

## Cat Radio

“C’mon.” Kisa pushed the grate out of the way and squeezed through the tiny opening. She crawled forward on her belly and stood to discover that they were in a storage room full of wrapping paper. Turning around, she grabbed Holly by the wrists to pull her through. Holly sat down against the wall while Kisa helped Tink. The goblin grumbled when her horns caught on the edge of the grate, then swore when she fell on her face.

The openings in the heating system were typically small, which meant it had taken some time to find one big enough for them to squeeze through. They had walked for several hours, all tied together by the garland around their waists to keep from getting split up. On more than a couple occasions, one of them had fallen in a hole that hadn’t existed for the others, or turned down a brand new hallway that opened up without warning. Eventually, Tink’s goggles had tracked airflow and she led them to an exit big enough for the three of them to fit through.

“Tink tired of fucking vents,” she declared, then stood and brushed off her dress. “Husband big lost, need better strategy.”

“Agreed.” Kisa frowned at the vent, then closed her eyes. They had tried to find Mike, but his location kept shifting all over the place. Sometimes Kisa could sense that he was close by, but then he would shift away as if teleported. The trio had made slow progress, and Holly’s only contribution had been her presence. The elf had been silent the entire time, staring at her feet as they walked.

Tink stuck her head back in the vent and looked around, her nostrils flaring. “Husband wait for Tink!” she hollered, then backed out. “Stupid fucking furnace,” she muttered and flopped down on the ground. “Tummy hurt. Big hungry.”

At hearing these words, Holly flinched, then reached into the pack around her waist and pulled out a handful of cookies. They were sugar cookies shaped like bells, wreaths and candy canes that had been decorated with white frosting and colored sugar crystals. She handed them wordlessly to Tink, then sat down against the wall.

“No make Tink forget?” the goblin asked warily. “Tink no like memory cookies”

Holly shook her head. “They’re magic, but they don’t make you forget,” she said, then took another one from her pouch. She took a bite to show that they were safe. “I’ve got plenty, but a couple should fill you right up. I have them for

long missions away from home, human food isn't really good for elves. Too much salt."

Tink handed Kisa a couple, then ate the rest all at once. Her dress was soon adorned with cookie crumbs, which she meticulously picked up and stuffed into her mouth.

"So are you ready to talk?" Kisa took a bite of the candy cane cookie and moaned. It was the most fantastic thing she had ever tasted, filling her mouth with buttery richness and just a hint of peppermint.

Holly sighed, then wrapped her arms around her legs. "What do you know about Santa?" she asked.

"Beard. Fat. Red suit." Tink listed these off, her mouth still full of cookie crumbs. A few fell out, and she picked up the crumbs and dutifully tucked them back in her mouth.

"He's much more than that." Holly looked back at the vents. "The human world only sees what it wants to, which has always been a double edged sword."

"What do you mean?" Kisa took another bite and fought back the wave of culinary pleasure that rushed through her. If she got a chance, she was taking some of these home with her after this was all over.

"He didn't always use to be the way he is. Santa, he adapts, you know?" Holly stood and turned toward the wall. She pulled a marker from her pack and started drawing on the wall. When she stepped away, she had drawn a man in robes and a tall hat. "This was how people saw Santa in the beginning. Just a simple man with a desire for generosity. He was called Saint Nicholas back then, and he performed miracles and a great many deeds. His legends grew until he did something that all mortals eventually do—he died."

"Doesn't seem dead to me," Kisa said. "Not that I've met him, but we're at the North Pole. Clearly he still exists."

The elf nodded, then drew a picture of a jolly Santa, complete with hat and a giant belly. "There's an entire story between these two pictures," she explained as she capped the marker. "One that nobody ever gets to hear, not even most of the elves."

"What's he hiding?" Kisa asked. "You make it sound so ominous."

