer, then grinned mischievously. “Maybe we could arrange for a different kind of moment?” she asked, her tone hopeful.

He looked at Mrs. Claus. “Now probably isn’t the time,” he whispered, suddenly afraid the old woman would sit up in bed and strangle him. “C’mon, let’s head back to the main room and give her some peace and quiet.”

Holly licked her lips and stepped away from the bed, her hips swaying as she walked toward the door.

“Ah, geez.” Mike followed her into the hallway. After closing the door behind him, he turned to see Holly leaning against the opposite wall, her fingers tugging playfully at the fabric of her skirt.

“I don’t suppose—” she began.

He chuckled, then rubbed his stomach when it growled. “I won’t say no, but I will say that I’m starving.”

Holly reached into her pouch, but he stopped her. “If there’s anything else to eat here, we should probably save the magic cookies for later,” he told her. He didn’t know where Mrs. Claus got her food from, but had a sneaking suspicion that there wouldn’t be any more coming in. That, and he was tired of baked goods.

The elf nodded her agreement, closing the flap of her pouch. “I can make sandwiches,” she said, then moved close to him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him in close. “There’s always some leftover roast or something in the fridge. You’d be surprised how much meat I can pack in between a couple of buns with the right amount of mayonnaise. How many would you like?”

“A couple,” he replied, ignoring her double entendre. “And maybe a spare one for when Yuki gets back. She’s been gone awhile so I’m sure she’ll be hungry, too.”

“I can do that.” She pinched Mike’s butt, then let him go. “Maybe if I make her a sandwich, she’ll help me make a different one later.”

“Then you’d better make her one heck of a sandwich,” he told her, distracted by the lack of blood flowing to his brain. He was surprised at how aggressive the elf had become, and wondered if it was a result of the swap they had made in the kitchen. Or maybe their encounter had given her a serious confidence boost, and she was just excited to explore the possibilities with him. There was a week in June where Tink and Kisa had gotten into some type of

ambush sex that still made him blush to think about, but he had been more than willing to indulge them as long as it didn't involve sticking his head in the dryer and pretending to be stuck. "I'm going to grab the big map from the workshop and will be down to help in a few minutes."

He walked down the stairs to the workshop, pausing to properly survey the room. It felt even bigger without the others, and he walked over to the table with the big map.

"Hmm." He studied it for a few minutes, then decided it would be best to roll it up. Convinced that Santa would have some sort of storage tubes squirreled away, he started digging through the drawers and shelves of the workshop to find one. While doing the menial task, he allowed his mind to process the past twenty-four hours, going over the details in the hopes that he hadn't missed something obvious.

Santa's home creaked as if struck by a heavy wind, causing him to wince. He assumed the house wasn't just settling, and decided it would be best if he sped things up. Moving across the room, he opened and closed drawers with no more than a cursory glance, quickly overlooking anything that wasn't tube-shaped. The map was too big to fold.

"Some lucky kid must have wanted a fishing rod, and those are a bitch to wrap" he muttered to himself while opening a cupboard over the workbench. A pair of cardboard shipping tubes fell out, and he caught one while the other bounced away, rolling across the workbench to stop at the giant clamp. He tucked the one he caught back, then walked over to the tube now wedged beneath one of the clamp's handles.

"This should do." It was the perfect size. Picking the tube up, his attention was drawn to the large alphabet block. Unless Santa was making toys for giant toddlers, it had to be some sort of decoration. On the front was the letter M, and on the top was the letter I.

He stared at it for several seconds, then decided to lean along the counter and see what the letter on the back of the cube was.

"Well, fuck me sideways," he muttered, seeing that the letter was a K. It was not lost on him that the odds of coming across a giant alphabet block with the first three letters of his name were pretty small in the first place. Moving the tube aside, he spent a minute undoing the clamp. Once open, he saw that one of the covered sides had an image of his house carved into the wood.

