

## Hearth and Home

Between Santa, Cerberus, and Freyja, there was little left of the North Pole village. Perhaps half of it had been burned to the ground by hellfire, and Santa had been a one-man wrecking crew, punching his way to victory. When Mike had finally emerged from Santa's home, it was to see a land that would need to be rebuilt from the ground up.

Mike and the others took up residence in Santa's home for a few days while the newly awakened elves eagerly started repairs. The Workshop was the first structure to be reinforced, as it was still in good condition. The air inside smelled of fresh cut wood and lacquer, along with cinnamon and nutmeg. The magical fireplace had been lit anew, and elves were constantly darting through it to gather lumber and supplies from all around the world.

While Christmas Present and Santa searched the North Pole for any missing elves, Holly and Mrs. Claus took charge to make sure that repairs were being done correctly. The map of the North Pole had survived the Krampus' spoogefest inside of its special case, and was being used as a guide. As far as Mike could tell, Holly was already planning some changes to the layout of the village, but whenever he'd ask about it, she'd just blush.

She was far less shy in the bedroom, though. He was pretty much keeping track of the days by how often she would ambush him. The two of them had snuck off on more than a few occasions, and it wasn't uncommon for Holly to go out of her way to bring along Tink. However, they had their own room now, and didn't need to worry about getting spunk in Santa's tree.

Currently, Mike was sitting at a table just outside of the Hot Cocoa lounge, watching the elves create an assembly line to transport the time-locked children home through the fireplace. A special team of elves was responsible for each child, a task which took at least a couple minutes per kid. Based on his own rough estimates, Mike figured that the process would take a few days to get everyone home safe.

With a list of names in her hand, Mrs. Claus stood by the fireplace, checking off the children as they went through. She had reappeared shortly after Holly had taken ownership of the North Pole, though she now wore regular clothing. Holly had informed him that the wife of Claus would only wear lingerie when she felt like it. Mike suspected that the older woman was still as amorous as ever, because Santa kept going missing every couple of hours.

“This is quite the affair, Mike Radley.” Death sat across from him, eagerly munching on a cookie.

“Aren’t you tired of those?” Mike asked.

“Yes. Yes I am.” Death crunched his teeth down on another cookie. “And yet, I shall continue to eat them.”

“But why?”

Death shrugged. “Habit, I suppose.”

Mike pulled the plate of cookies away from Death. “I’m cutting you off.”

“I suppose it’s for the best.” Death sighed. “Perhaps I am eating them because I am nervous about my trip.”

Once the children were returned, Santa planned to go around the world and undo everything the Krampus had done and finish his deliveries. Much to Death’s delight, Santa had invited the reaper along to help him.

“You have nothing to be nervous about. You did such a great job on your own, I bet you could give the big guy a few tips.”

Death snorted. “I am inevitable, Mike Radley, not gullible.”

“Perhaps, but you’re a good friend.”

“Indeed I am.” Death’s eyes blazed with blue light. “And I shall miss you. For it will be but a day for you, but months for me.”

“You are inevitable. We’ll see each other soon enough. Besides, it’s time for the rest of us to go.” Mike wasn’t able to contribute anything meaningful at this point. Tink had offered to help the elves rebuild, but they had immediately shut her down, declaring that they preferred to work without distractions. Lily was quietly creating enough of those to the point that Death had threatened to stick the Helper Hat back on her head.

Of Freyja, there was still no sign. The Yule Lads had long ago scampered off with their father and the Yule Cat, so Mike wondered if she went after them. Yuki had gone out multiple times searching for the goddess, but had been unable to track her. Every time he saw those extra tails of hers, Mike couldn’t help but feel bad that the kitsune had sacrificed two centuries of her life to save them. However, he would have made the same decision in a heartbeat and respected her for it.

Another group of elves carried a child to their home through the magical flames of the fireplace and Mrs. Claus crossed a name off her list. The massive hearth was covered in stockings, each with an elf's name on it. Mike couldn't help but stare at the large pile of stockings they had pulled down and set with reverence in the corner of the room. That pile represent the elves who hadn't survived, for one reason or another. Most of the elves paid it little attention, and he really couldn't tell if it didn't bother them or if they were throwing themselves so hard into their work that they really weren't noticing.

Holly walked into the Workshop, causing the elves to stop momentarily. She waved them on, bidding them to continue, then sat down next to Mike.

"Hello." Her eyes sparkled. "I bet that you're ready to get home."

"I guess. Are you sure we can't be of more help here?"

She shook her head and put a hand over his. "Once we're done with the children, we have months of work ahead of us here, maybe even years. We have many hands to help, and none of them will age. You've already done more than enough."

"Yeah we have." Lily sauntered over to the table. "The cocoa is really good, but someone broke the jukebox."

Mike made a face, but kept his mouth shut.

"Speaking of, Santa wanted to speak to all of you before he left." Holly looked over at the entrance to the Workshop and the massive double doors opened. A red carpet with gold lining rolled itself across the floor as elves moved out of the way. Dancer and Dasher walked on the carpet, pulling a small sleigh behind them with a large velvet chair.

"What's going on?" Mike asked.

"It's time to sit on Santa's lap." Holly patted Mike's leg as the big man himself appeared. The chair was offloaded next to the fireplace, and Santa let out a groan as he squeezed into it. The elves let out a small cheer as Santa waved to Mike.

"Why am I sitting on his lap?" He looked at Holly.

"It's his way of saying thanks." Holly smiled at him, then noticed his confusion. "Oh, sorry. To be specific, he wants to give all of you something special

for helping us. But you can't just ask Santa for something, you either have to write him a letter or sit on his lap first."

"Sounds like a blatant attempt at sexual harassment," mumbled Lily as Tink sprinted forward.

"Santa!" she declared, leaping onto Santa's lap. "Tink have extra big wish this year!"

"Ho ho ho!" Santa's eyes sparkled. "And if it is within my power, you'll be sure to have it!"

Tink stood on the edge of Santa's chair and leaned against his shoulder as if she was having a conversation at the bar. Holding a hand over her mouth so nobody else could see, Tink spoke to Santa for quite awhile. Santa's eyes widened unexpectedly a few times, and at one point he declared part of her request to be too naughty. In the end, he simply nodded, then patted the goblin between the horns.

"I'll have to see what I can do," he informed her. "That one really is a pretty big wish and might be past my limitations."

"Then she can have my wish, too." Kisa was already walking up to Santa holding an envelope in her hands. "All I had was questions, but I got those answered for me a bit ago."

"Hmm." Santa stared at Kisa. "You would give away a Christmas wish for Tink?"

"Bet your ass I would." Kisa winced when the nearby elves gave her a nasty look. "I'm so sorry. That one slipped out."

Santa chuckled, then looked back at Tink. "I can't make any promises," he informed her. "But it will be my number one priority."

"Good talk," she declared, patting him on the shoulder before hopping down. Back on the floor, she walked over to Kisa and hugged the catgirl so hard that a yowl squeaked out of her.

Santa patted his lap, then looked over at Mike and the others. Yuki came out of the bathroom of the Hot Cocoa Lounge, wiping her hands on her own fur collar.

"Towel dispenser is broken. What's going on?"

“The fat man is giving us gifts, and we get to ask for whatever we want.” Lily sneered. “But I suspect he’s secretly got a lap fetish and—ow!”

Death had jabbed Lily with a finger underneath the table. “There is no need to be so mean,” he said with a scowl.

Lily rolled her eyes. “Fine. The fox can go first.”

“Can I ask for Freyja to come back?” Yuki asked.

Santa shook his head. “The goddess Freyja is safe, if that’s your concern. I will be honest and say that asking for her return won’t affect the outcome.”

“Then I am good. I already got what I wanted this Christmas.” Yuki took Mike’s hand and squeezed it. Her fingers were still a bit damp. She smiled at him as Lily made gagging sounds with a finger down her throat.

Santa frowned, then shrugged. “I can give your wish to someone else, then.”

“You’re up, Romeo.” Lily gave Mike a little push. “You can have my wish, too. I’m not sitting on that guy’s lap, but seeing you do it will be hilarious.”

Mike frowned at Lily. She seemed extra grouchy, but likely had her reasons. “Is that okay? Three wishes?”

“I’d like to remind you that these aren’t wishes, per se.” Santa suddenly looked uncomfortable. “Nobody grants actual wishes anymore. You can ask me for a gift and I will do my best to give it using the magic of Christmas.” He held up his fingers. “Three gifts, actually.”

“I see. Well, okay then.” Mike approached Santa’s chair, aware that all eyes were on him. “Do I have to sit on your lap?”

“No.” Santa smiled. “The true magic of Christmas is about giving without expectations. I find that most people like to do it anyway.”

“Boo!” Lily had summoned a bullhorn. “Sit on his lap, Caretaker! I want it for my spank bank!”

Death, who was in mid-sip, snorted a hefty amount of hot cocoa out of his nose holes. “They make a bank for spankings?!?”

Several of the elves actually laughed at this, and Yuki helped mop up the sudden mess on the table. Deciding that life was too short, Mike climbed onto Santa's chair to sit in his lap.

Surprisingly, Santa was suddenly much larger than Mike, as if he had grown. Feeling very much like a child again, Mike gazed up at the big man in wonder, though he was wary of the tiny white beard hairs that curled themselves hungrily. His feet hung a couple feet above the ground.

"So you pulled me out of that car wreck. Guess I wanted to say thanks for that."

