

Caught in the Present

When Lily first caught sight of the Pacific Islands, two thoughts occurred to her. The first of these was that it was far warmer than the US had been, which caused her to start sweating under her hat. It had been easy enough to remove the sweat glands from her forehead, but that fudging hat was a different story. Over the last few hours, she had tried everything to remove the offensive article of clothing, but it refused to budge. She had even debated letting Tick Tock bite off the top of her head, but worried about getting bounced out of the time lock by doing so.

The second thing that occurred to her was that there should be daylight here in the islands. There wasn't. In fact, it was just as dark as it had been when they left the east coast of the U.S., and there was no rational reason for it. Curious what Santa Grim would offer as an explanation, she asked him about it.

"It's Christmas magic," he explained as they descended toward the first island. "It does what it needs to do."

"Fudging figures," she muttered as they approached their first home. Cerberus hovered in the air about ten feet over a shack on the beach. Death pulled out Santa's list and reviewed it.

"Okay then, we need presents for Mabel, Rose, and Timmy." He looked at Lily expectantly.

"Those are some very white names for Polynesia," Lily replied, not sure what he wanted from her. "You sure we've got the right stop?"

"It says here they are on vacation from Maine," he informed her. "And if you could grab their presents from the bag, that would greatly speed things up. Poor Timmy is worried Santa won't find them this year. It's a good thing we're on the case."

"Somebody kill me," she groaned, then smiled upon realizing that had gotten past the filter. "So I have to look through the bag for their gifts?"

"Just stick your arm in and think of those names," he said.

"Lots of people are named Rose," she argued, but shoved her hand in Santa's bag. A package was shoved into her hand, so she removed it.

“The process is very well automated,” Death told her, holding out his arms. She handed over two gifts for Mabel, one for Rose, and then three for Timmy. Death’s arms were very full as he moved towards the edge of the sleigh.

“How are you getting inside?” she asked.

“Christmas magic.” He winked and stepped backward off the sleigh. The tails of his cloak fluttered out from beneath Santa’s coat like the wings of a crow before he struck the roof hard and slid across its surface. Death dropped all of the presents when he spilled off the roof, landing face down in the sand. His bare bony legs kicked out as he struggled to extricate himself.

If Lily had been inclined to help, it would have been impossible. She was laughing so hard that she had crouched down in the sleigh, clutching her stomach as tears rolled down her cheeks. It was a good minute before she could pull herself together and look back over the side.

Death had managed to free himself, his skull twisted into a scowl as he picked up the presents he had dropped. He shook sand out of his sleeves, then brushed the presents off. Somehow they had all survived, though the wrapping paper on one of Timmy’s gifts was torn.

“You’re supposed to be Santa Claus, not Sandy—” Lily ducked out of the way as Death hurled a stone at her. Cerberus let out a series of snorts that could have been laughter.

“This is why you got coal for Christmas,” Death declared as he tried to turn the latch on the front door. It clicked open and he wandered inside.

A few minutes later, Death returned, pausing to shake some more sand out of his hat. Cerberus lowered the sleigh to allow the reaper to get in.

“So what went wrong with the dismount?” Lily asked, hiding her grin behind the pom pom of her hat.

“I’m not sure.” Death pulled out the manual again. “The house didn’t have a chimney, so I just assumed...ah, okay. There’s some stuff in the chapter on entering homes that I missed. Entrance is possible through any natural entry, or one that allows the flow of air, like a chimney or a window. For difficult to reach entryways, there’s a safety rope.”

“I didn’t see a safety rope.” Lily looked around her feet and was surprised to find a coiled length of rope that was white with red ribbons woven through it. “That definitely wasn’t here a minute ago.”

Death waved his fingers at her. “Christmas magic, my dear demon. Come, Cerberus, to the next home.”

The next home was only a block away, and Death had the hellhound park the sleigh on the ground this time. The name he read was Chinese, and Lily pulled two gifts from the bag with hanzi written on the tags. Death delivered the presents again and came out with a cookie in each hand.

“Little Bao remembered to leave Santa cookies,” he explained, then handed one to Lily.

“How kind of you.” She took a bite and winced. “This is very stale.”

“Indeed. The four I ate were not very good.” Death held the remaining cookie up. “And don’t worry, I didn’t forget about you.” He tossed the cookie to Tick Tock, who snatched it out of the air with a ribbon tongue.

“Should you be feeding that thing after midnight?” Lily asked.

“I am unaware of any time constraints on mimics or cookies.” Death snapped the reins and they were off again.

They established a good rhythm as they delivered hundreds of presents. Lily had Death read the list between houses so she could prepare gifts in advance. Death delivered most of them by walking through the front door. Apparently the world was still frozen inside the homes as he dropped off the packages, so there was no fear of discovery.

Without any proper way to keep time, Lily had no idea how long it took. Between Death falling off of a couple more roofs and that time Cerberus crashed into an apartment complex, the deliveries flowed together in her mind like a collapsing dream.

In a way, it made sense. It was a similar trick to what she could accomplish in the Dreamscape. An hour in the real world could become years inside a dream, but the human brain would find a way to compress that information upon waking. An ordinary mind was likely to forget enough details that it may as well have been an hour.

When staying with Eulalie and Velvet last fall, she had done something similar for their father, allowing him several months with his deceased wife in the Dreamscape. While awake, he didn't even question the time distortion. Instead, his dreams were just a montage of pleasant memories, the time dilation forgotten.

At the sudden thought of Velvet, Lily scowled. Her passing had left a scar on Mike's soul. Over the summer, she and Dana had gone down to Florida to take revenge for the death of their friend, but got caught up in something much bigger.

She pushed the whole event out of her mind. It was only going to make her angry all over again.

Australia was similar to the islands, but the population clusters were thick enough that Death would often return to the sleigh just long enough for presents to the next house. Lily had noticed back in the islands that they didn't stop at every home, even if there were signs of children. Death thought that the children had been naughty, or even no longer believed, but it didn't matter. That was always a few minutes saved, and it was going to add up quickly as the eternal night progressed.

They were somewhere above Sydney when they stopped the sleigh over an opulent home covered in Christmas lights. Lily knew something was up by the way the windows on the house sparkled as if tagged with fairy lights.

Death frowned at the list, his gaze moving to the house and back again.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Not that she cared, but she didn't feel like wasting time just sitting there. As long as they were busy making deliveries, she didn't notice how long it took.

"Er, nothing." Death looked at Lily, then back at the list, then the house.

"C'mon, what's the problem? I don't want to sit here all...night." She gestured at the moon up above, which had followed them the entire trip. "If there's an issue, let's just skip this place. Kid looks like they're probably getting a ton of presents anyway, look." She pointed at a window in the front of the house. Through it, a massive tree decorated in glass ornaments had been packed to the brim with presents.

Death cleared his throat, which made an eerie sound that reminded Lily of a creaking house. "Well, technically, there isn't a problem."

“Then let’s get to it. What’s the name?”

“William.”

Lily reached into the bag and was surprised when nothing was pressed into her hand. She reached even deeper and tried to grab the first thing she felt, but the presents slid away from her touch. “What the fudge?”

“This child requires something else from Santa,” Death explained. “You see, not everyone needs a material gift.”

“Okay, then what is it?”

Death turned the list to show her. William’s full name was scrawled in beautiful golden calligraphy. Just off to the side were the words **Personal Visit**.

Lily laughed. “Oh, that is rich! He’s going to be so fudging scared when he gets Jack Skellington instead of the big man himself!”

“And that, my dear friend, is the problem.” Death tugged his beard away from his face, revealing a bony jaw. “He might not believe that I am only helping Santa, you see.”

“No poop.” Lily scowled. Maybe her vocabulary could be more extensive, but she hated that the filter chose words for her.

“If only I had the ability to alter my form, it would be no problem.” Death looked at Lily.

“Yeah. That would solve the issue, wouldn’t it?” She looked away, refusing to acknowledge the comment.

Several moments passed. Death picked up his thermos and poured out some more hot cocoa. Lily had seen him do this multiple times already, and knew that the thermos likely contained thousands of gallons of the stuff.