“What the hell were you up to?” he wondered aloud, then went to pick up the block. Instead of lifting freely, a hidden hinge allowed it to open like a treasure chest. Inside, a thick white fabric was folded up neatly with a letter addressed to *M. Radley* and a small ornament sitting on top.

Mike looked around the workshop, then picked up the ornament. It was a simple glass bulb full of fog with last year’s date on it. When he twisted it around for a better look, was fairly certain he saw a face inside eerily reminiscent of Christmas Past. The spirit stared at him wistfully, then disappeared.

“Holy shit.” He set the bulb down and picked up the letter. When he unfolded it, tiny sparkles drifted into the air around his fingertips, then rolled across the paper, leaving golden letters behind.

*Dear Mike,*

*Merry Christmas! It’s been some time since I last gave you a present, and you’ve been a really good boy this year, so I wanted to give you something nice.*

*If you’re reading this, then you’ve just found the tubes for your map. There’s a scroll case downstairs sitting right next to the fireplace that will work much better, it has a strap on it.*

*I’m sure you have so many questions, but I’m afraid giving you the answers will actually cause more problems. What I can give you is this very special ornament with all of the memories from last Christmas! Breaking it will free the spirit inside, so be very careful where you hang it.*

*The coat I’ve enclosed is a spare from my slimmer days. It will keep you warm even on the coldest of nights.*

*Your friend,*

*Santa*

“You’ve got to be shitting me!” Mike’s hand trembled as he squeezed the letter so hard that the paper wrinkled. Santa had known everything that was about to happen! Why not take precautionary measures, or do something other than let the Krampus take over his goddamn body?

He held up the ornament and scowled at the spirit within. “And what am I supposed to do with you?” he asked it. The spirit appeared in the mists, then shrugged noncommittally before disappearing.

“Well, fuck you, too.” Mike unfolded the fabric, revealing a coat that hung down to his shins. He paused, trying to remember if Santa’s coat had always been that long. If not, then the big man was taller than Mike thought.

He casually threw the coat over a shoulder and then tossed the cardboard tube to one side and retrieved the rolled up map from the workbench. ““Ho ho ho, Mike. How about a nice warm coat so you don’t freeze? Wanna borrow a tube for your map? Sorry I put your family in danger, I just wanted to play Jekyll and fucking Hyde this Christmas. Fat fucking bastard.”

Did Holly know? Or Mrs. Claus? Santa was one thing, the guy wasn’t even around. But if the others knew and were misleading him still? He didn’t know how he would handle such a betrayal. His magic simmered in reaction to his anger, eager to lash out.

“You knock that shit off,” he warned it, poking himself in the belly hard enough that it hurt. “Months of good behavior, and now you’re acting up again. I understand the elf and the sexy giant, that’s just what we do. But the weird overload thing is getting old, so knock it off.”

His magic backed down, then went quiet. He wasn’t certain if it had actually heard him, or if it was like some reverse pep talk and he had just calmed himself down. Sometimes it really was easier to think of his magic like a separate entity.

“That’s better,” he said, walking toward the door. “Last thing I need is for you to get all worked up and damned near blow my arm off again. I do take full responsibility for being a human cum founatin earlier, so don’t think I’m blaming you for everything.”

He was halfway down the hall when a massive crunching sound resonated through the house, followed by a tremor which made him lose his footing. He twisted at the last second, making sure not to fall on the ornament. Up above, timbers groaned as the house creaked dangerously.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he muttered, climbing to his feet. “Holly, where are you?” He ran the rest of the way to the stairs, looking out into the living room. Holly emerged from the kitchen, her eyes wide in alarm.

“That was really loud,” she said, then screamed when something struck the side of the house hard enough that the whole building rumbled. The front door rattled on its hinges, and bright lights flashed through the windows.

“Are we under attack?” From his vantage point, he could see beams of golden light as they passed over the house like searchlights. He ran downstairs where Holly met him, then the two of them moved toward the front window

There was another loud bang, and then something roared. The front door rattled several times before everything went silent.

“What on Earth—” Mike was interrupted by the sound of a knock on the door, which caused Holly to scream.