Holly scowled, then nodded to herself. "He has a secret, a very big one. Allie told it to me a long time ago, but only because I get to leave the North Pole." She turned back toward the drawings and tapped on the saint first, then Santa. "Hundreds of years is plenty of time for one man to go from this to this. You would think that a man who gives gifts to children would be universally lauded, but that isn't so. He's had his share of enemies over the years."

"Tink have enemies, too." The goblin walked over to Holly and stuck her hand in Holly's pack. "Still hungry, maybe two more cookies."

Holly swatted Tink away and then handed her a couple more. "I'll run out eventually, especially if you keep eating them so fast."

"Tink, here." Kisa had gotten full after eating just one of her cookies, so gave her spare to the goblin. "So, anyway, Santa's enemies?"

"Right." Holly looked back at the wall. "Um, where was I? Oh, yes. So before most of the elves were here, the North Pole was...very different. I'm fuzzy on those details, but it's important to know that Saint Nicholas found this place long before he became Santa Claus. He and the first elf started making toys for little kids, but it was more than that. When he took the place over, some of the locals didn't take too kindly to it. Battles were fought, long affairs that stained the North Pole in blood."

"Santa wear red coat to avoid cleaning bill," Tink added knowingly.

"No, he didn't, eat your darn cookies." Holly scowled at Tink for a moment, then looked back at Kisa. "I don't know the full details on the fights, and even less about why he came to the North Pole in the first place. Alabaster was one of the first elves here, and is one of the most trusted. He knows practically everything, but tells nobody. Outside of the big secret, I only know so much of this extra stuff because I've been around Allie when he's had too much eggnog and he's spilled some details on occasion."

"Hehe, eggnog." Tink smiled. "Tink like magic eggnog."

Holly ignored Tink. "So the big secret is this: Santa is powered by belief. If you could convince everyone in the world that the big man didn't exist, he would simply cease to be."

"That...wait, how is he powered by belief?"

Holly tapped on the picture of Saint Nicholas. "Some time after Saint Nicholas came here, he died, and then was resurrected. Nobody is sure of the

mechanism itself, but he's essentially immortal. Immortality always comes with a hefty price, and his is that he will only exist as the world sees him. It's why Allie wants me to pay attention to how the world sees him, it's to brace for any changes we may experience on our end."

"Hold up." Kisa held up her hands, a stray memory floating through her head. It was rare to remember anything new from her time before the house, so she latched onto it with enthusiasm. "I think I remember something from when I was little. I saw a picture of a black Santa and asked...someone how that was possible. They explained something about how Santa can be black, or white, or Japanese, depending on the child."

Holly tapped her nose for emphasis. "Exactly. Before that soda ad campaign, he was much more diverse in appearance. White robes one day, red the next, was a bit of a toss up. When he's not visiting with a child, he reverts to the overall public perception, which is currently a jolly fat man with a beard in a red coat."

"So if everyone believed Santa was a woman, he would become one?" Kisa asked.

Tink laughed. "Santa make own milk for her cookies!" she declared, then mimed squirting milk from her boobs and catching it on her own tongue.

"Ugh." Holly looked away from the goblin, her cheeks brightening. "But yes, it could happen. Which brings me back to those battles. If Santa had become a warrior for the sake of survival, it would have changed him at a fundamental level. Anything he does becomes a part of his image, which then becomes a part of who he is. I believe the human term is 'doubling down'."

"So if he became a killer..." Kisa pondered the possibilities, imagining a psychotic Santa Claus who murdered his way across the North Pole and then headed south for more victims.

"Precisely. I think you understand." Holly drew a quick picture of a devil on the wall. "Which brings me to the Krampus. A demon from the deepest pits. Nobody knows how it happened, but Santa enslaved this creature to do all his fighting for him. It helped protect his image and win the battle for the North Pole."

"Tink hear of Krampus." The goblin's ears perked up. "Tink remember tales of Krampus from childhood. Be good, or Krampus eat you!"

Kisa looked at Tink with curiosity. To her knowledge, Tink had never brought up her own childhood.