“Lily.” Death paused to sip his cocoa thoughtfully. “You wouldn’t happen to know somebody who can shape shift, would you?”

She ignored him. There was no way she was going to play Santa.

“Lily?” Death’s tone shifted slightly, and she could hear the annoyance.

“Maybe this is something you should have considered before deciding to play Santa,” she mumbled.

“Lily.” The tone of his voice hardened, and all sense of jocularity had vanished. When she turned to face him, she saw that the flames in his sockets were burning purple. As she watched, the flames disappeared to reveal a field of stars inside his skull. One by one, the stars winked out as she let out a gasp of awe.

She didn’t fear Death. At worst, he could ruin her evening. Yet in those eyes, she saw a version of eternity she wanted no part of.

“What’s in it for me?” she asked in an attempt to deflect.

Death’s hard stare softened. “I suppose I would owe you a favor,” he said.

“A big one?”

He nodded, the light of the moon reflecting off of his skull. “A favor from Death isn’t one to be taken lightly, no matter the size.”

“And nothing tea or map related.”

His upper mandible twisted into a grin. “We can’t always predict the future,” he told her. “But yes, your repayment shall be very large.”

“Fine.” She looked at the house. “So I can just go in however I want?”

Death nodded. “The front door is fine, but if the child is awake, they will hear you.”

“Care to explain to me how this random kid is still walking around?” She clenched her jaw as a thick white beard sprouted from it. “I mean, if the whole world is time locked and all.”

“I suppose maybe you should think of it less as everyone else being frozen and more like we are just moving really fast.” He leaned back and put his feet up on the front of the sleigh. Grains of sand were stuck between his metatarsals. “We’re the ones inside a time bubble. Once it pops, we’ll rejoin everyone else as it were. Some exceptions will be made as others are allowed to enter the bubble with us.”

“How does that make sense?” Her voice deepened as her belly expanded. She gave it a poke to ensure that it did, indeed, jiggle like jelly. “Doesn’t your book explain it?”

“It does not, but it doesn’t matter. I once heard that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Death pulled a cookie from

his pocket. "In theory, this makes sense, but I choose to postulate an opposing position."

"Which is?"

"That magic doesn't require us to understand it for it to work. You want an explanation, but it isn't required. Sometimes we have to accept the magic for what it is and quit bothering each other with questions about how it operates."

"That sounds an awful lot like a fancy way of saying you don't know."

Death paused, as if deep in thought. "Perhaps. I must admit, my current form has placed several limitations on my ability to comprehend things in a multi-dimensional sense. When you're an all encompassing inevitability, you don't spend much time pondering the temporal nature required for traditional logic."

"That's a lot of big words for a man who still doesn't have an answer for me."

"Then I shall return to my original answer. Because it's all part of the magic of Christmas. And since the magic was created to help Santa deliver presents, this must be part of it." He made to take a bite of the cookie, but Lily snatched it from him.

"Santa first," she declared, then bit into it. She made a face. "Ugh, gross, raisins."

"That is why I didn't offer it to you," he explained, taking the cookie back. "I didn't want the little girl who made these to feel bad, so I took them. In fact, it's almost like I'm doing you a favor by eating this."

"Don't start with me," she warned, but he chattered his teeth at her.

"One must keep their sense of humor if they are to properly harbor the Christmas spirit." He tossed the cookie into his mouth and patted his non-existent belly. "I shall keep my word, dear succubus. Do not fret."

Disgruntled, Lily hopped out of the sleigh, causing both her knees to pop, then walked to the house. There was a partially open window by the kitchen. When she approached, she felt her whole body tingle as she turned into mist and flowed through the screen and reformed in the kitchen. She sniffed the air, curious to see if it would have the usual sulfurous stench.

Satisfied that she hadn't arrived with her typical odiferous flare, she walked through the house. Santa's proportions were almost comical, yet she tried to sway

her hips as usual. If nothing else, William would have one heck of a story to tell about the time he met Santa.

She was almost to the stairs when she heard the shifting of packages beneath the tree. Turning to face the emerald green monstrosity, she saw a young boy who was maybe eight years old digging through the packages.

Ugh, might as well get on with it, she thought. “Ho ho ho...William.”

The boy jumped, banging his head on an ornament which fell. It clattered against the wooden floor, revealing that the ornament was made of plastic. Now that Lily was close, she could tell that the tree was decorated in cheap replicas of old style ornaments. Even the candy canes hanging from it were fake.

“Santa!” William ran across the room and wrapped his hands around Lily’s waist, burying his face in her belly.

Lily froze. She couldn’t recall the last time she had touched a child, much less been hugged by one. There was so much warmth in the child’s embrace that she felt dirty for accepting it, and had to stop herself from stepping away.

“Now, now, young man. I’m here on a special assignment.” She pushed William away and saw that he’d been crying. “Apparently someone is in need of a Christmas miracle.”

William wiped the tears from his eyes. “Just knowing that you’re real is enough for me.”

“Eh...okay.” Lily frowned, then looked at the tree. A personal appearance from Santa sounded too simple to be the reason she was here. “So, were you snooping to see what you got?”

He shook his head. “No, sir. I was seeing what everyone else got.”

Lily cocked her head. “Now it shouldn’t matter what everyone else got. Christmas is about giving, and all that...kind of thing.”

William wiped some fake pine needles out of his hair. “That’s what I’m worried about. My sisters are missing their presents from my mom. My parents got divorced a few years ago and we never see my mom. My stepmom doesn’t like her, and they fight all the time. I found my present from her under the tree this morning, but wanted to make sure that my sisters got something, too.”

Lily contemplated William with a frown. "Why would your mother forget to send them presents?"

"She forgot their birthday," he replied, then moved to go back under the tree. "She didn't even call. My stepmom made a huge fuss about it, but when I talked to mom later, she told me she sent presents and tried to call, but nobody answered the phone."

"Okay." Lily pondered William's words. "So...what do you want me to do?"

The boy shrugged. "I don't know. But I wrote you a letter asking if you could make sure my sisters got my mom's presents, and here you are. To be honest, I thought maybe you weren't real, but I had to try."

"Tell me more about your stepmom." Lily sat down on a nearby couch, then noticed an empty plate. "Did somebody eat my cookies?"

William shook his head. "I threw them away. My stepmom made them, but they're really gross and I didn't want to hurt your feelings." His face brightened. "I can make you a sandwich if you're hungry!"

"Nah, I'm fine." She patted her belly. "So what's the deal with your stepmom?"

William scowled at the tree. "She sucks. I can tell she doesn't like me, but it's fine. She's nice to my sisters, but it's almost too nice. She has them doing dance and piano all the time, though, so I don't get to see them much."

"Classic stepmother move." It was the only reply she could think of, but William nodded as if he understood.

"She wants them to call her mom, now." He winced. "But they already have a mom."

"What do you call her?" Lily asked.

"Janet." He made a face. "She makes me play outside so I don't get her floors dirty. Or just in my room. I don't like her much."

"Let's see if I can get to the bottom of this." With a sigh, Lily heaved her bulk forward and walked toward the stairs. "You stay here. I'll be back."

William nodded, and then she ascended the stairs. She could smell the dreams of the household, and wandered down a long hall to a master suite that

was almost as large as the main floor at home. In a four poster bed, a man that looked like William slept next to a woman with porcelain skin and a sleep mask.

She could see the rise and fall of their chests, which meant that time flowed here as well. If she waited long enough, would morning come? Or would time snap back into place like a rubber band, making them live the same five minutes on repeat?

She thought back to Death's words. It really would just be easier to accept that magic happens, and accept that she would receive no explanation. Christmas magic was definitely something special, that was for sure.

To be safe, she gave both sleepers a jab with her tail to ensure they slumbered. A quick dive into Janet's mind revealed that she had rewrapped the presents from William's mother and addressed them from Santa. Puzzled, Lily dug deeper.

Janet's mind unraveled like a rotten onion, revealing a history of entitled behavior and glowing narcissism. William's sisters were adorable, and got plenty of attention from Janet's friends and strangers alike. She liked being told she made a good mother, and enjoyed taking credit for the children's accomplishments. However, as long as their mother was in the picture, there would be credit she couldn't claim.