“It’s me!” Yuki called from the other side. “Hurry up, let us in!”

Us? Mike stuffed the ornament into a pocket of Santa’s coat and tossed it over a nearby chair. The map went on a table before he moved to unlock the door. A gale force wind blew it inward, causing the fire in the fireplace to flicker dangerously. Mike crouched down to hold the door in place long enough for Yuki to come in, then grunted with exertion while pushing it shut.

“What is going on out there?” He demanded, then saw what Yuki was carrying. In her arms was the motionless figure of Jack Frost. He couldn’t tell if the woman was alive or dead, but weird golden threads of light blazed along her arms, twinkling like stars.

“You brought her here? Why?” He looked up at Yuki, noticing that her face was all scraped up. Blood trickled from a wound on her head, which ran down the length of her nose and dripped on the floor.

“I fucked up, Mike. I fucked up real bad.” There was a tremor in her voice that made him sick to his stomach. She set Jack down on a nearby couch and then ran into Mike’s arms, clutching him tight.

“Hey, whoa, it’s okay,” he told her, then flinched when something heavy slammed into the side of the house. “What the hell was that?”

“That would be one of my fuck ups.” She leaned away from him and sniffled. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Holly put on her earmuffs. “Jack was coming here with an entire army made out of ice. I thought if I took her down, they would fall apart or something.”

The house shook again, and some books fell off a nearby bookshelf. Up in one of the windows, a creature that looked like a cross between a gorilla and a snowman slapped a huge palm on the glass. There was a flash of red light as the creature’s arm exploded, and it hopped down.

“At least the house seems protected.” Mike inspected the flow of magic in the house, and was unsurprised to see that the exterior walls swirled with red and white streamers of light, making it look like a giant candy cane.

“They aren’t the problem.” Yuki walked over to one of the windows and pointed through it. “She is.”

Mike moved to her side and looked through the glass. At first he didn’t see the dark figure skulking at the end of the walkway, mistaking it for a giant pile of rocks. Her body was thick like a boulder, with long arms that dragged knuckles on the ground. Greasy hair hung over a face that resembled a burst tomato, and when the giant smiled, it was to reveal jagged teeth reminiscent of a hippo’s.

Ugly features aside, it was the golden light that surrounded her, sinking into the ground like an inverted tornado. The giant ripped a stone the size of a basketball out of the ground, then casually tossed it at the house. There was a flash of white light this time as the structure shook, but withstood the impact.

“You can’t stay in there forever, food!” Her voice was difficult to hear over the creaking of the house. Dozens of ice minions were now studying it, most likely trying to find a way in.

“Oh, no.” Holly was by Mike’s side now, up on her tiptoes to see out the window.

“You know this lump of ugly?” he asked.

“I do.” Holly’s face wrinkled up in disgust. “That’s Grýla. She’s awful, but relatively harmless.”

“Not anymore.” Yuki leaned against the wall and took a deep breath, then let out a groan and sank to the floor. She held out her hands, revealing a nimbus of golden light. It faded after a few seconds, and Yuki sighed, leaning against the wall.

“What happened?” Mike asked.

“Jack was coming here to attack you, so I thought I’d even the odds.” She chuckled weakly, then shook her head. “I had a tarot card that allows you to level the playing field. When used, it balances the magical power of any creature in its area of effect. Made it in case I fought Emily and she was much stronger than me. It’s meant to be temporary.”

“I take it that’s not the case here?”

“No.” Yuki stared at him. “For one, I thought it was just me and Jack. I didn’t expect a third party to be waiting in the snow beneath my feet. And two...I thought it would just pull ice magic out of her, Mike, I really did. Something I knew how to use, but this...” She held up her hands and the golden light returned, the veins in her arms lighting up.

“What is it?” he asked, but he was fairly certain he knew.

“Divinity. Magic far beyond anything I am capable of, not in this amount. If not for Grýla out there absorbing a third of it, I might have just exploded.” She grimaced, then clutched her chest. “It feels like I’m on fire.”