“Sounds right,” Holly added. “The Krampus is a mean old thing who believes in punishing bad children instead of rewarding good ones. After so many of these fights, Santa and Krampus came out on top. Once the North Pole was safe again, Santa locked the Krampus away. He couldn’t let the demon interfere with Christmas.”

“So do you think the Krampus escaped?” Kisa asked.

“Oh, no doubt, he’s out, he has to be. Some things make more sense now. Allie slowed him down while we escaped into the furnace. He would have gotten us all, otherwise.”

“Why Holly need escape?” Tink asked. Her dress was adorned with cookie stains that she occasionally sucked on. “Old ears make sure Holly not lost.”

“Santa needs people to believe in him so that he continues to exist.” Holly took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “If the Krampus has captured the other elves, there’s no telling what happened to them. I could be the only one left for all I know. But that’s not what’s important. You see, the whole world is time locked right now. The elves were created for Santa, not just as his helpers, but as his guardians and protectors. The world remains locked for months on end, maybe even years, it’s always different. Our belief sustains his existence during the lock, and if we’re all snuffed out...”

“Then no more Santa.” Kisa whistled. “That’s some pretty heavy stuff right there. But we’re not time locked either, and I believe in him, so it should be safe, right?”

Holly shook her head. “No. It takes a special kind of belief. Knowing he exists and believing in him are entirely separate things. A child has a special kind of belief, an innocent way of seeing the world that adults lose. They believe without needing proof, which is a very big deal. Elves were created to love Santa, so our belief in him is baked into our magical cookie code. An adult who believes in Santa with child-like innocence despite being told he doesn’t exist is essentially impossible to find these days.”

“Tink believe,” the goblin declared. “Santa bring Tink special person to love, always believe in Santa.”

“You hardly have an innocent worldview,” Holly said with a snort. “You were just pretending to milk yourself. Besides, the first time I met you and said Santa

needed your help, you called me a...word I won't repeat. And told me to do something anatomically impossible."

"Goblins make lots of milk," Tink added, holding a pair of fingers out from the tip of each breast to represent her nipples. It was clear she was avoiding Holly's accusation. "Babies hungry always, come in litters."

"Okay, Tink, enough about your boobs." Kisa snatched a cookie from Holly's pouch before she could react and tossed it to Tink. "So the Krampus is hunting you, and we can't let him have you. Got it. Moving on. Anything else we need to know?"

"If Jack Frost is helping him, there will be others." Holly groaned. "Oh, Santa, I don't know what to do!"

Kisa patted the elf reassuringly on the shoulder, then felt a powerful tug in the center of her body. Her cat ears perked up as she looked into the hole they had crawled out from. Mike had reappeared somewhere nearby, but was still miles out. She fought the urge to crawl back in the hole and find him.

"I need you two to hush for a minute." Kisa sat down in front of the vent with her legs crossed. "We're close enough now that I think we can talk."

"Talk? With who?" Holly looked perplexed.

"Cat radio," Tink said, then sat next to Kisa. "Tell husband Tink miss him biggest."

"I'll tell him you're causing trouble."

"Even better."

Kisa grinned, then shut her eyes and took several deep breaths. Her magic pulsed deep inside her body, then blossomed like a rose as she sent her consciousness forward.

---

"I need another break." Yuki's face was pale as she leaned away from Mike and put her hand on the nearby wall. "Just for a few minutes."

"Yeah, of course." Mike helped her into a sitting position, then moved next to her. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she slumped against him.

"Sorry," she muttered. "It's like I have the worst hangover ever."

“Kitsune can get drunk?” he asked.

“Stupid ones can,” she replied. “It’s been a very long time since I’ve indulged. Set my own tail on fire. Never drink and do magic. You’ll blow your own damned face off.”

“That’s good advice, I’ll have some t-shirts made.”

She snorted, then groaned. “Oh, that hurts so bad. I thought it would be better already.”