There was a lot to unpack. Janet was only being kind to the children for her own glorification and to hurt a woman she barely knew. William was old enough to see through the charade, but the girls were not. It was likely only a matter of time before she started using William as her own emotional punching bag.

"How would Santa handle this?" she wondered aloud. How would a fat man who brings joy and good cheer to the world deal with a chronic liar bent on destroying a child's perception of their mother? This situation reminded her of the one between Mike and his own mother, and the temptation to just snap Janet's neck was very strong.

Staring at her prey, she bit her lip and crawled up onto the bed. Spreading her legs around Janet's torso, she placed her hands on Janet's temples and delved into the Dreamscape.

She didn't know what the answer was. The fact of the matter was that Santa wasn't here, but she, Lily, was. She had her own way of dealing with things.

Not knowing what sort of deadline she was on, she bombarded Janet's Dreamscape with a nightmare sequence that lasted for weeks on end. The Christmas filter fought her hard at first, but the Dreamscape was Lily's domain, and she was able to defeat it soundly there.

Janet's soul begged for forgiveness on multiple occasions, but Lily saw through the lie each time. The woman Janet had become was a project years in the making, and not something casually undone. The woman would say whatever she thought necessary to stop the terrors that Lily sent at her. Scare tactics clearly weren't going to work, so she would have to go deeper.

Changing tack, it was time to do some spiritual manipulation. Lily set up a dream scenario where Janet woke up on Christmas day, broke her stepdaughters' hearts, and then enjoyed a briefly successful career as their manager when they got picked up by a scouting agency. She became close friends with the wife of a wealthy oil mogul, whom she eventually had a threesome with. Using this sexual moment as an opening, Lily pounced.

Souls were often like apples. It was entirely possible to cut the bad parts out in the hopes that what had rotted them in the first place wouldn't grow back. Lily bit large chunks out of Janet's soul, almost to the point where she would perish. When Christmas morning came, Janet would likely suffer confusion, weakness, and headaches for several days. She would barely have the energy to get through the day without napping, much less emotionally manipulating her stepdaughters. Smiling, Lily licked her lips and tweaked Janet's nose as if she was a child.

"If nothing else, that should keep you out of trouble for a few months. You'll love the attention you get from everyone when the doctors can't figure out what's wrong with you."

Before leaving the bedroom, she jacked into the father's head long enough to see that he was a good man with a penis that made most of his decisions.

"Consider getting snipped," she told him, both in his dreams and out. "Cause if you knock this one up, she's gonna take you for everything."

It had been almost half an hour by the time she returned to the living room. William was dozing on the couch, but snapped to attention when Lily arrived. He was holding a plate with a peanut butter sandwich, which he offered to her as a snack. She accepted it, then identified the presents beneath the tree that had been mislabeled. He helped her rewrap them properly, then sat back to identify

their handiwork with shimmering eyes. As she was leaving, William gave her a big hug, clinging tightly to her body.

“Thank you, Santa,” he told her. “Merry Christmas.”

“Right. Merry Christmas.” She waved him off of her. “Now go to bed before I bring you coal.”

“If Janet stops being so mean, you can bring me coal forever.” He grinned for her, suddenly looking much younger than he seemed. It was like the stress of his stepmother’s machinations had prematurely aged him, but now that weight was gone. She gave him a wave, then stuffed the whole sandwich in her mouth on her way out the door.

Death was reading the manual in the sleigh when she returned. Once they were airborne, she transformed back into her normal form and picked up the thermos. As she poured herself a mug of cocoa, she pondered again how Santa would have handled the whole affair. Perhaps it was some magic he possessed that she was unaware of, but it almost felt like the whole experience had been tailored to her particular strengths.

If so, to what purpose? That would mean that Santa had known that trouble was brewing, and that Death would take the sleigh. It seemed impossible to believe, so she thought back on the wisdom of the reaper and just let it go as she contemplated the night sky. She had been given a unique opportunity to help someone that hadn’t involved murdering someone else, though she had considered it.

“How did it go?” Death asked.

“The cookies sucked.” She slammed hot cocoa from the mug, marveling at how hot it felt against the back of her throat. “By not making you eat them, it’s almost like I did you a favor.”

“Aha! I see young William has gifted you with a sense of humor!” Death’s grin was contagious as he let out a booming laugh. “It’s almost like a Christmas miracle!”

In response, Lily chattered her teeth at him, then stuck out her tongue. Though she wouldn’t admit it out loud, she was starting to have fun.

“Next stop?” she asked.

Death nodded, then handed over the reins. "It's your turn," he declared with a smile.

She couldn't help it. With a laugh, she snapped the reins and Cerberus pulled them up into the sky, leaving a trail of smoking paw prints behind.

Christmas Present sat at the head of the table, smiling at Yuki and Mike while they filled up on meats, cheeses, and rolls. Yuki didn't dare let her attention wander away from the giant, who would occasionally lick her lips while watching Mike.

Conversation had been minimal, other than a general encouragement to eat. Christmas Present promised them a long journey, and they should be well fed before they began. Yuki didn't detect any animosity, but was expecting a betrayal of some sort. If not for the odd behavior and that strange scar on the giant's lower belly, she probably would have pin cushioned the woman a while ago.

Mike drank from a silvered goblet, then wiped his mouth with a napkin. He had put away an impressive amount of food, and Yuki watched a tiny spark jump across the top of his knuckles. "So you're one of the three spirits of Christmas. We met one of your siblings earlier."

Christmas Present chuckled, then tossed her hair. "Actually, you met several. You see, today is Christmas. My Christmas. Once it is over, I will join my brothers and we shall become the past together."

Yuki nodded. If Christmas Past really was a conglomerate of individual spirits, it would make sense how they had been able to split her and Mike into separate places and times. "Does that mean Christmas Future is actually several spirits as well?"

Christmas Present shook her head. "Potential spirits."

"Potential spirits?" Mike looked up from his meal. "How does that work?"

"That would be a limitation of your language. Just like a gift, each of us is an unopened box. We can be and are absolutely anything until we've been opened."

"I like the analogy," Mike told her. "Because I get the feeling that you're exactly what I wanted for Christmas."

Yuki felt the urge to chastise Mike for flirting, but she watched in fascination as the giant's face and chest burned a fiery crimson. Christmas Present seemed

friendly for now. If Mike wanted to flirt his way out of potential danger, then he was welcome to it.

In truth, she found the giant to be very pretty, which made her a little wary. She hadn't felt any sort of romantic or sexual feelings for many years now. It wasn't until the incident at the cabin where she had helped Mike get off to feed Dana that those feelings had emerged once again. Even then, the stirrings had been distant, but she had recognized them all the same. A part of her was waking as if from a long slumber, but it had skewed heavily toward the Caretaker himself.

"Tonight is going to be so much fun," Christmas Present declared, her voice filling the room. "An evening worth remembering."

"Speaking of which." Yuki set down her fork and wiped her mouth. "What exactly is your intention for us? Christmas Past seemed intent on harming us, and I am aware that you have been ordered to hunt us down."

The smile faded from Christmas Present's face. "You're right," she admitted. "I was sent to hunt you down, but can no longer remember why." Her hand slid beneath the fur-lined fabric of her robe and caressed the scar on her belly. "And when I caught you, I was supposed to take you away."

"Well, maybe we should just spend some time together instead?" Mike clapped his hands, a hint of worry in his eyes. "After all, it's Christmas, right? Nobody wants to be sad on Christmas!"

"That's right!" Christmas Present stood, then adjusted her crown. "And we've got so many things to see!"

"See?" Yuki looked at Mike. "Like what?"

"Come, Caretaker." Christmas Present stepped toward the two of them and extended her arm. "Hold onto my robes, and we shall travel anon."

Mike looked at Yuki, then flicked his eyes toward the spirit. She nodded, then moved to join him. Standing before the ghost of Christmas Present, she took Mike by the hand and they both grabbed onto the fabric that dangled from the spirit's arm.