“Yuki.” He could see the golden light blazing around her now, trying to force its way into her. Panicked, he put his hands over her chest, uncertain how to proceed. Could he try and separate it from her? What would happen if it had nowhere to go?

The side of the house rattled again, the walls protesting their percussive treatment.

“Come back, food!” Grýla growled, then threw another stone.

“Leave us alone,” Holly yelled through the window. “Go back to your cave!”

“The North Pole belongs to me now,” she yelled back. “Me and my children! The Krampus will see me rewarded for my efforts.”

“Krampus?” Jack moaned, her eyelids fluttering.

“What happened to her?” Mike asked.

“Punched her in her fucking face,” Yuki said with a grin. “But Grýla hits way harder than either of us. Knocked her out cold, only way I survived was a spell I had cast earlier. Stupid bitch chased us all the way back here, nothing I did seemed to hurt her. I’m not sure how, but she soaked up all that extra magic like a sponge.” She winced, her hands going to her chest. “My heart, it’s beating so fast...”

He examined Yuki’s magical aura again, studying the bands of light, isolating the colors. It looked different from Holly’s, almost feral in some places. The golden light was pressing in on the other colors, as if trying to sever them. They wanted in, but then what?

“Wait a second.” He turned his attention to Jack. Her magic was a pulsing core of blue energy, fluttering quickly like a bird’s heart. Between the occasional



gaps, he saw that same golden light scattered throughout, but more of it was concentrated inside.

Closing his eyes, he tried to consider the problem. With Mrs. Claus, he had tucked the strands back in. But that was magic that was a part of her, not just something that had been added.

No, that wasn't right either. He wasn't just seeing magic, he was looking at their souls. He was about to mess with his friend's soul, not having a single idea what the repercussions could be.

"Naia!" He opened his eyes. "I need you!"

"Naia?" Holly looked at him. "The nymph?"

"Yes!" He jabbed himself in the belly. "Wake the fuck up!"

"Naia?" Yuki opened her eyes. "Where?"

"Ugh, c'mon." He felt his magic wake up and stretch out. "I've heard you in my head so many times, you've helped me understand other's needs, and you're the only one I know who understands soul magic!"

Holly stared at him like he had gone nuts. Yuki squinted through one eye, the other shut as if the room was too bright.

"Hey, food!" The house shook again. "These walls won't hold me for much longer! You should come out here and, uh, talk. We can talk, that's right!"

"Shit!" Mike looked at Yuki, Jack, and then Holly. Things had taken a turn for the worse, and it was all up to him now. There were so many times he had heard Naia in his head, that fragment of his soul speaking to him while...

"Holly, come here!" He grabbed the elf by her collar and pulled her close. "Do you trust me?"

Holly stared into his eyes, as if uncertain, then she nodded.

He turned her around and bent her over the nearest chair, pushing up her skirt to reveal her bare pussy and torn leggings. With a single motion, he pulled down his pants, his cock swelling so fast he felt like the floor was dropping out from underneath him. The plan was crazy, but crazy was all he had right now.

"Mike, what...oh my Santa!" Holly groaned in delight as he teased her pussy with the head of his cock. He rubbed her clit with his fingers while sliding his

cock over the outside of her labia. Holly lifted her legs into the air, her lips parting easily as he pressed the head of his cock inside of her. "Don't you dare stop!"

"Wow. Any excuse to get laid." Yuki chuckled, then whimpered like a dog in pain.

"I'm coming, Yuki, hold on," he muttered, fucking Holly to make sure his cock was nice and wet. He slid out of her, then positioned the head of his cock against her tight little butthole. Holly tensed up and looked over her shoulder at him.

"Um, shouldn't we—" she began, but he held a finger to his lips.

"Trust me for just another second?" he asked. Naia had always been there to lend a hand when he needed sexual guidance. And if there was one thing she would correct him on, it was this.

Holly frowned at him, but nodded anyway.