"You are quite welcome." Santa's eyes sparkled. "And thank you for not seducing my wife."

"You're welcome." Mike chuckled. "How does it feel having a new boss?"

"Refreshing." Santa looked over at Holly, who was chatting with Tink and Kisa. "She's planning to come visit, you know. She was special to begin with, but you helped her to realize it for herself."

"She's always welcome. I'd prefer she send a letter next time, maybe not crash a sleigh into my house." Mike let out a sigh. "So I get to ask for three things, huh?"

"You do. And if they are in my power, you shall have them."

"Well, I can really only think of one thing, but maybe three wishes will do it." He looked up at Santa. "The last couple of years have been...amazing? Impossible? I don't even know the word for it."

"Perhaps unexpected?" Santa lifted an eyebrow.

"Yeah, that works. I've seen some great things, but also experienced some horrible ones. As far as miracles go, there's one in particular I'm thinking of."

"I cannot raise the dead, Michael." Santa shook his head. "The miracles I can accomplish have to be grounded in reality."

"Oh. Do you mean Velvet? That's not what I was thinking." Mike took a moment, suddenly feeling bad that he hadn't even thought about that.

"My apologies. I'm usually better at this, but ever since Holly claimed the North Pole, I don't feel as...plugged in as I used to be." Santa's eyes twinkled. "But that's a good thing."

“Yeah, it is. Actually, I was going to tell you that my biggest regret about all of this is what happened to Dana. She’s stuck, and I don’t know how to fix it. Maybe it violates your dead rule, but I would absolutely use all three of my requests to fix her.”

“You were given the opportunity to ask for anything, and yet you think of others.” Santa laughed, a booming sound that brought smiles to everyone nearby. “But of course you did, Michael. That’s just who you are.”

“So is that a yes?” Mike’s thoughts went back to Dana’s awkward dinner with her parents. “It would mean a lot to me.”

Santa stared at Mike for a few moments, his gaze suddenly becoming unfocused. Tiny lights like falling snowflakes appeared in his vision, and after almost a minute of silence, he looked back at Mike. “Her journey is not yet done, but perhaps I can provide something to help you both on your way.”

Santa reached into his pocket and pulled something out. When he turned over his gloved hands, he was holding three vials of dark fluid. Mike took them and held one up to the light. It immediately made him queasy to look at it.

“These are three drops of my blood, Caretaker. In the spirit of Christmas, I have decided to give you what you need, as well as what you asked for. But I must caution you on their use. The last time I gave someone a drop of my blood, they used it to make a powerful geas around your home.”

“That should probably surprise me, but...it makes sense in hindsight.” Mike looked at Santa. “So I just give these to Dana?”

“No. You give one to Dana. The other two...well, let’s just say that you will figure out a use for them.” Santa looked over Mike’s shoulder. Mike turned around to see the ghost of Christmas Future standing there, his hands tucked away in his robe.

“I see. Can’t tell me more? No instruction manual?”

Santa shook his head. “This is one of those things that cannot rely on instructions.”

“Great, well, then...thanks.” Mike hopped down off of Santa’s lap. When he turned around, Santa appeared to be normal size again. “Really, I mean that. Thank you.”

“I know.” Santa winked. “Now where’s my brother?”

“Brother?” Mike looked at the others in confusion, then realized that Death had risen from the table and was carrying a gift under his arm. It was Tick Tock.

“Indeed, Mike Radley.” Death handed the mimic over to Santa. “Didn’t you know?”

“Know what?”

“Tick Tock was the very first gift of Christmas!” As Death neared Santa, the gift sprouted arms and reached for Santa. “From the First Elf himself!”

Everyone’s jaws dropped as Santa chattered at Tick Tock with strange hissing sounds. The mimic reacted, then settled down as Santa tucked him under one arm.

“Tick Tock will be assisting me this year, along with Death. We have quite the mess to clean, don’t we?”

“The toaster is Santa’s brother?” Lily stared in disbelief, then threw her hands in the air. “What the absolute fuu...” She noticed the dirty looks being thrown in her direction already. “You know what? Fine, I’m with Romeo. This doesn’t even shock me.”

“Little does, these days.” Yuki came to Mike. “I think it’s about time we head home, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, probably.” He looked at Holly. She walked over to him, and he knelt down to accept a hug from her. She brushed the hair away from his forehead and planted a kiss on his lips.

“Thank you. For everything,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

When he stood, Holly took him by the hand and led him over to the fireplace. Once at the flames, she reached into her pocket and threw a handful of glittering powder.

“May I walk you home?”

“You certainly can.” Mike allowed her to pull him through the flames, and the slight chill of the north disappeared as he stepped into his home. It was just as he had left it—frozen in time. Seeing Beth on her hands and knees over by the tree, he suddenly felt his throat go dry. In the commotion of everything else, he had forgotten.

“She’s pretty.” Holly walked over to Beth and hopped onto her butt, using her as a chair. “I have a special present for you.”

“You do?”

Holly nodded, then patted Beth’s butt. “I do.” As if it had been timed, the others came through the gate. Tink swatted Mike on the butt as she walked past, and then followed Kisa up the stairs. Yuki winked at Mike on her way out of the room. Lily stopped at the door and pulled a bag of popcorn out of nowhere.

“Hey!” Holly pointed at the succubus. “You all agreed to give them some privacy.”

“Technically, you asked if we would all make ourselves scarce and everyone else agreed.” Lily tossed a piece of popcorn into her mouth. “I, on the other hand, want to watch him make Beth the mayor of pound town.”

Yuki stepped back into the room and grabbed Lily around the waist and lifted her up.

“I’ll make sure she stays with me.” Yuki tossed Lily over one shoulder and started up the stairs. “Will pin her down if I have to.”

“Give her hell, Romeo.” Lily licked her lips before disappearing up the stairs.

Holly waited for a moment, then slid off of Beth. “When you kiss her, time shall return to normal for all of you, but wait until I leave first. Turns out my promotion actually comes with extra responsibilities.” She stopped at the fireplace and turned to face Mike. “Thank you, Caretaker. For everything.”

“Merry Christmas, Holly.”

“Merry Christmas, Mike.” She stepped through the flames and vanished.

Left alone, Mike turned around to look at Beth. Bent over as she was, he had a perfect look at her ass. Her sweater had come untucked at the back of her pants, revealing the red band of her panties sitting just above her leggings.

“God bless leggings,” he muttered. He contemplated Beth’s frozen form, taking her in like a work of art. Her legs were toned, as if she’d been regularly exercising. The sweater clung to her body like a second skin, highlighting pendulous breasts. Moving back in front of her, he knelt down and took a deep breath.

The last several days had been crazy. With the world stuck in eternal night, he had no idea how long it had been since Holly had crashed into his home. Now here he was, at the moment that had become the finish line. Despite all that he had seen and experienced, this still made him nervous. The women of the house were all beautiful in different ways, and yet Beth stood out somehow. It wasn't just a crush, or some unrealized love he had for her. The longer he thought about it, the more he realized just how much of himself he recognized in her.

She had no hesitation about her relationships with the others. He had heard the stories about what went down between her and the men at the cabin. The fairies were always sneaking over there to watch and subsequently tell everyone. In a way, she was his opposite, a woman who was having the same experiences that he was, just from a different perspective.

Was all this supposed to be hers? He stared at her frozen form, wondering if she had been the original inheritor of this house. It put so many questions and doubts into his head, but he shook them off.

There was no use wondering about what-ifs. He was the Caretaker, and right now, a member of his home needed something from him. His magic came to life and crackled across his knuckles as he leaned forward and planted his lips against Beth's.

There was no disorientation, or magical light show as the time-lock ended. Instead, it was the soft caress of lips against his own, and the slight moan of approval. Beth's tongue sought his, and he touched her face, marveling at how soft her hair was. She jerked back, her eyes suddenly wide.

"What's wrong?" He looked around, half expecting the Krampus to knee drop him from the shadows, or maybe a different sort of extra-dimensional incursion that would result in a battle to the death.

"Is that...is that you?" Beth pondered him, confusion in her eyes. "You feel completely different than you did just a moment ago."

"Um...how do you mean?"

She shook her head as if clearing her thoughts. "You have this sudden presence now, it's almost overwhelming. You feel like a different person, somehow."

He nodded, realizing her instincts were sharp. “It’s actually a pretty long story. I’m happy to tell you, but this…” He gestured between the two of them. “Will get put on hold for a bit.”

Beth frowned and sat back on the floor. “How much do I need to hear?”

“Probably all of it.”

“Was anyone else involved?”

He nodded.

“Did everyone come home okay?” Her eyes were suddenly soft. “Did you come home okay?”

“Honestly?” He pondered his answer for a moment. “I think everyone came back better than they went in.”

“So…can it wait?” She bit her lip seductively. “If it’s important, I want to hear it all, but I absolutely have something else in mind.”

He chuckled and moved toward her. “I think that maybe this has already waited long enough.”

She was suddenly all over him, pressing herself against his body, her lips on his face and neck. He kissed her back, his magic surging in recognition of the nymph magic she carried. When he slid his hand under her sweater and cupped her breast, their magic resonated, causing the lights around the room to flicker.

“That’s new,” Beth muttered.

“There’s always something new,” he replied, pushing her onto her back by the fire. With both hands, he pushed her sweater up to reveal breasts trapped beneath a cotton bra. He almost laughed, he couldn’t remember the last time he had seen normal undergarments.