It was as if someone grabbed Yuki by the heart and pulled. Her breath left her body as the world turned into a blur. Dazzling colors spun around them for the span of a breath, and they appeared on a frost covered hillside. Down below, smoke rose from a small cabin, and the nearby barn was lit with Christmas lights.

“What are we doing here?” asked Mike.

“There are many ways to measure a man,” Christmas Present replied, some of the cheer gone from her voice. “You see, I’m perfectly aware that your magic has altered me. But yours isn’t the only magic making demands.”

For just a moment, her sparkling eyes flickered black, causing Yuki and Mike to step away.

“It would seem that I have been given a dangerous choice,” she informed them, her eyes changing back. “To oppose my master and risk destruction, or to put my fate in your hands. You see, I desire you, Mike Radley. I wish to make you mine, to feel the heat of your body against my skin, to possess you in all the ways a woman can take a man.”

“But?” Mike’s voice squeaked a little.

“That’s what your magic has done to me. It has given me desires of my own. And I would see what your influence has done to others.” She shook her head, her smile reappearing. “So, come! Let us see what transpires in yon cabin!”

She waved the sleeve of her robe, obscuring their vision for a moment. They now stood inside the cabin, surrounded by hordes of rats who sat throughout the house. The rafters were packed with them, and most of the furniture had been obscured by their bodies. Up above, Emery could be seen sitting amongst the rodents with a sprig of mistletoe taped to the top of his head.

“Hello!” He greeted them, then flew down in their direction. Stunned, Yuki couldn’t figure out how they had teleported to the cabin until the imp passed through them to land on the kitchen counter. Reggie the rat king had emerged from a small doorway with a wreath of red and green tinsel wrapped around his crown.

“So we’re not really here?” Mike asked, wandering away from the spirit.

“We are,” she said. “These are not the shadows of things that have been, but of what transpires now.”

“What about the time lock?” Yuki asked.

The ghost chuckled. “We are still in it. Traveling as spirits, we are not beholden to the linear nature of time and have stepped outside of the lock. As such, this party had started before you came to the North Pole, and there is naught you could do to alter its course upon returning.”

Reggie held up his hands and waved at the other rats as a bunch more poured through the cabinets. It was almost as though the rats had chewed portals through most of the cabinetry, and the cabin was filling up.

The rat king greeted nearby rodents with sparkling eyes and friendly waves. The rats that came through the cabinets ran up to the rats at the cabin and greeted them with warm hugs. Ever since Eulalie had become the Rat Queen as a bit of a joke, a section of the rat kingdom had gone to live with her in the Library. Though there was nothing keeping the two fiefdoms from interacting, Yuki would bet this was the first time so many of them had gathered in one place.

Reggie had been a bit hurt when the split had first occurred, but then realized it was beneficial for his kingdom as a whole. Not only did this allow his subjects to spread out a bit, it also meant that the odds of them being wiped out completely went down drastically. Even if the house was vaporized, the Library and its occupants would remain to rebuild.

“Looks like we’re missing quite the party,” Mike said, pointing at the kitchen table. Fruit, bread, and giant wheels of cheese had been set out for everyone, and the rats were drinking some sort of cider from tiny tea sets. A roaring fire burned in the fireplace, and the front door opened to reveal Bigfoot wearing a large, white beard.

“Ho ho ho,” he declared, holding a bag under his arm. “Merry Christmas!”

Young rats gathered at Bigfoot's feet, milling about as he knelt down to hand out gifts. They scrambled up into his fur as he laughed, doing his best to give them their presents. Most of the gifts were dollar store toys for children, but the young rats were able to wear them like accessories. More than a few rats sported slap bracelets as fancy belts and one of them had scored a set of earrings that was now worn as a necklace.

Christmas music played through a speaker that sat by the front door. Reggie was in the middle of handing out some red cheese wheels when his nose twitched and he looked up toward the second floor of the cabin.

Up above, Eulalie had emerged from her room. Sleek black legs unfurled from beneath her as she climbed over the railing and flipped over to land on the main floor. The rats squeaked at her in greeting and spread apart to give her some room.

“Merry Christmas, everyone!” Eulalie gave everyone a wave. She wore a garish Christmas sweater adorned with a patchwork tree. Tucked against her belly

and wrapped in silken webs was an egg with ruby spirals. Firelight reflected off of the egg, but Yuki was certain that some of the light she saw was coming from beneath its shell.

“Merry Christmas, my queen.” Reggie took off his crown and gave her a regal bow. “And well met.”

“This isn’t the roleplaying server.” She winked at him and held out a hand. “You can just be yourself.”

“Roleplaying...server?” Reggie’s whiskers trembled in confusion.

“Just some web humor. Don’t mind me.” She laughed.

“How is the child?” Reggie asked. “Do you think she’ll hatch soon?”

“We’ve got plenty of time.” She rubbed the egg and smiled. “Though I can feel her vibrate, sometimes.”

“Where’s the beer?” Bigfoot stood, causing the rats to scatter. A few remained behind, putting braids in the hair by his shoulders. “I didn’t see the cooler outside.”

A few of the rats contemplated their tea cups, then skulked away. In the corner of the room, Yuki saw a rat move a pillow to block the sight of crushed cans on the floor.

“We can have someone make a beer run.” Eulalie looked around at the rats. “There’s probably some at the Library.”

“Speaking of, I thought Sofia was gonna stop by.” Bigfoot sniffed, then scratched his nose. “Kinda wanted someone my own size to talk to.”

“Ooh, do you have a crush?” Eulalie batted her eyes. “Does Uncle Foot like the cyclops?”

Bigfoot laughed. “She’s okay, just wanted someone my own size to hang with. You know Beth keeps me busy enough, but she decided to go home for a bit. Had something she needed to do.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard the rumors.” Eulalie smiled, then picked up a piece of cheese. “But back to your original question, Sofia won’t be making it tonight. She’s...tied up with some unexpected business.”

“Busy? On Christmas?” Bigfoot shook his head. “Woman’s a workaholic.”

“She’s enjoying herself. I promise.” There was an odd twinkle in Eulalie’s eye when she said this.

Christmas Present made herself at home, and grabbed one of the cheese wheels from the table. Upon touching it, the wheel doubled in her hands, leaving the original behind. She bit down into it and nodded her approval. “High quality,” she declared.

The gathering progressed for quite some time, and Mike wandered through the cabin while Yuki followed. It didn’t take long before he wandered outside. He walked over to the new barn and put his hands on his waist.

“You okay?” Yuki came up from behind him, her arms resting across her belly. There was no chill in the air, despite the frozen surroundings. Whatever mechanism they were traveling by didn’t convey the chill that should have been in the air.

“I guess,” he told her. “At least they aren’t all swimming at the spring, right?”

She nodded, then moved closer to him. Though the barn was new, it dawned on her that this was the last place Mike had seen Velvet alive, chasing after that bastard Leeds. She could see his pain through the way he stood, could smell it in the air like cloves and dying flowers. He was putting up a brave front about it, which was a feeling she knew all too well.

Hesitating for a moment, she stepped into him, wrapping her arms around his chest from behind. He tensed up at first, then pressed into her. Beneath the warmth of his skin, she could feel his magic swirling through him. It was like trying to hold a handful of butterflies, their fluttering wings sending ripples of power through her body.

Back when he had used his magic to electrify her, it had been nothing but pain and agony as it tore through her muscles and into the metal floor of the ductwork. Now, though, it reacted to her touch, and moved as if to caress her. No stranger to the duality of magic, she couldn’t help but wonder; if his magic could bring so much misery through touch alone, how much joy could it also bring? Would it be large enough to fill that gaping void in her soul, the one she contemplated on a daily basis?

They said time heals all wounds, but she was tired of waiting. Her heart was now beating in time with those tiny surges of power, and his magic was still inside

his body. They were both survivors of a special kind of heartache. Maybe it was time for her to take that first step toward leaving Emily behind forever.

“Mike?” She wrapped her hands around his chest and rested her cheek in the small of his back, her thoughts on the words he had spoken earlier. Once upon a time, she had been an artist, a poet, a traveler. She had conquered continents on foot, had battled armies of stone, had even head-butted an Oni over a bottle of saki. But most of all, she had been a survivor.