Mike took a deep breath and pressed forward just enough that he felt resistance, visualizing himself sliding deep into Holly's ass, hearing her moans of pleasure as he roughly pumped himself inside her, and—

*Slow down, lover.* Naia's voice was playful, but he heard a hint of anger in it. *She's not ready for that.*

"Naia, quick, I need to do soul magic on Yuki!" He spat the words out as quickly as possible, afraid her presence would vanish. "I don't need help fucking, I need help saving Yuki!"

*What?* He could feel Naia now, sense her confusion as if it was his own. *You're doing soul magic?*

Satisfied that Naia was there to stay, he shifted his cock back down to Holly's pussy and slid himself back inside. The elf groaned, her whole body shuddering.

"Sweet Christmas, you had me going for a second," she muttered, licking her lips.

"I don't know what all you can see from inside there, but I need your help fixing Yuki." He turned to look at the kitsune, his cock sliding out of Holly. Naia's presence faded immediately, so he slid his dick back into the elf.

There was a painful moment where he thought he had lost her, and then the nymph laughed.

*You get into the strangest trouble, lover. Keep fucking Holly, and I can guide you. Naia chuckled in his mind. Since you are balls deep in someone, I can stick around on a technicality.*

“Thanks, Naia.” He grabbed Holly by the hips and pulled her off the couch, noticing a few gemstones from her crotch were left behind, stuck in the fabric. The elf groaned when he picked her up, grabbing hold of a couple of couch pillows before crossing over to where Yuki sat, his cock still buried deep inside Holly. He imagined it looked quite ridiculous, but didn’t care.

“This is what I see,” he said, helping Holly to the floor. “Hey, can you keep your ass up for me?”

Holly giggled, then tucked the pillows under her hips to raise herself up. “Let me know how I can help,” she whispered, then groaned as he resumed thrusting.

“Just doing some soul surgery.” He examined Yuki’s soul once more, and felt Naia wince. “While fucking, apparently.”

*She’s been through so much, Naia whispered. I can see all her pain, it’s in those dark spots. But I can also see where she’s healed. She found something new to love, and recently.*

“What can I do about this golden light?” He stared at the golden beams that had formed into concentric rings and were tightening down on Yuki’s soul. “She called it divinity.”

“Oh, yeah, pull my hair!” Holly added, wiggling her hips. Mike obeyed, grabbing her by the back of her head and yanking it back. She groaned in delight, and a surge of his magic went across her back. Mike tried to concentrate, his mind slipping as Holly essentially rode him from the prone position.

*Let me guide you, Naia whispered. He switched to a slower pace with Holly, allowing him to sit up and see Yuki better. While tugging on Holly’s hair with one hand, the other went through an intricate weaving process, his magic spreading across both the elf and the kitsune, those tiny sparks sinking into both of them.*

In Yuki’s case, he could see the sparks become tiny motes of light that rode on the strands of her magic. Naia had him grab at those pieces as he unraveled a few of her threads just enough to begin weaving the new ones in. It didn’t go

unnoticed that some of that golden light clung to his fingertips, then danced along his arm until it disappeared into his chest.

Was this what Naia felt like when she did her soul swap? His had always been an automatic process, but now he remembered how she had given him specific abilities. If he mastered this skill, could he choose what he got from his future lovers, and what they might get from him in return?

His hand was on Holly's shoulder now, and she let out a gasp, then pulled his hand to her mouth and bit down on his knuckle. Distracted, he felt his mind shift to the writhing figure on the floor, and that familiar heat built up in his gut.

The house trembled as Grýla kept throwing rocks. A puddle of water formed in the fireplace, and Mike wondered if something had tried to squeeze its way in and had melted. Still, he kept fucking Holly while trying to fix Yuki. He was essentially edging himself with the elf, concentrating hard enough on the task at hand that she had already come three times beneath him, all the while begging for more. The wooden floor was covered in tiny sparks, and more than a few were made of gold.