“How long were you in there?” he asked out of curiosity. They had traveled silently for the last couple of hours, and were currently in a narrow duct. As they walked along, the metal flexed beneath their feet. There weren’t any vents to see the Workshop through, which worried Mike. If not for the little lightning spider guiding the way, it would be pitch black. “Christmas Past seemed to have quite the upper hand on you by the time I arrived.”

“Days,” she replied. “I lost track.”

“I’m so sorry.” He rubbed her ears, causing her to sigh. “It wasn’t that long for me.”

“I’m glad,” she told him. “I can’t imagine what that stupid ghost put you through.”

“Not much, honestly.” He looked down at the hand he had punched Christmas Past with. His knuckles were scraped raw, despite their soft impact. “Just some old mommy issues that I’ve resolved. They obviously thought it was low-hanging fruit, but I didn’t bite. Would have made me suffer more if they had me relive that Christmas I got food poisoning.”

“Gross.”

“I’m guessing you saw her? Emily, I mean.”

“Yeah.” She sniffled in his arms. “It was super fucked up. Brought back a lot of feelings. Then they took me on a tour of my greatest hits over the years. Made me question a lot of my decisions, I think it’s how they got inside my head.”

“Nasty.” He stroked her fur absent-mindedly. “I used to think about the past all the time. It can be hard to let those things go, doubly so if you have to watch a physical manifestation of them.” It wasn’t just that his life had changed for the better. When Naia had done that initial soul swap with him, she had fixed something in his head. Instead of a past that would surface and scream in his face

during his waking hours, the wounds had been allowed to heal, leaving emotional scars that faded into the background as he swapped souls with the others. In the Dreamscape, his mother's voice used to follow him around and shriek madly in an attempt to bring him misery. Now there was just blessed silence, other than the lapping of the waves against the shores of his mind.

On at least a couple of occasions, someone had tried to use the past against him. While jarring at first, repetition had blunted the edge of that particular weapon.

He thought back to what he had seen in his childhood, and his mother's missed medication. After the trick with his ex-girlfriends, Mike wasn't certain if what he had seen was real or not. If not, then nothing had changed. But if his mother really had been ill and needed that medication to stay stable...

He shook his head and wiped the moisture from his eyes. Nothing could ever change what had happened, and all he could do was feel bad for the little boy playing with toy cars under that Christmas tree. Mikey had a loving family one Christmas, and they were gone the next.

"Hey." Yuki squeezed him. "You good?"

"Just sad," he told her. "It's okay to be sad sometimes."

"That's good, because I'm sad a lot." She shifted in his arms into a more comfortable position and nuzzled against him. "And that's what made me weak. That ghost used my grief to get inside my head, to make me feel useless. You had to come rescue me, and it should always be the other way around."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because that's what I'm good for. I'm a weapon, I'm supposed to protect you."

"You're not just a weapon," he replied. "You're a person, and my friend. We protect each other. I couldn't have survived Oregon without you, we both know that. You're stronger than me in so many different ways, but it isn't always about what you can do for me. You're also an artist. I've seen the easels in your room, I know you're not just painting new tarot cards in there." Yuki had a bad habit of leaving her bedroom door open, and her paintings were usually pointed right at the door. Over the last several months, he had seen landscapes and still-lives that were nothing short of amazing. "There's more to you than just being the ice queen."



Yuki didn't say anything for so long that Mike wondered if she had fallen asleep. Or maybe he had made things awkward by complimenting her so much all at once. Not being able to see her face made it difficult for him to read how his words had landed, and this was a conversation that required a measured approach.

"Do you miss her?" Yuki asked unexpectedly.

Mike knew exactly who she was talking about. Other than Eulalie, almost nobody brought up Velvet around him. He wasn't sure if they were afraid it would hurt his feelings, or if it just made them uncomfortable.

"Every day," he replied. "It's weird to think how big a part of my life she became, even though I only knew her for a few days."

"Love can do that," she said. "It's the sword that can mistake your heart for its own sheath. Every time you wield it, there's a good chance that you only hurt yourself."

"Do you miss Emily?"