Emily had brought out the best and worst in her. Now the person she was today was just a shell of the person she used to be, going through the motions of living. The rage and anger were largely gone, but had left a chasm she had yet to fill.

“I thought you didn’t need to bury your head in someone to smell them.” He put his hands over her wrists and squeezed.

“I know what it’s like to hurt,” she told him. “Like you do, right now. I’m not saying that you should stop, but I do want to say this: don’t end up like me. I...I wish I was doing better.”

He turned around in her arms and contemplated her with dark eyes that glowed from within. Even now, she could feel his magic radiating from him like warmth from a lantern.

“Want to talk about it?” He asked.

She shook her head no. Talking had taken her as far as she was going to get, and she needed something more. She lifted a hand to his cheek and moved in, closing her eyes as her lips approached his.

When their lips touched, she felt his magic intensify and press against her. His hands tightened around her waist, but the sudden pressure of magical energy from behind them caused her to break the kiss and spin around.

Christmas Present stood about ten feet away, a smile on her face. She clapped her hands together slowly, then approached.

“God-damned cock-blocking holiday,” she heard Mike mutter.

“I thought you were watching the party.” Yuki sneered as her heart slammed shut again, the moment lost.

“I still am.” She gestured over toward the barn. Up on the roof, Eulalie stood gazing at the stars, her hands on Velvet’s egg. “You see, we’re not just here for the party. I want to see the ripples you’ve left behind in this particular pond.”

When the spirit snapped her fingers, they teleported to the roof. Eulalie cradled her sister’s egg, singing something under her breath. Her eyes shimmered in the starlight, her lower lip trembling.

“I wish you were still here,” the Arachne said, her eyes on the stars. “Or mom. Or even dad. I hate how alone I feel in a room full of people. I hate that a year ago, you and dad were still here. Everything changed so fast, I feel like I’m a different person now. Almost like the old me died, and I’m all that remains.”

Yuki felt Mike tense up beside her, so she took his hand and squeezed it.

“Ah, here it is. The secret misery behind the holidays. Missing the ones we’ve lost.” Christmas Present’s eyes had turned black, and dark veins sprouted along her cheeks. “If joy were measurable, I wonder just how much of it you’ve robbed from this beautiful creature.”

“Eat my whole, fucking ass.” Mike spun to face the giant. “If I hadn’t come along, Leeds would have torn this entire place apart. Maybe Velvet would have survived, maybe not. This is the same shit Christmas Past tried, and it didn’t work.”

Christmas Present’s left eye twitched, and a heavy presence descended on them both. The world dimmed as a harsh buzzing sound filled the air, and Yuki moved between Mike and the giant, summoning foxfire into her hands. The giant smiled, revealing teeth that had elongated into fangs.

A quiet hum filled the clearing, broken by the occasional hooting sound. They all turned their attention toward the forest where tiny lights had appeared.

It was the Nirumbi. The small humanoids marched forward from the forest, each one clutching a tiny LED in their hands that flickered like a candle. A group of Nirumbi children led the way, each one carrying the edge of a giant piece of fabric that was rolled up between them.

Yuki realized that the Nirumbi were humming the tune of *Silent Night*.

“It took me a while to teach it to them,” Bigfoot spoke from down below. With a grunt, he leapt onto the roof of the barn and sat next to his niece.

“What are they doing?” Eulalie asked.

“Bringing you your Christmas present.” He placed a large hand on her shoulder.

Yuki chanced a glance at Christmas Present. The giantess’ features twitched as the darkness receded.

The Nirumbi came to a halt beneath the barn, and the children unfurled the fabric. It looked to be woven from wool, and in the middle of the cloth was a beautiful geometric design that looked like a cross between a spider and a woman.

“I don’t understand,” Eulalie whispered. “They made me a blanket?”

“Keep watching,” Bigfoot whispered.

Nirumbi warriors moved forward from the group, clutching their spears tightly as they turned toward the cloth. As one, they knelt down around the children, setting down their weapons. Nirumbi elders, dressed in fine robes, surrounded the warriors. Each one held a wooden bowl full of a dark liquid.

“That’s blood,” Eulalie said.

“Deer blood,” Bigfoot added. “They’ve stopped using their own.”

One by one, the elders anointed the faces of the warriors, drawing the symbol around their tight features as the tribe continued to hum. Once finished, the warriors turned to face Eulalie, grim determination on their faces.

Satisfied with their work, the elders turned to each other and repeated the process. As they finished, more members of the tribe emerged from the shadows, revealing that their faces had been painted similarly.

“What is this?” Eulalie whispered.

“The Nirumbi decided some time ago that it was time to part with the way of the warrior and embrace the role of the protector.” Bigfoot smiled, then wiped a glistening tear from his face. “They believe that the spirit of your sister protects them, and she is now the guardian spirit of the spider tribe.”

Eulalie was speechless.

Yuki heard Mike sniffing next to her, but didn’t look to see if he was as moved as the Arachne. Instead, she turned her attention to Christmas Present, whose face had reverted to normal, the heavy presence fading.

“Perhaps seeds of joy can be grown from the ashes of despair.” The ghost stroked her chin thoughtfully, all signs of corruption gone. “How soon could I forget?”

“To be fair, you’re less than a day old,” Yuki told her.

The spirit chuckled, laugh lines blossoming next to her eyes. “Do not let my age fool you. After all, I am full of the wisdom of the season.”

“Full of something,” Mike muttered next to Yuki.

A dark look crossed the spirit’s face, and she grabbed Mike and Yuki by the hand.

“Somewhere else,” she declared in a hollow voice, then yanked them across time and space. The glowing lights the Nirumbi held spiraled like fireflies before disappearing, and now they stood outside of a two story home.

“Ah, now this is more like it.” Christmas Present’s pupils dilated as she stomped toward the home, tendrils of smoke swirling below her feet. She passed through the front door, leaving Mike and Yuki outside.

“Where are we?” Yuki asked.

“Dana’s parents.” A dark look crossed Mike’s face. “The spirit is losing control. Just like Christmas Past, it seems to pull energy from sadness and anger.”

“Seems that way.” They stood outside in the whirling snow, the flakes passing through their bodies. Yuki looked up at the house. “So what do we do?”

Mike nodded, then looked at Yuki. “I’m going to try and seduce her. I think my magic is the only thing keeping her from going full dark side on us, so maybe I can tilt the scales in our favor by flooding her system.”

“I agree.” Yuki kept her thoughts on his word choice to herself. She didn’t know what sort of chaos would ensue as a result of such a union, but had a pretty good guess it would get messy one way or another. “What do you need from me?”

When Mike laughed, it sounded almost like a bark. “Keep her from crushing me between her thighs, maybe?”

“You almost sound excited,” she said.

“Have you seen how big she is?” Mike winked. “I’ve come to terms with my unique skills, and have decided this is a mountain I need to climb. She’s twice my

height, after all.” He let out a heavy breath, his anxiety breaking through.” Now c’mon. Let’s see what sort of special guilt trip she has planned for me here.”

Mike disappeared through the front door. Yuki stood outside the front door of the home, wondering briefly what it would feel like to crush him between her own thighs, then followed him through.

The interior of Dana’s home smelled of scented candles and ham. An old sofa in the front room was surrounded by a pair of ebony tables stacked high with worn copies of *Popular Mechanics*, and a half-finished puzzle was on the coffee table. Mike could tell that the room had been recently vacuumed. In the corner of the room, a Roomba covered in stickers sat on its charger.

“Dinner is this way!” Christmas Present declared from up ahead.

It certainly is, Mike thought, magic gathering in his fingertips. He had tried to play it cool with Yuki in regards to his intentions with the giant, but his stomach was a mixture of fear and excitement.

On the one hand, he had always had a thing for tall, muscular women. He was certain that any armchair psychiatrist could take a guess as to why. Sex with Sofia had always been fun because of her height, but Christmas Present was at least a few feet taller. It was like she had been built specifically for this fantasy of his, and he suspected that was his magic’s doing.