She was fumbling with his pants, distracted by the tiny sparks of light that danced along his knuckles and teased her nipples. He discovered that he could control them now—instead of wandering off, they danced along her sensitive flesh.

“You’re making it hard to concentrate,” she muttered, and he felt her summon her own magic. Suddenly, a wave of lust washed over him, and he gasped in surprise as his cock became so hard it shoved its way free of his pants.

“It’s even bigger in person,” Beth muttered, then frantically pulled off her pants and underwear. A thin line of auburn pubic hair pointed like an arrow to her clitoris, which was engorged in such a manner that it looked like a tiny replica of Naia’s Pearl.

“I assume that’s a recent development,” he said.

She giggled. “Had to wear skirts for a few days to adjust, but yes. The more in tune I become with water, the more nymph-like I become.”

He paused. “And you’re happy with the changes?”

Beth nodded. “These are changes I enjoy. As Naia explained once, the magic is helping me to become who I truly am on the inside.”

He smiled. “I’m happy for you.” When he leaned forward to kiss her, he let his magic dance along her skin as he rubbed his cock against her belly. She moaned in delight, her arms wrapping around his waist as her hands squeezed his ass. Her skin was hot against his and he could feel her magic twist itself around him, filling him with lustful thoughts.

Beth’s magic was like a diluted version of Naia’s, but that was to be expected. If his magic hadn’t evolved so early on, it would probably be very similar.

“I want you on your back,” she said, reaching between them to squeeze his cock. “Mind if I take charge?”

“By all means.” He rolled off of her, allowing her to scramble on top. Her swollen labia rubbed against his erection. She moaned, then sat up so she could hump him.

“I’ve been wondering what this would be like for so long,” she admitted, the thick nub of her clitoris pressing against his glans.

“Um, same.” He laughed. “I’m sorry, it’s just...I’m not sure I can compare to your other lovers, outside of my magic. I’m competing with a minotaur, a dullahan, and a guy who can expand his body.”

“That’s not true.” Her hips rolled, and he realized that she was using her clitoris to massage his shaft, sending waves of heat through his pelvis. “It’s not a competition, and I’m not playing a game. I’m embracing who I am. I don’t imagine the women you’re with ask you who’s better, or who feels tighter.”

“I live with Lily.” He snorted. “If you can think of an embarrassing question about sex, then she’s asked it.”

Beth laughed, then groaned as she moved higher on his shaft. He could feel the lips of her pussy part around him, the head of his cock now in that perfect spot for penetration.

“I just wanted to be...clear is all.” She stared down at him, her hands on his belly. “I have my own life, but I want you to be a part of it. I would have made my move earlier, but I never wanted you to think I was trying to lock you down. I worked hard, making sure that I would be worthy of this.”

“You’ve always been worthy.”

Beth rolled her eyes. “I know that now. But it’s no different than your comment about my other lovers.”

“I see you’re still a good lawyer.” He put his hands on her hips, marveling at how soft her flesh was. “Is this the part where we try to reach a settlement?”

“Ugh, no lawyer roleplay.” She pinched his stomach playfully. “But if you wanna play sexy wizards, I’m game.”

They both laughed, which caused Beth to shift her weight. Mike slid inside her less than an inch, and she gasped, her eyes now locked on his.

“I want to ride the lightning,” she whispered. “That’s what the others call it. I have to know what it feels like, to feel it washing over me and—”

She never got a chance to finish. Mike grabbed her by the hips and thrust himself balls deep, then commanded the magic to take her from the inside. Beth tensed up, her arms curling up at her sides as tiny sparks emerged from her pores and crawled across her skin.

Beth growled, then leaned forward and put her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes were glowing blue now, and a wave of her sexual energy rolled across him. For just a moment, all he could think about was the weight of her body on his, those perfect thighs wrapped around his waist while his cock was buried inside her pussy.

Smiling, he pushed her magic back onto her. Beth gasped, her mouth opening wide as she was forced to endure her own magic on top of his. Her cheeks and chest turned a deep crimson as each breath became a struggle.

Digging her nails into his skin, Beth screwed up her face in concentration, then lifted her hips and slammed herself onto him.

That was all it took. When Beth came, the lights in the room flickered dangerously, and it felt like she might crush him between her legs. Her whole body was so tense now that she had become a statue, and a small pool of fluid filled the space between them.

“Holy shit,” she whispered, her voice filled with awe.

“That’s only the beginning.” Mike winked at her. “If you think you can handle it, that is.”

Growling, Beth leaned forward and planted her lips on his. When her tongue entered his mouth, he could feel the magic attempt to claim him, to drive him insane with lust. The force was surprisingly easy to manipulate, but he allowed it to drive him wild. His hard cock was already throbbing for release.

Still, this was Beth, and this moment had been over a year in the making. He wasn’t ready to let her off the hook so easily. Mike pushed the magic back into her, and her legs sprung free from beneath him, going straight back as another orgasm struck, causing her to topple forward. Even with her hair in his face, he could still see her soul, visualizing it in his mind’s eye as a swirling mass of light-filled water. With each thrust of his body, he could see the ripples he caused, watching in delight as his magic sank into her core and made her tremble.

Beth groaned as she rose to a sitting position, his lap now sticky with her fluids. “How are you doing that?” she asked. “It’s like my whole body is one giant nerve!”

“You mean this?” He flexed his cock inside her, then teased her with the magic once more, concentrating on the ripples. They were his to command, and Beth cried out in sweet agony as she rode him to another orgasm. The humidity in the room had increased drastically. Little clouds of water vapor appeared around them as her magic spiraled out of control. Every time it threatened to claim him, he pushed it back, watching in delight as Beth lost control.

This was a woman that held it together during a fight with the horsemen of the apocalypse. She battled an evil spirit with a powerful Grimoire without so much as a complaint, had been sucked into his strange world without even blinking. He had never seen her rattled or knocked off kilter.

But now, she was a mess. Her skin glistened with sweat and her hair was now tangled. Magical sparks danced across her exposed skin coalescing around her nipples as her eyes went unfocused. The moisture-laden air hummed with magic, Beth openly drooling as he took full control of her orgasms. Sometimes he would hold her on the very edge, while other times he would make her have them back to back. Her magic only served as fuel for his own, and he poured all that energy straight back into her until she finally let out a groan and collapsed on top of him.

“Holy...shit...” Her eyes fluttered, and she turned a dreamy gaze on him. “Is that what it always feels like?”

“No.” He pushed the hair out of her face. “You haven’t seen the real sparks fly yet.”

“I want to see them, Mike.” She giggled. “But I’m too tired to be on top anymore.”

That was all the permission he needed. He slid out from beneath her, and she moaned as a copious amount of liquid formed a pool beneath her belly. She let out a raspy laugh as she looked over her shoulder at him.

“I may be tired, but I like it rough,” she said. “Don’t go easy on me.”

Mike stared at her body, contemplating the magnificent orbs of her ass. He had seen it so many times through skirts and pants, and now that it was in front of him, all he could do was stare. It had always been a great ass, but now that a nymph’s magic was helping to perfect it? It was truly a masterpiece.

He gave it a playful swat and was delighted to see that this caused ripples both along Beth’s skin and on the outside of her soul. When he swatted it again, she cried out in pleasure.

“Like what you see, Caretaker?” She wiggled her ass for him. The movement itself was borderline hypnotic, and he didn’t bother fighting the stupid grin that appeared.

“I’m about to show you how much I like it.” He straddled her legs, teasing her labia with the head of his cock. She whimpered, her fingers picking at the Christmas tree skirt that was within reach.

When he slid inside, she let out a full-throated groan. Her magic rushed up to meet his once more, but this time he let it in. His heart raced as he built a

steady tempo, pounding her from behind. Whenever his body slammed against the meat of her ass, tiny lights appeared in the air all around them.

“Ah, yeah, give it to me!” Beth tried to push herself up on her hands and knees, so he moved his legs inside of hers so that she could move. A string of curses came out of her as he proceeded to pound her even harder. She paused just long enough to demand that he pull her hair, and he saw no reason not to obey.

He could feel it building within him, a monstrous orgasm. The air was saturated with the smell of sex and ozone, and sweat ran down his forehead in rivers. The runes were drawing themselves on her soul, and he watched as his magic began to gather in what little space separated them. His cock was so slippery now that he would occasionally pull out just to wipe some fluid off with his hands.

Beth was practically incoherent at this point. He didn't know if she was just enjoying herself or if he had blown her mental fuse. Either way, his own orgasm was approaching, and he couldn't help but stare at her soul. Everything she had achieved, she had done on her own terms, her own way. Her magic was something she had nurtured on her own, carefully cultivating its growth. They may be alike in a lot of ways, but where he was chaos, she was order.

“I'm about to come,” he said.

“Wait,” she whimpered, catching her breath. “Not there.”

He bit his lip, forcing the fire in his belly down as he slid out of her. “Where do you want it?” he asked.

“Right here.” She reached back and pulled her ass cheeks apart. “Come inside my ass, Mike.”

His mouth was suddenly dry, and he licked his lips in anticipation. When he placed the head of his cock at the entrance to her ass, she arched her back to give him a better angle. The runes on her soul turned to mist and disappeared.

“I'll try to go slow—” he began.

“Like hell you will. If I can take Bigfoot back there, I can take you.” She grabbed onto the tree skirt again. “Now fuck me like you mean it!”