The temperature in the hallway dropped, and he felt Yuki tense up. It was almost like her magic was acting defensively, but there was no actual threat. It was likely the question itself, and he almost regretted asking.

"I don't know how to explain it," she said. "I love who she was, but loathe who she became. I dream about her most nights. Sometimes she's just watching me, other times we talk. We reminisce, we argue, it's like she's really there. But sometimes the dreams turn bad, and I'm facing her as she was toward the end. I scream her name, beg her to snap out of it so I can save her, but..."

"That sounds hard." He squeezed her affectionately. "This might sound silly, but if you ever need Lily to go into your dreams, she can probably help." In fact, Lily had offered once to go with him to the Dreamscape and masquerade as Velvet, but he had turned her down. He didn't dare tarnish that final memory of her shimmering eyes as she crossed over on the shores of his soul.

"No thanks. There's a lot in there I'm not really comfortable with her seeing."

"I understand." He sighed and relaxed against the wall. They had walked so far already, and there was no telling how much farther they would have to go. His magic had recuperated a bit, but not enough to power him on the marathon jogs

he was used to. Maybe if Yuki shrunk down, he could carry her and jog for a couple of hours until they found a way out.

Thinking of Yuki, he wondered what sort of tragic secrets she still carried. There was more than a single lifetime of hurt weighing on her soul, and he wished for perhaps the hundredth time that there was a way he could help her with her burdens. Sometimes it seemed she was on the verge of crossing the divide she had built around her, but it always surprised him how quickly she was able to step away from that metaphorical ledge.

*Mike.* It was Kisa's voice, wavering slightly as if spoken through a tube. *Can you hear me?*

*I can.* Even though it was dark, he closed his eyes. Kisa materialized before him, sitting with her legs crossed. *Where are you? Are you all okay?*

*We are.* Kisa's eyes popped open, and she smiled. *I can see you!*

*We mustn't be too far away,* he replied with a grin. Ever since the two of them had connected minds across thousands of miles and a dimensional barrier, they had been working on replicating the feat. When close enough, they could communicate telepathically, but it required a fair bit of concentration. Luckily, he had nothing better to do right now.

"What's going on?" Yuki asked.

"Cat radio," he replied, using Tink's favorite term for it.

"Are they close?" she asked.

"Hold on." It took him a moment to strengthen the connection. *Where are you? We can head that way,* he told Kisa.

*Don't. We're in the Workshop right now, but listen. The furnace is enchanted, the tunnels change without warning.* Kisa tilted her head as if listening to something. *Tink says that you should try to find a way out next time you find a vent. It would be easier to find you out here. Is Yuki still with you?*

*She is.*

*Good. Don't get separated, the vents of the furnace are constantly shifting.* Kisa made a face. *You're being hunted.*

*I know,* he replied. *Just had a pissing match with the ghost of Christmas Past. They weren't happy with the outcome.*

*There's at least two more in there with you. Are you okay?*

*I am, but Christmas Past got away, so they're still out there. Apparently they work for the Krampus, now, whatever that means.*

Kisa nodded. *About that. He's hunting Holly. We need to regroup and figure out a plan. This guy sounds like a real dick, and he might be in there with you, we aren't sure.*

"Mike?" Yuki's voice was a whisper as she grabbed Mike by the front of his jacket and tugged. He opened his eyes and saw that a faint glow was coming from somewhere up ahead. The tunnel was being illuminated by a distant ball of light that disappeared around a distant turn, but didn't go much farther. Its ambient light was more than enough to continue illuminating the main passageway.

He closed his eyes again and saw Kisa. Her image rippled, a result of the distraction. Even when the two of them were in the same house, it was very difficult to maintain a psychic link like this. *Shit, we have company. Stay out of the vents, we'll find a way to escape.*

Kisa gave him a thumbs up, and then vanished.

"It's getting closer," Yuki whispered as she rose, then pulled Mike up. The tiny sphere of light was surrounded by red lines of energy that made it look like a Christmas ornament. Festive music echoed down the corridor, and Mike was fairly certain he was hearing *Auld Lang Syne* being sung.