On the other hand, he had sensed the darkness dwelling inside her on the roof of the barn. His magic had been squished away as her dark side manifested, and his precognition had been put on high alert. In terms of size and strength alone, the giant could easily kill him if she wanted, and he suspected that she almost had.

His plan to use his magic to drive the darkness out came with plenty of risk. If not for Yuki’s presence, he would already be sweating bullets at his chances of success.

Upon entering the dining room, he saw that Christmas Present had taken a seat on a chair in the corner, her head nearly scraping the ceiling. Sitting at a hand-carved wooden table were an older couple, Dana, and Quetzalli. Dana’s father looked scholarly in a sweater vest and glasses, but the calluses on his hands revealed otherwise. Her mother was in a pretty blue dress and wore a cheap necklace that said Happy Holidays in beads.

Dana wore a sweater and jeans, and Quetzalli had on a purple sweater dress. Her hair was parted high and clipped around the sides of her head to avoid draping over her invisible horn. Mike thought he could spot the edges of the enchanted napkin ring that concealed it.

An awkward silence hung over the table as everyone ate. Dana was surreptitiously palming bites of food off of her fork and slipping them into a napkin on her lap.

“So, you two met at Dana’s internship?” Dana’s mother forced a smile as she took a bite of ham, then looked over at her husband. “I think it’s great that you’re making new friends.”

“Dana here hasn’t told us much about this internship.” Her father set down his fork. “Maybe you’d care to enlighten us.”

“We all signed a non-disclosure agreement.” Quetzalli’s plate was loaded down with food, and she speared a bunch of green beans with her fork. “They even keep us in a top-secret location.”

“Is that true?” Dana’s father didn’t look convinced.

“Ick ith.” Quetzalli’s mouth was too full of vegetables to respond properly.

Mike looked at Dana to see her reaction. Though she had fed shortly before going home, her eyes already had that dull look that could be so off putting. At worst, her parents would assume their little girl was on drugs, not realizing that she was actually dead.

The conversation was grim as Dana seemed to ignore her parents while Quetzalli did most of the talking. Dana’s father kept throwing odd looks at his daughter while her mother worked hard at being polite.

“Now this—” the giant began.

“No, fuck you, I get this one.” Mike moved to stand by Dana and made his voice deep. “Ho ho ho, you got this girl killed and now it’s ruining her afterlife.”

“Mike.” Yuki moved next to him, concern in her voice, but he held up his hand for silence.

“No, wait, what else? Ah, yes. Eternal damnation, made her eat your essence, ho ho ho.” He stared hard at the ghost of Christmas Present. Her soft features were already beginning to harden, confirming his theory that

antagonizing the spirit brought out whatever influence the Krampus had. It was time to make his move.

“So then, you acknowledge that you’ve wronged her?” The spirit’s eyes were already fading to black.

“What’s happened between Dana and myself is nobody else’s business. Do you know why?” He hovered his hands on Dana’s shoulders, making it look like he was touching her. “Because we’ve talked about this at length. She doesn’t hold me responsible, and I’ve promised to do anything possible to return her to normal. She’s not some victim of an official Mike Radley Dastardly plot; she’s part of my family.”

The darkness receded, and Christmas Present gestured at the table. “Well then what is this? You can see that her parents are hurting!”

“She cut out her parents long before I entered her life. In fact, her coming here tonight was my idea. I want her to have these ties, to be part of both the old world and the new.” He trickled magic throughout his whole body, being careful not to draw attention to it. Even so, Yuki seemed to sense this and casually moved to stand on the other side of Quetzalli. “What happens next is up to Dana.”

“But then why did you—” Christmas Present’s eyes went wide as Mike pulled off his shirt. “What are you doing?”

“They can’t see us, right?” He tossed his shirt onto the table and watched it vanish through the ham. Flexing his shoulders, he stretched his arms high, revealing the lean muscle of his shoulders and back. Ever since he had started working out, the nymph magic had altered his body so that his muscles looked as if they were cut from marble. Other than the scars along his side and hip, his torso was lean and flawless.

“Yes, but this is...” The spirit seemed lost for words as she stared at Mike’s abs.

Mike was startled when he felt Yuki move behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and dragged her claws over his belly.

“Mmm. Nice and firm.” There was a purr to her voice. “And you’re sure they can’t see us? We could do...anything?”

“No, this is wrong, I...” Christmas Present seemed confused. The room darkened momentarily as the world rumbled around them, but Mike could sense his magic inside the spirit, dancing about as if to be let free.

“That’s right,” he told her. “We could do anything, right in front of them, and they wouldn’t know it.” He was pushing his luck now, and a ball of ice was forming in his gut. The darkness inside the spirit was lashing out, causing Christmas Present’s left eyelid to flutter.

The scene around them melted, and they were now standing in Ratu’s sanctuary at the center of the Labyrinth. The naga was sitting on a chaise lounge with a cup of tea in one hand as she addressed Opal, who sat in a large plastic tub.

Opal’s features were glossy, like melted wax. At the center of her body, a glass vial hovered roughly where her heart would be. She was using her hands to sign at Ratu, who had Cerulea on her shoulder for translation.

“She said it feels hot,” Cerulea told her.

“That would be the new enchantment,” Ratu said, her voice tired. “Residual magic from using raw materials to repair and strengthen her core. It’ll fade, but you’ll be stronger than ever.”

Distracted by Ratu, Mike wasn’t able to get out of the way when Christmas Present grabbed him by the neck and lifted him into the air. Her cheeks were flushed and she was panting, but darkness hovered about her like a cloud. Yuki climbed onto the giant’s back and tried to wrap her arms around her neck.

“Naughty...so naughty...” Christmas Present’s face spasmed as she struggled to focus on Mike.

Gasping for air, Mike clamped his hands down on the spirit’s thick wrists and unleashed his magic. It spiraled around the ghost’s muscular arms and then entered her open mouth, flooding her with magic.

The scene flashed again, and now they were standing in an apartment. It was empty, but there was a decorated tree in the corner. The room shifted, and now they were in a hotel lobby. *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* blared over the speakers as a brutal storm swirled outside the glass doors. They continued like this for several moments, teleporting to random locations, until Mike was dropped on the ground.

When he hit the floor, he was in a dark room lit by a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. There was a chill in the air, and he stood to see that

Christmas Present and Yuki had vanished. The dirt floor and warped floorboards above his head put him in a basement, but where?

“What the fuck?” He rubbed his arms and turned, then froze. In the corner was a wooden chair with metal bands bolted to its frame. A human figure sat in the chair, but large chunks of them were missing. Instead of blood and guts, it was just empty holes with veins and muscles exposed, as if they had been casually dissected and the pieces lost. Dark spots like ash swirled through and around the figure, and its head was missing from the nose up.

Mouth frozen in a soundless scream, the figure pulled against their bindings. Without a head, it was impossible to be certain, but Mike recognized a metal ring on one of the hands. The last time he had seen it was on a man he thought long dead.

“Amir?” His voice was barely a whisper, and the figure flinched as if struck. Flooded with terror, Mike backed away. An icy sensation swirled through his body as a figure came into the room from the stairs. Their features were obscured by the large hat they wore. When they looked up, the pupils were crimson in color.

“Who is there?” they hissed, looking directly at Mike. It was almost like the stranger was sucking the energy from the room.

Stunned, Mike was grabbed from behind by a powerful hand, and the scene vanished. He tumbled over backward, and was now in the middle of a massive office party. Surrounded by men and women who had been drinking heavily, he stumbled to his feet and flinched when a woman walked through him.

“Didn’t mean to drop you.” The voice behind him was dripping with sensuality, and he turned to see that Christmas Present stood in the middle of the room, her robes pulled open to reveal her naked body beneath.

“Where’s Yuki?” he demanded, aware that Christmas Present’s eyes were now glowing blue. It was the color of his own magic. The darkness within the spirit had been compressed into a tiny ball deep inside.

“Here.” Yuki’s head popped up over Christmas Present’s shoulder. She was clinging to the ghost’s robe, and there was a strained look on her face. The kitsune dropped to the ground and collapsed.

“What did you do to her?” Mike asked.