He started slow, but was surprised to discover that her ass had no problem accommodating his girth. Her ass was phenomenally tight, but stretched without

any problems. His cock was still soaking wet, so lube wasn't a problem in the slightest. When he was halfway into her ass, his trepidation vanished as his magic guided his actions. This wasn't just the ass of a beautiful woman. This was the ass of a beautiful woman with nymph magic running through her body.

Mike grabbed Beth's hair and pulled her head back as he slammed himself the rest of the way in.

"YES!" Beth cried, her hands now frantically grabbing for anything as he rammed himself into her. The lightning gathered between them anew, crawling across the hemispheres of her buttocks like a miniature Aurora Borealis.

It was too much. Between Beth's screams of pleasure and the tightness on his shaft, he exploded inside of her. Copious amounts of cum blasted her insides, and his magic took no prisoners, washing over both of them. Several of the lights in the room brightened, and then a few burnt out as his magic took them both over.

Beth pulled several ornaments off of the tree when she came. Her magic fed into his own, those tiny sparks of his gobbling up her aura like it was food. When it came back to him, he came inside her ass again, hollering in ecstasy as he pushed himself deep inside of her. More lights blew out, and Beth collapsed to the ground beneath him, her whole body twitching as she lost control.

He had no idea how much time passed, or how many orgasms they exchanged. By the time he finally pulled himself out of Beth, there was a massive pool of their combined fluids all over the floor. The fairies had arrived some time ago, all four of them rolling around in the puddle while they feasted. Mike went limp on top of Beth, his hand going down to her ass and giving it a squeeze.

"They really could base a religion on this ass," he muttered.

Beth snorted, her eyes barely visible through her hair. "So I've been told."

They lay there, exchanging small talk for quite some time. Eventually, Carmina tried to bury herself in the crack of Beth's ass, so she pulled the trespasser free and sat up.

"The others lied to me," she said, looking around the room for her clothes.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. They undersold the experience." Beth winked at him as she stacked up her clothes. "I'm just gonna walk of shame my way home, if you don't mind."

“Still a place for you here if you want it.” Mike paused. “Whatever bed you want, honestly.”

She knelt down and caressed his face. “Thank you for the offer, but I’m still enjoying my own space. I thought I had it all figured out, but it looks like I’ve got some catching up to do.”

“It’s not a race,” he said.

“Oh, I know. But it doesn’t mean I don’t want to keep pace.” She planted a kiss on his lips, her eyes sparkling. “And Mike?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for letting me just be me.” Beth kissed him one more time. “I’ll be back in the morning. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Beth.” He watched her go and let out a sigh. Lying back on the floor, he chuckled as the fairies swarmed his lap, eager to lick him clean. It had been a really good Christmas.

---

Through the front window of the living room, Lily watched as the others started another one of their silly snowball fights. She had her arms crossed beneath a bright red sweater that Tink had knitted her for Christmas, and was holding a mug of hot cocoa with her tail. It was Christmas day and she was feeling miserable.

She sighed, contemplating the battle outside. It looked like there were now three groups. Beth, Mike, and Cecilia had teamed up against Tink, Kisa, and Jenny while Yuki and Abella rained icy terror on all from above. There was no keeping score, or moments of anger. In fact, Cerberus, in human form, was absolutely mesmerized by the snow and kept chasing after the snowballs that were thrown their way. It was just some good old-fashioned family fun.

Lily caught sight of her scowling reflection in the window and turned away. She plopped down onto the nearest chair and winced. Leaning forward, she pulled what looked like a *Monopoly* hotel from underneath her butt. One end had been melted into a fine point.

“I should really start coming to game night,” she muttered, flicking the hotel across the room. It bounced off the wall and vanished behind the couch.

“Well, you seem full of Christmas cheer.” The voice was soft but powerful. Lily turned around in her seat to see Christmas Present standing by the fireplace. Her once red hair was now flecked with white and she had crow’s feet in the corners of her eyes.

Lily slid out of her seat and moved to the spirit, her mouth open wide. “You...what happened?”

“You refer to my appearance?” Christmas Present smiled. “I think you forget that today is my special day. When it is over, I shall become the ghost of Christmas Past, just as my predecessors have.”

“Wait, so you...you die?” Lily was appalled. She wrapped her arms around the spirit and inhaled her scent. Christmas Present smelled like peppermints. “But your life is so short!”

“On the contrary. I am the spirit of the season!. For wherever there is celebration this day, I am there. As the day progresses, I shall bear witness to hundreds of years worth of celebration. It will pass much faster for you, but for me? It will become everything.” Christmas Present hugged Lily. “Weep not for me, dear friend. I will have lived plenty when the night is over, and shall have this day forever more.”

Lily sniffed, rubbing her face against the spirit’s robe. “So, what? Just thought you’d make a special appearance to make me cry or whatever?”

“Nay!” The fireplace ignited, sending flames up the chimney as Death stepped out. His robes and body were decorated with garland, glitter, and all things Christmas. “For she hath brought with her tidings of joy and good cheer! Me!”

Even Death’s scythe had been decorated, wrapped up in red and white ribbon. A fur-lined stocking with his name hung from the far end of it, bulging with candy and small gifts. He turned around toward the fireplace and waved at the flames.

Christmas Present chuckled. “Santa wanted me to bring him back. He’s been a great help, but he should spend the day with his family.” She looked out the window. “As should you.”

Lily snorted and stepped away from the giant. “Please. If you think you’re just going to waltz into my day with that hot body and some dommy mommy

vibes in order to make me change my stripes, you are sorely mistaken. I can't be fixed."

"Shame." The giant stroked Lily's cheek with an oversized hand. "Regardless, I heard from my sibling Christmas Future that Mike will be getting a very special present from you sometime around three o'clock. Something about a hot elf roleplay fantasy?"

Lily smirked. "Please. I'm going to set the bar for hot elf roleplay."

"Do you think he'd mind if I join in?" The spirit's eyes sparkled.

Lily laughed. "He's gonna need a new bed, isn't he?"

"Perhaps." Christmas Present ran her hands through Lily's hair. "Until later, then. Just remember, this is my day. I'm always watching." With that, the ghost transformed into silver specks of light that floated through the floor and disappeared.

"Watching me the whole day? That's kinda hot," Lily muttered, turning her attention outside. "Bet she's been getting worked up all day staring at Romeo. Probably watched that romp he had with Beth last night, too."

"Lily, my dear friend!" Death wrapped his arm around Lily's shoulder and held up a cellphone. The Grim Reaper snapped a selfie of the two of them and tucked the phone away in his pocket. "I had the most amazing time at the North Pole! Santa said I can come with him every year to deliver presents if I wish! I'm going to meet so many children in the years ahead. Isn't that great?"

"Sounds kinda dark when you put it that way," she said with a frown. "But I'm glad you're happy. And who gave you a phone?"

"Santa did, of course. It's so we can stay in touch. I can even send him emojis! It took us quite some time to get the North Pole put back together, and we are very good friends now." Death pulled a cloth bag from his robes that Lily recognized as the one they had lost to the Krampus. "By the way, Santa taught me how to do woodworking. Would you like to see?"

Lily fought the urge to roll her eyes. "Okay, what did you make in woodshop? Is it a birdhouse?"

Death held out a rectangular package wrapped in green paper. "There are no birds at the North Pole, my friend. Here, this is for you."

Lily took it with a frown. "What is it?"

"If I told you, then why bother wrapping it?" Death chuckled, the blue fire in his sockets shedding tiny sparks. "Open it!"

She slid her finger along the edge, using her nail to cut the paper. With one quick movement, she unwrapped the gift, revealing an ornate frame with decorative inlays made of sea glass.

"I collected those on our trip together," Death said, touching the different stones. "If you are interested, I can tell you where each one came from."

"Not right now." She stared at the frame for a moment, contemplating its beauty. It looked to be made from a single piece of wood, and she had no idea how he had embedded the sea glass inside of it. "It's beautiful, Death. Thank you."

"I made it from oak, because you're the strongest person I know." Death pulled some more gifts from his bag and set them under the tree for the others to find later. "And it is the perfect size for that drawing Reagan made for you."

A chill ran down Lily's spine and she glanced at the reaper.

"You don't have to put that in there if you don't want to," Death continued, paying no special attention to her. "And I know what you're thinking. I would like to reassure you that this frame is just a gift and that I still owe you many favors."

"Very many," she added, narrowing her eyes.

Death nodded sagely. "Indeed. And should you ever wish to collect, you know where to find me. Ah!" He knelt down by the tree and picked up a package with his name on it. He gave it a shake and grinned. "This must be a new tea I haven't tried yet!"

"You can tell just by shaking it?" Lily asked.

Death nodded. "It's a trick I picked up on the road with Santa. If you'll excuse me, I am very excited to try it."

She watched the reaper leave, then turned her attention to the picture frame. With trembling hands, she summoned Reagan's drawing and slid it into place. It was a perfect fit.

It felt like the room was spinning. She set the picture down on the table and contemplated it for a moment, hot tears filling her eyes. Outside, she heard the

others laughing. The woman in the picture frame looked like she would fit right in with the festivities, unburdened by a shameful past.

“Damn it, Death.” Grinding her teeth, she walked toward the front door, a coat and snow pants appearing on her body. She casually dodged the snow, crossing the yard to where Mike and Beth had built a small snow wall.