"Let's head back the way we came," he whispered back. "The vents change anyway, doesn't seem to matter where we go."

She nodded. As they backed away from the approaching light, they passed a corridor that descended like a slide.

"Hold on." Mike led Yuki into the side passage, then knelt down and held his hand to the floor. He summoned a lightning spider and guided it to the corner. The air sizzled around it while it waited for instructions.

"Okay, let's go." He held Yuki's hand as they moved twenty feet down the corridor. At his mental command, the lightning spider jumped around the corridor and shot sparks into the air as it ran away.

The spirit blasted after the spider with the sound of jingling bells. The spider fled down the corridor and away from the spirit, scattering light and sparks in an

attempt to make a scene. Mike and Yuki crouched down as the spirit barreled past them, leaving glitter and snowflakes painted all along the corridor behind it.

There was a loud pop, and the hallway went dark. Mike felt his magic strain at the sudden change in distance between himself and the little spider before it fizzled out.

“It’s gone,” he said, then summoned another spider for light.

“I’m guessing the ghost of Christmas Present?” Yuki pointed at the decorations, which were already fading into colored smoke. “At least it leaves a trail for us to avoid.”

“Then I say let’s avoid it.” He turned down the corridor and felt a tugging in his abdomen. It was Kisa’s presence, suddenly much closer. Had the furnace tunnels shifted again? “I sense the others nearby. I hope that means we’re close enough to the Workshop that we can break out of here. We just need to find a vent big enough to fit through and we’re set. If we don’t, we’ll probably starve or die of thirst while being chased by Christmas movie rejects.”

“I can make us water.” She held out a hand and summoned a small icicle. “There’s not a lot of moisture in here, but this is doable. It’ll sap your body heat, though. I think you’ll freeze to death long before you starve.”

“Least of my concerns right now.” He took the icicle from her and sucked on it. His lips had already cracked. She summoned one for herself and bit the tip off. “That’s bad for your teeth,” he said.

She bared her fangs at him with a smile. “I’ll worry about my teeth. You worry about getting us out of here.”

It was hardly a fair trade, but seeing her smile was worth it.

They continued down the long hallway until it tapered, forcing Mike to crouch. He lost track of how many hours they walked, his stomach grumbling in protest. That single mug of hot cocoa wasn’t going to sustain him forever.

The spider leading them down the tunnel blipped out of existence, carried away by whatever magic ran the place. Mike and Yuki paused, and she summoned a foxfire flame to float ahead of them.

“You’ve got to be running low on magic,” she told him. “Let me lighten the burden.”

“I’m doing okay. The spiders are pretty easy,” he explained. “I’m really just having my magic walk in front of me. Since there’s nobody to sink into, it doesn’t even take that much concentration to maintain. I can even reclaim it, but there’s a small chance it might trigger my sex drive, so I usually just let it fizzle out.”

“How many of them can you control at once?” she asked.

“Three, if we’re talking complete control. If I just make them run until they hit something, I can do quite a few.”

Yuki nodded. “A lot of magic scales up exponentially based on complexity. The fact that you make them look like little spiders probably doesn’t help.”

The comment wasn’t meant to be hurtful, but it felt like he was punched in the gut. He stopped walking, and Yuki squeezed his hand.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” She patted his arm. “It’s not that I forget, I just—”

“It’s fine.” He took a deep breath and let it out. The lightning spiders had been created shortly after Velvet’s death as a way to speak with the spiders in his own house. Their lives were typically simple, and once he had convinced Tink not to swat them, it wasn’t uncommon to spot them in the corners of the room giving him a friendly wave. “It really is. I started using them as a way to stay connected to her and it’s just a habit now. I honestly don’t know if I could make them into a different shape without some serious effort.”

“I’m the same way with ice magic. When my third tail grew, I was so angry and bitter that I connected with ice on a fundamental level. I’m not in that place anymore, but the magic is just as much a part of me as my own hands. I tend to lean on it.” Yuki turned and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight. “But I wish I could learn to lean on others, like you do. I hate feeling isolated, like I’m the fifth wheel of the family. And before you begin, I know I do it to myself.”