“That last temporal distortion was quite tricky,” Christmas Present replied. “We passed through a rough patch, which is how I lost you.”

“I’m okay,” Yuki added. “Just need to catch my breath.”

Mike nodded, then looked at the spirit, who was moving toward him. He could sense her intent as it washed over him, and his magic responded. She stood at almost ten feet now, her head missing the ceiling by less than a foot. Moving with purpose, she clamped her hands on his sides and lifted him into the air, then pressed him against the wall.

“You’re mine now, little man.” Her voice was husky, the want clear in her eyes. Mike’s cock surged to life, now uncomfortable in the confines of his pants while she forced her body against his. For a moment, his entire world was a pair of massive breasts, but he was able to shift his head upward to get some air.

Impatient fingers pulled off his pants and boxers, stripping him down so that the fabric dangled from his ankles. When the spirit grabbed his cock, she let out a tiny squeal.

“This is the first time I’ve gotten to open something on Christmas,” she said, stroking his erection.

“This is my first time being a Christmas present,” he replied, then awkwardly squeezed her breasts with his hands. They were so big, he couldn’t figure out where to touch first. Underboob? Start at the sides and work his way up? Concentrate on the nipple?

His magic snapped through him like a whip, tuning him into her needs and desires. He used one hand to send out sparks that danced across one of her nipples while he sucked the other into his mouth. It was huge, with an areola the size of his face. There was still some awkwardness, but he was now making proper progress.

Blood rushed to his head as Christmas Present whipped him about, then set him on a nearby table. She was grinding her crotch on one of his legs as he sat on the edge, his feet dangling over the ground.

She loomed over him, using a pair of fingers to stroke him. He groaned and leaned back, allowing her better access.

Off to the side, Yuki pushed herself up until she was sitting. She narrowed her eyes for a moment, then let out a small sigh.

“You should try sucking it,” she said.

“What a delightful idea.” Christmas Present put her head in Mike’s lap and licked his cock tentatively before sucking it into her mouth. Her massive tongue caressed the underside of his shaft as she easily took his full length.

“Yeah, that’s a good ghost.” Mike put his hands on the back of her head, but didn’t bother guiding her. Even when she took his full length, he just barely passed the back of her tongue. It was strange to experience a blowjob where he didn’t occupy so much oral real estate, and she was doing well enough with her tongue alone.

Christmas Present placed a hand over his mouth. Lifting her head from his lap, he saw the devilish grin on her face.

“I think you’ve got it backwards.” As she rose, she grabbed him by the legs and rolled him onto his back. His legs were pushed together and then upward, causing his cock to pop free beneath.

“What are you doing?” Mike looked around his legs and saw that her robe was fully open now. Massive labia that looked like Christmas ribbon dangled from between the spirit’s legs.

“You’re not in charge here,” she informed him. “After all, today belongs to me.”

Shifting forward, she easily rose her hips above his and pressed her body into his. She was standing at the very edge of the table, leaning forward slightly. As their bodies became one, he had a sudden fear that the table would collapse beneath their combined weight.

Pausing only to aim his cock properly, Christmas Present lowered herself onto him. She groaned when he penetrated her, wiggling her hips to figure out a better angle. Her hands were on Mike’s thighs, pinning him in place.

“Holy shit,” he muttered while pushing on her breasts. She moaned as he touched her, unaware that this was an act of self preservation. Not only was she giant, but her body was solid muscle. He wondered how much of that was his own fault. Unaware of what she was like before combining with his magic, he could only assume that previous incarnations hadn’t required so much muscle tone.

Christmas Present was thrusting herself against him now. His magic circulated through his body, seeking to strengthen his limbs for the purpose of sex.

He felt something thick bounce off the top of his groin and took a peek between his legs to see that the spirit had an oversized clitoris, like the tip of a thumb.

His body seized on this information. Shifting one arm between his legs, he stroked that elongated nub, tickling it with magical sparks that disappeared into Christmas Present. The spirit groaned, her cadence slow as she forced herself down, the entire cock now inside her. Her eyes were closed as she chewed on her lip. Those thick curls partially blocked his view, but he could make out her face without any trouble.

Usually, his magic drove both parties into a state of hyper stimulation, but it seemed to know that further encouraging the giant might kill him. The magic in his body connected with hers and created an odd pulsing sensation that moved back and forth between them. It rewarded Christmas Present whenever she matched the rhythm, but Mike didn't know how much longer he would be able to hold out. He planted his between his partner's breasts, resting it against her sternum. Those gorgeous, dangling orbs swung so close to his face that stuck out his tongue to lick them.

The table creaked under their weight as the party continued around them. People passing by would occasionally set beverages that passed right through them, unaware that Mike was getting dominated in the middle of their office party. His legs were trembling now as the giant continued, and it occurred to him that she may have his stamina.

There was movement from above, and then Yuki was there. Sitting with her legs on either side of Mike's head, she was now using her arms to brace the giant by her shoulders. The spirit paused for a moment, but continued once she realized that the kitsune was only there to help.

"The trouble you get into," Yuki muttered, looking down at Mike. "This is the second time I've had to help you fuck somebody."

Whatever witty response he had prepared vanished when he felt a tingling all along his shaft. Puzzled, he looked down and saw that electrical charges were building up all along his legs. They were red and green, just like the ghost's labia, and had begun the migration from her body to his.

"Uh oh," he whispered. Up above, the grunting woman sounded slightly more frantic as the table groaned beneath them. It had to be a fixture of the spirit's mind, because there was no way an ordinary piece of furniture could handle such abuse.

More sparks appeared, and Yuki stared at them with wide eyes as they migrated along Mike's stomach and vanished around his torso.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked.

Mike nodded, looking up into her green eyes. He couldn't even reply. Christmas Present was forcing herself onto both of them now, chasing her impending orgasm as twinkling lights filled the room. All of his physical energy was focused on keeping from getting flattened beneath her, and his brain was distracted by the pleasurable surge running through his entire pelvis.

This mountain of a woman was about to blow her top, and he was going to get caught up in it.

Christmas Present took a deep breath and held it, her face turning red. Her hips now slammed into him hard enough that his back felt the impact. Yuki fell forward on her hands, her body now acting as a second table while the giant's breasts pressed into her back.

"How is she so heavy?" she asked, wincing with the impact of every thrust. "She's a fucking ghost!"

It was a good question, but Mike didn't have the capacity to ponder it. The pressure had increased, and a desperate look appeared on the spirit's face. Little grunts blasted free of her lips with each thrust, and it was clear she was having trouble reaching her climax. The friction between them decreased drastically as Christmas Present's juices soaked his crotch.

If he didn't get her off soon, she was going to squish him. He couldn't maintain any sort of contact with her clitoris, and had pulled the arm back to help support Yuki from beneath. Closing his eyes, he grabbed hold of the magic deep inside and gathered it in his lower body. It throbbed like a beating heart, then sent a rush of warmth to his cock. Expecting his magic to enter the giant and make her cum, he was surprised to feel swelling all along his groin.

Groaning, his cock expanded to fill the spirit. It was like his erection was having an erection of its own, expanding in girth and becoming even harder. The slick, interior walls of Christmas Present's pussy suddenly pressed against him from all sides, and the spirit gasped above him.

"Whatever you're doing is working," Yuki grunted, her face now inches from his belly. The kitsune's breasts hovered over his face, occasionally brushing against his nose. "I don't know how much longer I can hold out."

Inside Christmas Present's vagina, he felt a static-like build up as her magic bound itself to the head of his cock. It was like a magnetic attraction, and the air around them became heavy as blinking lights manifested in the air.

"Is that you?" Yuki gasped, watching the lights. They were spinning around the table, scattering throughout the room and disappearing between the attendees.

"I...don't..." It was getting hard to breathe as the giant leaned on both of them and let out a roar as their magic connected. He had tapped directly into her well of sexual energy, and his magic flowed up into Christmas Present.

The laughter of the Christmas party around them turned into shouts of surprise when someone tripped and fell against the table. One of the legs snapped, sending food and Mike toward the ground. Instead of falling, strong arms wrapped around Mike's back, holding him and Yuki in place as Christmas Present thrust herself against him, coating his crotch in sticky fluid as she came.