The snowball fight continued right up until Lily took Mike by the hand. He looked at her in surprise, then melted in her arms when she put her lips to his. She clutched his face in her hands, as if afraid he might disappear. The battle came to a standstill as her wings popped free behind her back. It was an involuntary reaction, but Mike didn’t seem to care. When she broke the kiss, she stared into those beautiful eyes of his.

“I want my own room,” she told him. “Here. For Christmas. A place that’s just mine. I have a picture I want to put up in it.”

“Uh, yeah! Sure!” He looked surprised, but genuinely excited. “Here, let’s go inside and figure somethi—”

“No, not right now.” She grabbed a generous quantity of snow with her tail and curled it up behind her. “I’m on Yuki’s team.”

With that, she smashed the snow into Mike’s face, white-washing him until he fell over backward with a laugh. Beth grabbed Lily from behind, pinning her wings so she couldn’t get away as Tink and Kisa pelted the succubus with snowballs. Abella swooped down and pulled Lily free, the succubus loudly vowing revenge on her attackers. When she looked down, it was to see that Tink was mooning her from atop her own fort.

The snowball fight was still stupid, childish at best. Laughter echoed across the yard, filling Lily for the first time with a different kind of warmth.

There was no place she would rather be.

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The jabberwock sat at attention, its serpentine neck elevated so that Yuki could sit on the end of his snout with a thermos full of hot chocolate. The others had gotten too cold hours ago, but she was content to sit outside and gaze out over the neighborhood.

A storm had blown in overnight, painting the world anew in a fresh white coat. Other than a couple of people out for a Christmas walk, the world was

relatively untouched. Tomorrow, the streets would be plowed, and trash would start to pile up by the curb, mostly boxes and wrapping paper. But for now, it was perfect.

The front yard was a mess. Large chunks of yard had been revealed by displacing the snow, but even those looked small in comparison to the structures that had been built for the fight. She smiled, thinking about how happy everyone was to see a fresh blanket of the good stuff after waking. The fight had been Tink's idea, which surprised nobody.

With a thought, she commanded the yard to reset itself. Walls of ice fractured into soft powder that filled in the gaps, and a snowman with a giant carrot for a penis turned into three balls that unrolled themselves all over the yard. Within minutes, the yard looked as if nobody had ever been there, a blank canvas once more.

A chill breeze tousled Yuki's hair and she felt a presence behind her.

"Nice trick." Freyja sat down next to Yuki, causing the Jabberwock to snort. Yuki patted the beast, settling it down with her will. "Where'd you learn that?"

"Picked a few things up in the Arctic. You know how it goes." She offered her thermos to Freyja. "Do you want some? It's not as good as the stuff Santa has, but it's pretty close."

"No, but thank you." The goddess looked tired, her white hair longer than it used to be. "I thought I would drop by and see how you were doing."

"Me?" Yuki leaned back and smiled. "I'm doing great."

"I'm grateful to hear that." Freyja looked down at the yard. "I saw your snowball fight earlier. It looked like fun."

"You should have joined us." Yuki looked over at Freyja. "In fact, why didn't you join us? We didn't see you after the big fight, what happened?"

"I paid a rather large price for our victory." Freyja held out her hand. Curious, Yuki took it. "It took me some time to come to terms with it, but I finally have."

"Are you okay?" Yuki held the goddess' hand for a moment before realizing how warm it felt. "Freyja, what happened?"

“The world has changed, Yuki. As all things do.” She gazed over at the house. “Have you ever wondered why the gods abandoned humanity?”

“Who hasn’t? I know for a fact that gods exist, which kind of makes it worse. But who am I to question the will of the gods?” She opened up the thermos and drank straight from it. “You sure you don’t want some?”

“We had no choice.” Freyja let out a sigh. “During the battle for the North Pole, more of my memories returned. Disturbing ones. The gods didn’t abandon this world on a whim, or even for self preservation. We were forced to flee from predators.”

“Predators?” Yuki frowned. “Who would challenge the gods?”

Freyja’s face twisted up. “We called them the Others. We used to call them the outsiders, but that isn’t entirely accurate. They came through the cracks in this world, attacking the gods where they lived.

“What you don’t know is that these Others surpassed us in strength and numbers. They couldn’t be killed, at least not in a manner we were aware of. Many of us were slain, and the rest of us scattered. We didn’t abandon mankind to save our own skins, though, I don’t ever want you to think that.” The goddess took her hand back from Yuki. “They were attracted to our power. That’s how the Others found this world in the first place. We went into hiding to make this place harder to find, but that meant losing ourselves in the process.”

“I see.” Yuki looked over at the goddess. “So what does that mean for you now?”

“I’m not sure. But I had to make a choice. You see, as a goddess, I was the embodiment of many things. In a way, I have lost a right to many of those claims. There are those out there who still have faith in me, and it’s time I do right by them. They deserve a reason to believe.”

“So you’re gonna be Freyja officially? Make a comeback?”

“In a way.” Freyja grinned. “When the Others broke into this world, there was a man who had an insane idea on how to hold them back. He wanted to build something that would hold the cracks shut, like driving a screw into the edges of reality. It would be some of the most powerful magic that the world had ever seen, but it came at a heavy cost. He built several legendary artifacts, structures tied strongly together by our love of games. As long as these structures exist, the Others cannot come through and claim this world.

“Knowing this, I can’t be the only one who survived. The other gods are out there somewhere, and I plan to find them. While the Others are locked away, we have the chance to build our strength anew for when they inevitably return. But we can’t come back as we once were, this world is too different. New gods must rise to replace those who have fallen. Surely, this you understand.”

“I do.” Yuki’s tails twitched behind her. “And I assume some of these new gods will be less than desirable?”

“Indubitably. I will need those I can trust to have humanity’s interests at heart. Which is why I want to be the first to recognize you formally as the new goddess of winter.” Freyja turned toward Yuki and bowed low with her hands together over her heart.

Yuki felt something shift inside her and gasped. “What did you do?”

“Recognized you and relinquished my title. During my fight at the North Pole, I was forced to choose. I couldn’t be the goddess of so many things when my power was weak. My followers have prayed to me all these decades and never received an answer. I was undeserving. And so I let certain things go. My divinity lives on inside of you, Yuki. I can feel it, like a distant heartbeat. I can no longer command the ice and snow as I once did. This power is now yours.”

“But...that can’t be right? I can’t be a god, I don’t even have all of my tails!” Yuki touched her chest. “It’s not like I feel any different.”

“And you won’t. None of us became gods overnight. You now have a legacy to live up to as Old Man Winter.” Freyja smirked. “Or you could always go by a cute name like Jack Fox.”

“Ugh, no.” Yuki wrinkled up her nose. “I don’t want to be a god. I just want to stay here and be with my family.”

“As you should.” Freyja stood. “But now that I have recognized you as such, you are officially on the path. Your powers will grow, their boundaries set only by your determination. I will need others like you, someday. To become new beacons of light for the world, ready to stand and defend it when the time comes. And I shall become stronger, too. The age of miracles is about to return.”

Down below, the front door of the house opened and Mike stepped out. He slipped something into his pocket and contemplated the fresh appearance of the front yard. He rubbed at his lower back and did a couple of stretches. Yuki noticed that Freyja watched him with a smile.

“You have plans for him, too.” Yuki shook her head. “I can promise you that godhood isn’t something he wants.”

“I know. Some people chase greatness. Others have it thrust upon them.”

“He wants what I do. A quiet life for his family.”

“I know.” Freyja grinned. “And that’s what makes him so special.” The wind picked up, ruffling Yuki’s fur. Down below, Mike adjusted the collar of his jacket and zipped it up, oblivious that he was being watched.

“And what if I say no?” Yuki scowled at Freyja. “What if I don’t want any part in this fight?”

“You don’t have a choice. For you see, my dear kitsune, that man has become the Caretaker of several of these magical structures. Should he ever fall, it is possible that the world shall fall with him.” Freyja’s whole body became translucent as the wind carried her into the sky, and her voice became a whisper in Yuki’s ears.

*“Go forth, child of winter. Know that Freyja watches over you.”*

Stunned, Yuki stared into the empty sky. Below, she heard the crunching of footsteps as Mike made his way through the hedge maze to where the sundial sat. It looked like he was getting ready to reset it.

Eager to tell him what she had just learned, Yuki leapt from the jabberwock’s snout, commanding the snowbank below to catch her. Mike looked in her direction, then waved. He waited for her in the center of the maze.

“Hey,” she said. “Freyja was just here.”

“Oh really? How is she?”

“Fine, I guess. Gonna go out and find her followers and some of the other gods.” Yuki gave Mike a brief summary of what she had learned.

“I see.” He sighed. “Well, I quit expecting things to be quiet after our first apocalypse.”

“Our *last* apocalypse,” she corrected him.

“Probably not. The end of the world is relative, after all.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out Tink’s goggles.

“What are you doing with those?”

Mike grinned. "It's a surprise. Want to see?"

"Sure." She stood back as he pulled a small vial from his pocket. "Is that blood?"

"Sure is. A single drop of Santa's blood." Mike put his hands on the sundial, the lenses flicking into place. "I spent a lot of time in bed last night going over things in my head."

"From what I heard, you spent a lot of time in bed last night turning Tink into an air raid siren."

Mike winced. "Yeah, sorry about that. She was being a bit loud."

"More than a bit. And why does she call you her special hammer?" Yuki actually knew the answer to this, but absolutely loved seeing Mike turn beet red and squirm. "Also, I'm sure you both know this, but you never need to lube a hammer. It's a safety hazard."