“Yuki.” He twisted to hug her properly. The fur of her coat was indistinguishable from her own natural softness, and it was remarkable just how fluffy she felt against him. “I think you already know this, but I’m always here for you, no matter what you need.”

She shifted, and he could make out the outline of her smile in the dim light.

“Thank you,” she said, then looked up at him. Her eyes were shining, and he was suddenly aware of how close her face was to his. Her triple tails swished about, then folded around him as if in an embrace.

Her foxfire went out, and she got on her tiptoes and planted a small kiss on the corner of his lips. One of her fangs caught the edge of his lower lip, but not enough to draw blood.

When Yuki spoke, her voice was barely a whisper. "I'm not entirely certain, but I think I may be falling for you, Caretaker."

"I—" Mike was cut off when she pressed her finger against his lips to shush him.

"Don't say anything, not yet." She let out a sigh and hugged him. "Just hold me a bit longer, and then we need to keep moving. You won't be able to survive the cold like I can."

Nodding, he stayed in her embrace, marveling at how much heat radiated off of her. Was that part of her magic or just the fur on her body? He couldn't help himself as he buried his face in the fur of her collar and inhaled the scent of the woods. It wasn't just memories of Oregon that were triggered, but every camping trip he had gone on as a child.

"Are you...sniffing me?" Yuki asked.

"Maybe a little. Sorry." He lifted his head, the cold air of the vents immediately kissing his cheeks. "You were just so warm, it made me feel a little too comfortable is all."

"I see." She took a step back and swatted his nose with the tip of one of her tails. "I was more wondering if it was a trick you picked up from our resident hellhound."

"Nope. If I got something from her, I don't know what it is." He made a face. "And again, I'm really sorry."

"Don't be." She looped her arm through his. "I'm a fox. I use smell to identify everyone, even you."

"Really?" he asked.

"Yeah. I just don't need to bury my head in their hair first. Listen." She chuckled, then sniffed the air loudly as if to prove her point. "Wait, what the hell is that?"

Mike thought she was screwing with him until she snapped her fingers, summoning the foxfire once more. Instead of the long conduit of the ventilation system, they stood in an opulent room decorated in Christmas greenery.

Mistletoe, holly, and ivy were draped along the walls on golden hooks. A large table piled high with meats, breads, and all sorts of holiday dishes flooded the room with steam and the sweet odors of Christmas dinner.

“Ah, shit,” Mike whispered, his eyes traveling to the figure sitting at the other end of the table. It was a giant, easily twelve feet tall with a thick, fur-lined green robe. Long auburn curls tumbled down the giant’s shoulder, and when it leaned forward into the light, Mike realized with a start that the Ghost of Christmas Present was a woman.

She held up a large cornucopia which blazed to life with enough fire to light the rest of the room. There was a wicked glint in her eye as she held the torch forward to see them better. Her sleeve slid along her arm, revealing a muscular forearm.

“Come in!” exclaimed the ghost. “Come in and know me better, man!”

“We’re...already in,” Yuki muttered as she gazed around the room. “How are we supposed to come in when we’re already here?”

The green robes hung so loosely on Christmas Present that large, erect nipples were revealed while she leaned forward. She eagerly stacked a plate with food and held it toward them with one hand.

“I am the Ghost of Christmas Present! Look upon me!” She shook her head, her curls riding across pendulous breasts in waves. She wore a wreath of holly like a crown, and her hands were the size of dinner plates. There was a mischievous grin on her face as she sat back in her seat, the robes now folded open to reveal her chest. She set the plate of food down and slid her hands along her breasts, pushing them together to create the biggest press of cleavage Mike had ever seen.

“Um...I think something’s wrong with this one,” Mike said to Yuki.

“There’s something wrong with all of them,” she replied in a hushed tone. “At least this spirit isn’t a creepy little fucker like the last one.”