A dark swarm of energy squeezed out of the spirit's mouth, hovering over them like an angry storm cloud. It formed into the shape of a devil's head, complete with fangs and a long tongue that attempted to lash out at Mike. When it made contact with his skin, magical sparks leapt from his body and crawled up on the devil's face. There was a loud popping sound as the swarm fizzled out and turned into black sand that vanished when it struck the ground.

Mike struggled to catch his breath, but the magic he had poured into Christmas Present was now on its way back. He was now supporting Yuki's body with his arms, squeezing her torso to hold her in place. The magic expanded in his balls, circling through his groin. The sensation surrounded him in a field of energy, and he opened his eyes just long enough to see that the sparks now danced along Yuki's body, too.

The world dimmed around them as he exploded, coming so hard inside Christmas Present that his every muscle in his body contracted. Torrents of semen pumped into the ghost, filling her with sperm and magic. Red, green, and white lightning danced all along their bodies as the magical cycle began.

Christmas Present fell over backward pulling Mike and Yuki with her. Mike slipped out of her just before she hit the ground, Yuki tumbling free of his arms at the last second.

“By the gods, I have never experienced such pleasure!” Christmas Present brushed the hair from her face and smiled. “Such joy, wrapped into such a tiny moment!”

Mike stood over her, his cock so engorged it was almost painful. Panting, he put his hands on his hips and stared at her. The spirit was a mess, her hair splayed around and beneath her like a cape. She laughed, one massive hand toying with her clitoris. The magic was flowing away from her and drifting through the party like fireflies.

His back hurt, and his legs were sore from being folded. He was fairly certain that he would have bruises, but his dick was still so hard, it felt like it would break. “We’re not done,” he told her, and snapped his fingers.

Stray sparks around the room coalesced onto the giant, and she moaned, spreading her legs for him. He knelt between them and slid his cock between her pussy ribbons, sighing as their sweet heat enveloped him once more. Burying his face between her breasts, he pounded her from above, concentrating on that swirling mass of energy at her core.

The magic pulsed back and forth between them, and when she tried to sit up, he found the strength to push her back down. The spirit cried out in joy, singing Christmas carols as he filled her once more, making sure to push his magic up into every nook and cranny of her being. With a loud cry, he blasted her insides with enough spooze and magic that he nearly blacked out.

His cock shrank to its normal, flaccid size as he went limp on top of her body. The ghost of Christmas Present wrapped him up in her arms and let out a sigh, a few dark clouds dissipating from her breath like fog. They made a growling sound before vanishing, and the last of the Krampus’ influence was finally gone.

“I have decided,” she declared. “This is the season of giving, not taking. We should bring joy unto others and not focus only on the pleasure we bring to ourselves.”

“Is that code for you’re officially on our side?” Yuki sat on her knees, a tense look on her face. She was fidgeting with a strand of hair.

The giant nodded, then reached out a hand. “Touch my fingers,” she whispered.

Yuki grabbed the offered digits, and the room melted away. The new room that appeared looked different than the others. It was a large bedroom with a

massive bed, and all of the furniture was hand carved from wood. Large windows looked up into the sky, the Northern Lights dancing overhead. A fire roared in a hearth big enough to drive a car through, and there was a Christmas tree in the corner. A hole had been cut in the floor, the trees roots sunk deep into the soil beneath.

“Where are we?” Mike asked.

“I have brought you somewhere safe. In doing so, the Krampus will know that I no longer serve him. I am afraid that this means that my powers are now limited, as I no longer serve the master of this realm.” The giant patted Mike on the head, then shifted out from beneath him. She belted her robes and chuckled. “This has been enlightening and fun, Caretaker, but I must take my leave and contribute in whatever manner I may.”

“Where are you going?” Yuki glared at the spirit with an intensity that Mike found surprising.

“I have much to do. I may be free of his foul influence, but my siblings are not. It is a dark night for the North Pole, and I would help be the light that reclaims it.” She turned from them when the door to the bedroom opened and a woman walked in.

“By Santa’s beard,” whispered the newcomer, a hand at her lips. She was an older woman with her hair tucked up into a bun, and she wore a red and green negligee that left little to the imagination. “Christmas Present, is that really you?”

“Aye.” The spirit knelt on one knee and bowed her head. “I am free of the dark influence of the Krampus, and seek to make amends. I came here to find you and beg your assistance.”

“And who are...these?” The woman frowned, her train of thought derailed as she stared at Mike’s naked body.

“I was sent by the Krampus to remove them by any means necessary. They were my prey, but are now our allies.” Christmas Present turned and winked at Mike.

“I’m Mike, this is Yuki.” Mike, realizing the woman looked uncomfortable, covered his crotch. “We, uh...”

The woman shook her head. “It’s none of my business. If you’re here to help save my husband, I don’t care how well dressed you are. You two look tired,

so please make yourself at home.” She pointed to the bed. “I have much to discuss with this spirit before she...wait, how are you a woman?”

Christmas Present chuckled. “It’s been an interesting night. Fear not, Caretaker, for you are in the presence of the lady of the North Pole, Mrs. Claus. She is the one creature the Krampus fears above all others.”

“Which is why he’s holding my elves hostage to keep me locked away in here.” Mrs. Claus’ face turned red as she scowled at the floor. “Two-horned butt sniffer.”

“Come, mother. Let us discuss what we both know. Once these two are fully rested, I believe they will be a valuable asset to our efforts.”

“Hmm.” Mrs. Claus looked doubtful, but she nodded. “I’ll bring you two some food in a couple of hours. Haven’t been in the mood to bake tonight, but I’ll throw something together. Both of you look too skinny. Young man, feel free to find your clothes and actually wear them.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mike’s reply slipped out of him almost subconsciously.

Mrs. Claus and Christmas Present left, the spirit ducking to fit beneath the door. Once the door was closed, Mike let out a breath and took a few steps toward the bed. He sat on the edge of the mattress, his feet dangling just above the ground.

“So that actually happened,” he muttered, then looked at Yuki. She was staring at the door, her hands rubbing at the fabric over her thighs. “Hey, are you okay?”

The kitsune let out a breath and walked toward him, then put her hand against his chest. With a light push, she shoved him onto the bed.

“Yuki?” He watched in amazement as she hiked her robes up to reveal her thighs, then crawled on top of him. Her tails fanned out over his legs, tickling his skin.

“I thought they’d never leave. You’d better have some more juice in you,” she told him, then moved her face in front of his. He could sense it now that she was close, residual magic from his sexual encounter with the giant. It had gone everywhere, and it was no surprise that the kitsune had been caught in the crossfire. Deep in her chest, he could feel it tensing up, ready to pounce at a moment’s notice.

“I...might need a minute,” he admitted, his back cramping up once he was horizontal. His whole body hurt. It took some effort to lift his arms and place them around Yuki’s waist, his arms fitting naturally in the curves above her waist. He wanted to ask so many things in that moment, afraid that his magic was about to hurt the relationship they already had. This was a true moment of vulnerability for her, and he didn’t want to accidentally take advantage of it.

“I’m fine taking it slow.” Her green eyes were glowing now as she placed her hands around his shoulders and lowered her face to his. “Just as long as we continue moving forward, I think that will be just fine.”

He didn’t know how to respond and wasn’t given a choice. She pressed her lips into his, and he felt an instant connection that went far beyond the physical pleasures he had experienced with Christmas Present. It was both exciting and scary at the same time, and any doubts he had were dispelled by the soft touch of her tongue against his.

His magic came alive once more, flooding his limbs with new energy. His joints loosened up, permitting him to move his hands and explore Yuki’s body. It seemed like there would be plenty of time, and it would be nice to take it slow for a change.

“Wait.” She moved away from him with a smile and pulled her robes loose, revealing her breasts. When she layed back down on him, he was surprised at how warm her bare skin was against his. “Kiss me some more, Caretaker.”

He gladly obliged.

Outside the window up above, the wind howled, smashing snowflakes against the glass so hard that they formed into chaotic fractals that hugged the wooden frame.