Mike stared straight ahead. "Jesus loves you," he muttered.

"What?"

"Just checking that you're not a certain succubus. Anyway, I was thinking about some stuff. Did you know that a drop of Santa's blood was what originally established the geas?"

Yuki shook her head. "Nobody knew where the geas had come from. We always just accepted that it was here."

He nodded. "Well, Santa informed me that I could use this to strengthen the geas even further. I talked it over with Ratu and I think we might be able to upgrade it. Make it even better than before."

"How are you going to do that?"

He turned and looked up at the house. "I've wondered more than once if the house was alive. On a few occasions, I've even spoken with the spirit that inhabits it. The North Pole has one, and so does the cabin. All part of some game I don't really care that much about, to be honest. All I want is to protect my home and my family from harm."

Mike held up the vial of Santa's blood. "Its rooms are already there, but forgotten. It changes shape before our eyes, reality rewriting itself to accommodate. Remind you of anything?"

“You think the house was built out of...an ancient one?”

“No. The spirit of this home is definitely grounded in our reality, but it makes me wonder: was it designed to mimic one? And for what purpose? Every time I get answers, it just creates more questions. Truthfully, the most important question I can ask is how to keep everybody safe.” Mike set the vial down on the sundial and watched the stone timer click through its final minute. Once time ran out, a chill wind blew across the yard, making Yuki shiver. “So I’m going to do what the house does. We’re going to hide in plain sight.”

Mike looked at her, then back up at the house. “I will protect everyone,” he said, raising his voice. “They say that home is where your heart is, but guess what? It doesn’t have to be a place. It can be a friend, a lover, or a child. So if a geas can wrap itself around a piece of land, why not the people inside? And don’t think for a moment that I’m doing it for you. I don’t give a damn about your Architect or your game.” He picked up the vial and pulled the stopper free. Yuki’s ears popped and the fading light of day bent and warped around the opening of the vial.

“I’m doing this because I’m the Caretaker,” he declared. “And these are the people I love.” He dumped the single drop of blood onto the sundial, then summoned lightning into his hands. The air around him sizzled as he grabbed the sundial and gave it a twist.

The drop of blood became mercurial, coating the sundial in a silver gloss that Yuki could see her reflection in. Mike’s magic was carried along with it, dancing across the ground and causing the earth beneath the snow to glow blue and purple. Mike’s attention was on the sundial at first, and then he spun around and stared at the house.

Before their eyes, the house changed colors. Multiple variations of the home appeared, as if it was trying on different appearances. The Victorian home was suddenly a quaint cottage, then a stone fortress, followed by what looked like a fishing hut. It expanded rapidly, eventually settling on a proper manor with at least four floors.

“I knew it,” Mike whispered, his eyes on something Yuki couldn’t see. The sundial sent a beam of blue light into the sky where it collided with a spherical barrier. Motes of light floated down from above and winked out of existence before they could touch anything.

A ring of light emerged from the house and washed over both of them. When it passed through Yuki, she became light-headed and grabbed Mike’s hand

for support. He squeezed her hand firmly, but didn't look away from a spot above the home. She squinted her eyes in the same direction, but still couldn't see what he had.

After several minutes, the blue light faded. Cecilia appeared on her swing, her face composed as she surveyed the much larger front porch that had appeared. Through the closed windows, Yuki could hear the shouts of surprise as everyone realized that the house had expanded once again.

"C'mon," he said, pulling Yuki toward the door. "Let's see what our magical home has in store for us today."

With a smile, she obliged. She would follow him anywhere.

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The cemetery behind St. Andrew's was quiet, most of the markers buried under a thin blanket of snow. It was late in the afternoon, and other than some light traffic out on the street, the world was quiet. In the distance, the skyscrapers of New York stood watch like slumbering giants.

Kisa knelt down and brushed the ice and snow off the marker and let out a sigh when she read the name.

### **Yuriy Petrov**

She brushed away some more snow. The small headstone had been paid for by his church, so other than his name and the year of his death, it was blank.

"I should have come to your funeral," she began. "I mean, maybe I did, but I can't remember. Some bad stuff went down, but you should know that I'm sorry I forgot who you were," she said, apologizing to the grave of the man who had saved her from the streets. "Would you like to hear about it?"

A distant car honked at someone crossing the street. Kisa waited a few moments before she continued. She told Yuriy all about how she had gone on a hunt to remove the cursed collar on her neck and ended up trapped by Emily. The details for that period weren't necessary, but if his spirit was somehow listening, she wanted him to know how and why she had forgotten all about him.

From there, she talked about how she had ended up with Mike, both in his house and as his familiar. The words poured out of her like water as she spilled years worth of pent up feelings. It no longer mattered if anyone was there, these were words that needed to be said.

She told Yuriy all about the horsemen of the apocalypse, and that time she'd been possessed by a spirit. Tink and Mike both came up, but she left out the sexy parts. After rambling for nearly an hour, she let out a heavy sigh.

"You're probably wondering how I found you." Kisa reached into her coat and pulled out the packet of adoption papers. "For my most recent adventure, I went to the North Pole and ended up finding these in Santa's Undeliverables Warehouse. Turns out you died of a heart attack right before Christmas, and Santa has to jump through the same legal bullshit we all do. That's so stupid, right? Jolly old fat guy has to plan his Christmas miracles months or even years in advance. I was supposed to wake up on Christmas day and find these under the tree.

The papers trembled in her hands. "When Holly first told me all about it, I'll admit I cried. It took me a few days to wrap my head around how such a stupid thing as a heart attack had changed my life completely. If not for that cursed collar, I would have gone back to being an orphan. Nobody even missed me when I disappeared. How messed up is that?"

She laughed sadly, then set the papers down by the grave. "I signed them, just so you know. Not that it matters, considering I'm legally dead now. Regardless, I would have been happy to be your daughter, would have traded everything for it, in fact. I looked up my family, or what's left of them. Mom was an addict who dropped off the radar. No dad on file. My grandmother took me in, but died from a stroke when I was eleven. I spent a couple years on the street before you found me and taught me to dance. I had nobody, was nobody, yet you saw worth in me, convinced me I could be something. You were a dancer who fled the fall of the Soviet Union, you knew all about starting your whole life over and about putting faith in others.

"I guess for the longest time, I was worried that my life was full of people who abandoned me because of who I was. My mom, if she's still alive, doesn't have an address. Grandma is in an unmarked grave somewhere, so I can't even visit her. You were the only connection to my old life. Maybe these papers couldn't bring me the happily ever after that I wanted, but they helped me find the closure to chase the one I deserve. Once upon a time, you were my whole family. The one I have now, though?" She chuckled and looked over her shoulder. Death and Mike stood several headstones over, sharing a large thermos of hot chocolate. The grim reaper had a large pad of paper and was using a crayon to take rubbings from the graves, a trick that Mike had taught him.

“They’re pretty great.” She stared up into the sky and sat with her feelings for a bit. Once she was ready to go, she pulled a black marker from her pocket and wrote the word father below Yuriy’s name. Leaning forward, she placed a kiss on the cold marble and then stood. When she walked back over to Mike, he stopped talking to Death and gave her his full attention.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Good, I guess.” She shrugged. “Not really sure. Dead father issues, and all that jazz.”

Death nodded sagely. “Indeed. The loss of a parent is a difficult situation, no matter—”

Kisa stood on her tiptoes and placed her hand over Death’s mouth. “Shush.” Some moments were simply better when less was said.

“We can stay longer if you’d like. Whatever you need.” Mike ran his hand between her ears in a way that made her shiver in delight.

“Nah, I’m good. We can go whenever.”

They turned and walked toward the edge of the cemetery where a gnarled tree stood. Once nearby, Mike stopped and looked out at the city.

“Oh, by the way. I sort of accidentally promised Death we could go see Times Square.”

“He did, Kisa Radley.” Death was busy folding up his gravestone rubbings to tuck them away into his robes. “But it is your day, and I do not wish to intrude.”

She laughed at this. “I guess we can go check it out. But aren’t you worried you might scare the shit out of someone?”

Death shook his head. “This is New York, my feline friend. Even if someone is able to see me, I doubt I shall even be noticed.”

“Well, I guess we’ll see about that.” Kisa slid her hand into Mike’s, feeling his magic rub against hers. With just a thought, she willed her magic to extend over his body, hiding him in plain sight. To anybody watching, everything else in the cemetery would suddenly be far more interesting. “Shall we?”

“We shall.” Mike put his hand on the tree and the portal opened. The three of them stepped through, finally leaving Kisa’s past behind.

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Sunlight streamed through the dining room window, illuminating the tray of bacon that had been set to cool on the counter. Sofia hummed to herself, swaying her hips from side to side as Mike came up from behind. She jumped when he put his hands on her hips, then turned around to swat him with a spatula.

“Don’t sneak up on me!” She gave him another playful swat.

“You said you didn’t want me smacking your butt anymore.” He winked at her. “But that cancels out your early warning system, now doesn’t it?”

“Silly man. I didn’t expect you to listen.” She pushed her fingers through his hair. “It’s getting long again. You should cut it.”

Mike sighed and looked out the window at Naia. She was busy doing her princess bit with some birds who had stuck around for the winter. Her fountain was heated, and the local fauna treated his backyard like a sanctuary of sorts. Currently, she was singing to a group of finches who did little circles over her head.