Yuki relaxed during the process, eventually losing consciousness. He could see the changes happening inside of her as that golden light became a part of her, hoping against hope that he wasn't doing any permanent harm. By the time he was finished, he had managed to spread it out and weave it in with all the other threads he saw. Did soul magic always look like string, or was that just the way he saw it?

*That should be enough, lover.* He felt Naia's smile in the back of his mind, her presence now fading. *The rest is up to her.*

Satisfied, he turned his attention down to the sexual mess that was Holly.

"If you need to keep going, I'm game," she whispered, her voice hoarse from all the tiny shrieks she had made. She held up one of her magical cookies, revealing that she had taken a couple of bites. "Plenty of energy. Can go all night if you need to. Can even go find some lube if you wanna try butt stuff."

"Some other time." He pulled out of her and helped roll her onto her back. She sighed as he laid down on top of her, then placed his lips against hers. "Thank you for that. I can explain later."

"You don't need to explain anything to me." She ran a hand along his ass. "But I bet you want to finish."

He looked at the golden light that had accumulated on his skin, then shook his head.

“I would love to, but not inside this time.”

“Your wish is my command.” She reached down with both hands and started jerking him off. “But...could you kiss me while I do it? I kind of like how it feels, it’s less...intense.”

He pressed his lips to hers, their tongues sliding across each other as she stroked him with both hands. He was slick with her juices, and his long denied orgasm built quickly. With a loud groan, he blew his load, coating Holly’s outfit in sticky ropes of glittering semen. Holly pumped him enthusiastically with one hand as she continued to kiss him with her other hand on the back of his head.

The sparks on the floor dissipated, and he collapsed on top of the elf with a grunt.

“Okay, you’re too heavy,” Holly protested.

“Sorry.” He rolled off of her, immediately noticing the sticky mess that now covered both of them. It looked as if they had been attacked with hot glue and glitter. His magic dissipated, leaving him with a brutal headache.

A headache made worse by the continued pounding of stone against wood. Grunting, he stood, kicking off his pants before retrieving Santa’s coat. His magic fired up again, concentrating in his fingertips as he walked over to the door.

He waited for another impact, then opened the door and stepped outside. The cold wind blasted him, but the accompanying chill was non-existent. He stepped outside, scowling at the grotesque figure who had carved a large chunks of stone out from the yard. The snow was littered with all the rocks she had thrown, and Grýla paused, her head tilted to one side as she tried to scoop up another large rock.

His magic spun up like a cyclotron, and he could see it now, running down his arms and dancing across his fingers. The same golden nimbus Yuki had held now manifested across his fingertips, interwoven with blue and white streamers of light. Anger, frustration, and a desire to put Grýla in her place fueled him, the streamers hissing like hot oil as the magic rose to the challenge, eager to obey.

“What are you doing, food?” Grýla asked, her gaze stuck on Mike’s exposed cock. Around them, creatures made of snow crawled toward him across the boulder strewn landscape.

“Giving you a taste,” he growled, then threw his right arm forward as if pitching a baseball. The spinning light in his fingers turned into a hot ball of energy, then manifested as a blast of lightning that struck Grýla in her face. The giant howled, dropping a boulder the size of a beach ball and stumbling around in agony. She fell to all fours and fled, her cries filling the air.

Pain rushed up his arm, every nerve now tingling as if he had smashed his funny bone with a hammer. Spasms wracked his fingers, and he pulled his arm in to his stomach, cradling it like a child.

Seeing that the snowman house of horrors was nearly upon him, Mike retreated back into the house, slamming the door shut behind him. Holly sat on the floor, her eyes filled with awe as he shook his arm and flexed his hand, the pins and needles subsiding.

Jack, however, stared at him with a mixture of disbelief and suspicion.

“What are you?” she asked, one eyelid twitching rapidly. The pupil in that eye was dilated, making the whole eye look black.

“My name is Mike Radley,” he said, realizing his coat was still open, his cock exposed. He clumsily pulled the coat shut, using the built-in belt to tie it. “And I’m the man who’s going to save Christmas.”