“Yeah,” he replied, watching the nymph. “I was planning on it today, actually.”

Distracted, he didn’t notice when Sofia wound her arm back and swatted him in the ass with the spatula. He jumped and rubbed at his backside, giving her a frown.

“I thought I was supposed to see that coming,” he muttered.

“Perhaps.” Sofia’s cheeks were flushed pink. “You should stop by the Library later. Come see me in the Head Librarian’s office. we have some stuff to go over.” She pulled her apron off and hung it on a nearby hook. “Breakfast is ready for anyone who wants it, but I’m off to organize a new shipment. See you later?”

“Of course. Need me to bring anything?”

The cyclops grinned, then handed Mike the spatula. “Maybe that. And the apron.”

Intrigued, he swung the spatula experimentally, cracking it on the palm of his other hand. “I mean, you could just stick around if you wanted.”

“I could, but I do actually have a shipment of books coming in that require special handling. Some stuff Eulalie helped me procure.” She licked her lips. “Don’t disappoint me, Caretaker.”

“I don’t plan to.” He watched Sofia saunter off, then turned his attention to the coffee maker. Moments later, Yuki ducked through the door in a pink terry cloth robe.

“Thank gods, I thought you two were going to fuck in front of the bacon.” The kitsune grabbed a few pieces off the pan and turned her attention to the nearby platters of eggs, sausage, and toast. While she was loading her plate, others arrived. The kitchen became busy as anyone capable of eating food made a plate for themselves. Mike leaned against the counter and watched everyone with a smile, then made his own plate and went out to the dining room.

The dining room was larger than ever, but the massive table was the same as before. It was one of the rooms in the house that had changed the least after the last transformation. His own bedroom now had a sitting area and had become its own turret above the manor with windows that overlooked the front and back of the property. The observatory was on the opposite side of the manor and was more tower than turret. Dana had been surprised to see that the house had changed, but immediately took the room that had appeared just outside the observatory.

Lily’s room was just down the hall from Mike’s. Other than a very decadent bed which she would never sleep in, the only other piece of furniture was a beautiful picture frame that Death had made for her. Mike had noticed that she dodged any questions about who drew that wonderful picture of her, but figured he would learn who Reagan was eventually.

Mike sat and ate breakfast, then took care of his dishes and wandered toward the front of his manor. The front room of the house had expanded into a large open space with a double staircase that went up to the second floor. A beautiful mosaic had been built into the wooden floor using different types of hardwood. The pattern was intricate and shimmered in the daylight, scattering colors like a prism. Some of the larger windows higher up had been replaced with stained glass that Mike was certain would be a bitch to repair.

Reggie and Jenny sat at one of the couches, locked in yet another battle of wills. This time, it was over a game of Connect Four. Mike was surprised that it hadn’t lost any pieces yet.

He stepped out front and took a deep breath. The cold air entered his lungs, and he let it all out in a single burst.

“Mike.” Cecilia appeared next to him and laid her head on his shoulder. “Good morning, mo stór.”

He put a hand around her waist and squeezed, his fingers sliding along the cool fabric of her eternal dress. When he planted a kiss on her head, he noticed that the red streak of hair was thicker than it had been.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I am well.” She sighed, her empty gaze fixed on the distant road. His manor now sat atop a small hill, the plot of land around his home nearly triple in size. He had no idea how large his home would get, but had decided that it was never something he would worry about. The people already here were the important ones. “How did you sleep?”

“I slept okay.” In fact, it hadn’t been great. There had been a lot on his mind, and he had spent a good chunk of his time in the Dreamscape having a heated debate with all the personalities living there. “Anything to report?”

Cecilia shook her head as Abella landed in front of the house.

“Nothing new,” Abella said. “Though more people are driving by and looking at the house.”

Mike nodded. To the rest of the world, his home had always been a magnificent manor. It was likely that his neighbors were suddenly curious and probably wondered why they didn’t drive by more often. “As long as none of them come into the yard, we should be fine.”

Abella nodded her agreement. “And even if they do, we will be ready.”

Mike glanced over at the corner where the jabberwock was asleep beneath the snow. On the other side of the yard was a small structure they had built for Cerberus. Now that the hellhound was free of the underworld, they chose to sleep the day away and come out mostly at night. Even so, any sign of trouble would bring them out.

The stone lions on the perimeter of the house stared out at the street. There were six of them now, with several smaller iterations ensconced across the exterior of the manor. Now that the sundial was permanently activated, he knew that the home’s defenses would never be better.

“Are you okay?” Abella asked.

“Yeah. Just gearing up for something I’m a bit nervous to do is all.” He wasn’t going to lie to them, but he couldn’t afford to say the truth until he was certain. “Wanted to take in the calm of the morning is all.”

Abella looked concerned, but said nothing. Cecilia took Mike’s hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Call us if you need us,” she whispered, then faded away.

“Always.” He stepped down the stairs and kissed Abella’s forehead. “I have the egg later today and was thinking of taking her for a walk in the Greenhouse. You want to come?”

Her obsidian eyes sparkled. “I wouldn’t miss it,” she declared, then leapt into the sky, her wings flapping as she spiraled around the manor and eventually landed on a ledge just above his bedroom window. She settled into a crouch, her eyes settling on the front gate, his family’s protector.

Mike took a walk in the garden to clear his head, pausing at the sundial. The smooth stone surface sparkled now, as if crushed diamonds had been laid into the stone. It no longer rotated, frozen in a single moment of time by the drop of Santa’s blood.

“What husband doing?” Tink stepped from behind him and examined the sundial. “Find way to fix?”

He chuckled to himself. After resetting the sundial, Tink had informed him that its final position was actually a couple degrees off, meaning it was only accurate within a few minutes. Though it didn’t actually matter, she liked to tease him about it every chance she got.

“Nope.” He ran his hand along the gnomon of the dial, feeling a brief connection to the ancient power that ran beneath the land. “Figured I would wait until my favorite goblin fixed it for me.”

Tink pinched him and he flinched.

“Not favorite goblin. Favorite. One word.” Tink sounded dead serious, but there was a mischievous look in her eye.

“Favorite wife, maybe?”

Tink snorted, then took him by the hand. "Only wife," she reminded him, then bit his wrist.

"Ow!" He jerked his hand back. "Didn't you eat enough breakfast?"

"Tink always hungry for husband." She let out a sigh and turned her head toward the house. "But busy today. Dead girl need internet, have to install wires. Ugh."

"I'm sure Dana will appreciate it," he reminded her.

"Dead girl said husband pay price." She sashayed away from him, then looked over her shoulder directly. "Husband get ambushed later, this only warning."

"I have been warned." He followed her back to the house and walked inside. A roll of ethernet cable was sitting at the bottom of the stairs, and Tink picked it up and held it over her head as she grumbled to herself.

"Stupid fucking stairs," she muttered.

Mike watched her go, then walked around the stairs and down the long hallway that would take him to the backyard. There were two new sitting rooms along the hall, and one of them was already accumulating children's toys. Callisto would need somewhere to play on days he visited, after all.

The back door now exited to a sunroom. Mike walked across it and through the final gold trimmed door that led outside. The temperature in his backyard was roughly twenty degrees warmer than out front, and he didn't even question it. He was fairly certain it was partially due to Naia's fountain running hot water this time of year to help the creatures who came to visit her.

Naia was watching a pair of finches bathe in the uppermost tier of her fountain with a smile on her face. Her blue eyes focused on him as he approached the edge of her fountain.

"Good morning, lover." Naia melted into the water, reappearing a moment later on the edge. She twisted her body so that she was sitting on the ledge, her hands still connecting her to the fountain's basin. "It's so good to see you this morning."

"Good morning, Naia." He didn't come any closer. "How are you today?"

“I am well. It’s pretty quiet, but I rather enjoy it.” Her eyes narrowed. “Your hair is getting long again, you should let me cut it for you.”

“Yeah, about that. I sure could use a haircut, but that kind of depends on something else. There’s a question I want to ask, but I don’t know that you’re going to like it.”

Naia’s smile faded. “I don’t understand. Mike, I can feel your emotions from here, is something wrong?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know yet. It’s just us back here, right?”

She nodded. “That I’m aware of. Well, and the birds.”

“Good. Because the question I’m about to ask is for your ears only.” He walked around the edge of her fountain. “Do you remember Christmas day? When I used that drop of blood to strengthen the geas?”

“Of course.” Naia’s body slid along the edge of the fountain so that Mike was constantly right in front of her. “My fountain got a bit bigger and my bathtub now has a window with a view!”

Mike nodded. “There were so many changes all at once, and it seems like we’re still discovering some of them. But that’s not what this is about. It’s actually about something I learned from the North Pole, and a little bit about the cabin.”

“What’s that?” She tilted her head to one side, her blue and green locks tumbling down her shoulder.

“Well, let’s start with the cabin. I was only there a couple of days, and the entity that resides there made direct contact with me. Sure, it was in a dream, but I was actually speaking with her.”

“Uh huh.”

Mike frowned. “And when I went to the North Pole, the entity that resides there spoke with me directly. He also spoke with Holly, I checked with her later on. Came right out and said hello.”

Naia blinked, confusion on her face.

“However, my own home seems to be more mysterious. The spirit who lives here has contacted me, but never directly, not in a face to face manner. I’ve occupied her body, or heard her voice in my head. I thought that was really weird, right?”

She shrugged. "I guess. But two out of three doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"You're right it doesn't." Mike stopped at a stone bench and sat down. "But it was the North Pole that gave it away. I got to see Freyja's memories, you know, was floating around in her head quite a bit. Some of it didn't make sense to me, but Yuki filled me in on Freyja's visit, and a lot of things clicked into place."

"Oh? Like what?" Naia blinked at him with those beautiful, sapphire eyes. She was the first one Mike had met, this beautiful creature who had pulled him into an exciting, unexpected adventure. For a while, she had been his everything, and then the others came. As the house expanded, she was ever there, his Naia, maybe even his first real love.

"I'm not going to pretend to understand the rules of the Great Game, or even its true purpose. But I have learned why it demands secrecy, and what is at risk if the truth of the matter ever got out. For example, I know now that the Architect built all these locations using the bodies of the gods." Mike sat forward on the bench, his magic wrapping around him like a shield. "A simple google search pretty much confirms that the North Pole is Cronus, or maybe Janus, it seems like there's quite a bit of overlap in regards to who is in charge of time."

Naia nodded, waiting for him to continue.

"Now, the cabin is likely Artemis, or a similar counterpart." He paused, half expecting to be struck down by lightning. When it didn't happen, he continued. "But it makes sense in hindsight. The Architect made their bodies into physical locations, and then bound their souls to the property. The gods are hiding in plain sight, protecting this world from outside forces...somehow."

The nymph shrugged. "I guess that makes sense."

Mike sighed. "Well, that brings us to now. You see, ever since dealing with Artemis and Cronus, I've wondered why the spirit of this home isn't more directly involved. How come I've never seen her face?"

"Maybe she's shy?" Naia looked at him, her face the picture of innocence.

"Or maybe she's been hiding in plain sight." Mike stood and let out a sigh. "So my question is this: were you ever planning to tell me that you're not actually Naia?"

There was a long pause as Naia stared at him, her features frozen in shock. The birds behind them continued to bathe in her fountain, singing cheerfully to themselves despite the sudden shift in atmosphere.

Naia didn't respond, her eyes glistening as the fountain gurgled behind her. She eventually blinked. When her eyes opened once more, they had become golden in color.

"Well done, lover." Naia stretched her arms over her head, then stood and stepped out of the fountain. Streamers of water connected her to the basin as she walked toward Mike across the cobblestones. "Though I don't know why you're suddenly so defensive."

"Because you lied to me." Mike took a step forward, closing the distance. "From the very beginning."

"That's not true at all. Naia has never lied to you, she doesn't know I'm in here." She reached out and touched his face. "So did the all powerful google tell you who I am, too?"

"Maybe. A quick search for gods and goddesses who represent the home gave me a fairly solid option, but I have my doubts." He fought the urge to push her hand away. "For example, if you are who I think you are, it's more than a little strange that you chose a nymph as your guardian."

"Naia was one of the only survivors when Olympus fell. I consider her and Aymone to be family, so had the Architect save them. I was forced to choose between one of them as my Guardian. I couldn't use Aymone because she sleeps in the winter, which left Naia. Though her sexual proclivities fall outside my domain, she is pure of heart. Neither of them remember any of this, by the way. Not because of the geas, but due to becoming pawns in the Great Game." She winked at him. "So are you going to guess, or do you plan on keeping a lady waiting?"

"Then you are Hestia, goddess of the hearth and home." If he was wrong, he honestly didn't know who she could be.

Her golden eyes shimmered in relief as the goddess took a step back. "You have no idea how long it's been since someone has spoken my own name to me. Yes, I am Hestia, one of the last gods of Olympus, and you are living inside what remains of my body." Hestia put her hands over her heart. "You have found me at last."

“Why play Hide and Seek with me, then? The other gods, they showed up pretty quick.”

Hestia’s eyes shimmered. “I have always been here, looking out through her eyes. You see, Caretaker, though I was careful in who I chose, your predecessor’s mistakes almost cost me everything. You see, after Emily died, Naia...didn’t make it.” Her shoulders drooped. “Or at least, she wouldn’t have, had I not intervened. The fountain was cut off, and she was dying. Not only do I think of her as my own child, but losing my guardian means I would become little more than another piece to be collected. So, in her final moments, I initiated the soul swap with her so that my magic could be used to force enough water through her spring to keep her alive. But, as you know, some souls are indivisible.”

“So Naia didn’t know? She hasn’t been lying to me?” Mike let out the breath he had been holding. It was the one thing that he had been worried about. She had been the first person he had ever truly trusted, and the knowledge that she had been lying to him this whole time had nearly made him sick to his stomach.

“No, she hasn’t, never knowingly. Nor could I casually reveal myself, not without potentially harming her.” Hestia sighed. “The rules of the game, as it were. But I must ask—how did you figure it out?”

“I can see souls now.” He could picture it again, that magnificent fractal pattern above the house as the geas took a stronger hold. It rotated in place like a distant galaxy, marked with golden streaks of divinity. The house itself was alive, and it was a pattern that he recognized as the runes on Naia’s ribs. “That, and I discovered something interesting in the Dreamscape.”

“Oh?” Hestia cocked her head.

“Naia doesn’t have her runes there. Which means they aren’t technically a part of her soul. For the longest time, I thought they were what shackled her to this place, but when I saw them on Holly, I realized it was part of the soul-swapping magic.”

The goddess clapped her hands and laughed, a magical sound that caused the nearby birds to burst into song. “Oh, my. You are quite the detective.”

“So is that why I haven’t been able to reach you when I wanted to? Because you’re part of her?”

Hestia nodded. "An unforeseen consequence, I assure you. On occasion, I have tried to lead the way through Naia's words, or have impressed visions upon you in the hopes you would understand. Though you have found me, I am still bound by the rules of the Great Game, and can only offer so much assistance."

Mike stared into her eyes, wondering if the goddess was being truthful with him. Every interaction he had ever had with Naia was now under scrutiny, and he hated it. Either he would have to accept that Hestia had his best interests at heart, or he could choose to forever doubt a woman he loved.

"From now on, I would prefer we speak like this. Visions are fine or whatever, but no putting words into Naia's mouth for her. She deserves better."

Hestia gave him a little bow. "I find these terms agreeable. Now that you have found me, I shall reveal my presence to her later tonight and let her know that she is my vessel. She will be like the priestesses of old, allowing me to use her body to speak with my Chosen."

Mike contemplated the goddess for several more moments. Hestia was the house itself, but knowing how to reach her directly changed everything. Would he use this knowledge to make an honest attempt to further his progress in the Great Game? Or would he continue as he had, simply enjoying the time he had with the others? He felt like the choice was clear, but wanted to be sure.

"So what happens now?"

Hestia giggled, then stepped backward until she was standing in the fountain.

"That's just it, Caretaker. Your agenda has ever been your own, and I would not seek to change it in any way. The choice is forever yours."

"Can I tell the others about you?"

She smirked. "Refer to my last answer."

"Oh, good." He chuckled. "You gods sure do enjoy walking the line between mysterious and annoying."

"And we wouldn't have it any other way. But know this, child—when you were lost, I gave you a home. You became the bond that tied our family together and allowed it to grow. You have seen success where others have failed, and have yet to lose sight of what is important to you. As far as I'm concerned, you have already succeeded."

Hestia closed her eyes. When she opened them, the crystalline blue pupils had returned, and he realized that Naia was standing before him once more. She shook her head and looked around as if puzzled.

“I’m sorry, I must have tuned you out. Were we talking about something?”

“I’ll explain later.” He moved to the fountain’s edge and stuck out his hand. When she took it, he gave her a squeeze. “Have I ever told you how lucky I was to find you?”

“You mean you got lucky when you found me.” She winked. “Twice, if I remember correctly.”

He laughed, then slid his arm around her waist. “So about that haircut—”

“Mike!” The back door of the sunroom burst open, the glass in the door shattering. It was Eulalie, her eyes wider than he’d ever seen. Clutched in her hands was Velvet’s egg, the swirled gemstone lines sparkling in the limited light of winter.

“What is it, what’s wrong?” By the time Mike stood, Eulalie was standing over him. She held the egg down where he could see it.

“Put your hands on it, quick!”

Mike pressed his hands to the hard surface of the egg and was surprised at how hot it felt. Some of the others came out the back door to see what the commotion was, and Abella landed next to them, her wings curling against her body.

“What is happening?” Abella demanded.

“She’s moving!” Eulalie grabbed Abella’s wrist and put the gargoyle’s hand on the egg. “Can you feel her? She’s never been so active!”

Mike stood in awe, feeling his daughter shift around beneath the egg’s surface. All around the egg, he could see the swirling, magical colors of her soul as it shifted about like a flower in a storm. The others gathered nearby, eagerly waiting their own turns. Two more hands appeared, and Mike looked up to see that Lily and Dana had pushed their way through to touch it.

The new soul turned to regard each of them, but eventually focused on Mike. He could feel his daughter’s attention now, as if she was studying him

through her shell. He had felt her shift a couple of times while watching her in the past, but never like this. She was present, fully aware now.

“I’m your daddy,” he said, rubbing his palm across the top of the egg. “And I really can’t wait to meet you.”

The soul sparkled with light, something that only he could see. Gossamer strands drifted away from it and brushed against everyone, as if inspecting them. Beneath his palm, he felt something scratch the interior of the egg, then tap it a couple of times.

A crack appeared.

END BOOK 6