“I would say this is a different kind of creepy,” Mike whispered in return.

Christmas Present let out a joyous laugh that rocked the room.

“You have never seen the like of me before!” she exclaimed, then stood. Her robe briefly opened to reveal that she was, in fact, wearing absolutely nothing underneath. Between her belly button and auburn pubes shaped like an upside down christmas tree was a scar that looked very much like the outline of one of

his electrical spiders. Mike's best guess was that the spirit had caught up to his little lightning spider, but had no idea what that meant in the long-term. Based on the ghost's behavior, though, he had a pretty good idea that his magic was to blame. "Now, come! It is Christmas Day and we have plenty to celebrate!"

"I'm not sure if we should be thrilled or frightened," Mike said, then eyed the plate of food. For now, his precognition said he was safe, and he was famished. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Yuki sniffed the air, then nodded. "I prefer fighting on a full stomach. Other than our horny hostess, I think we're in the clear, but don't take your eyes off of her."

Mike fought back a laugh, practically fighting to pull his gaze away from Christmas Present's breasts. The giant saw him looking and grinned, then shimmered, causing her pendulous breasts to sway. He wasn't entirely certain where the danger in the situation lay, but at least he would have something nice to look at in the meantime. Christmas Present smiled at the attention, then sipped from a massive silver goblet. She eyed him hungrily, then licked her lips.

"Oh, don't worry. I won't," he said.

---

Kisa let out the breath she had been holding in as Mike faded from view. She opened her eyes to the sight of Holly watching her intently from only a foot away.

"Well?" she asked.

"They're okay, but I guess they got into a fight with the ghost of Christmas Past."

Holly groaned. "Oh, Santa, everything is absolutely fudged right now. If the spirits are attacking people, what hope do we have?"

"Tink think need better plan." Tink was lying on her back, her eyes on the ceiling and her feet swaying back and forth as if listening to some unheard tune. "Husband escape furnace, but then what? Pointy ears still in big trouble."

Kisa nodded. "She's right. We know that the Krampus is taking the elves, but where? Is there anyone else here who can help us? What should we be doing?"



Holly had turned away from them, her lower lip trembling. There was a lot riding on the elf's tiny shoulders, but she wasn't offering any ideas.

"Hmm." Tink sat up, then walked over to Holly and snatched her marker away. "List problems first, focus on solutions." She turned toward the nearest wall and drew a rough sketch of the furnace, followed by a demon. "No heat, Workshop getting too cold. Need restart furnace, or pointy ears freeze. Fuck-face demon—"

"Tinker!" Holly clutched her ears.

Tink rolled her eyes. "Bad demon want capture pointy ears, don't know why. Tink can fix furnace, but can't protect sexy elf same time."

"So we should wait until Mike finds us." Kisa looked back at the vent. She felt a shifting in her body as Mike moved away from her. "How long will that take?"

"Husband smart, come back to Workshop. We smart, too, find safe place to watch Workshop until he comes back."

"The cameras." Holly looked up. "We have a room with monitors that watch the whole Workshop! If we go there, we can find him as soon as he gets back!"

"Good idea. Let's head there right aw—" Kisa was interrupted by a loud clanging sound from the vent, followed by a low grumbling. It sounded like Mike's voice, but it was distorted. Had he found them already?

The shrieking sound of metal on metal filled the air as a specter passed through the wall. It was roughly the same height that they were, but its porcelain face was twisted up in agony.

"Miser! Miser!" it screamed in Mike's voice, then locked eyes with Holly. Its whole body swirled around like a tiny galaxy while its cherubic face remained stationary. It let out a rasping growl, then charged.

"Oh, no you don't!" Kisa hollered, jumping between the spirit and the elf. It collided with her when she sank her claws into it. The spirit looked surprised as it disentangled itself, muttering in a different language as steam escaped from the scratches. It froze in place, then shouted more gibberish as it swiped at Kisa with a long arm that was more tentacle than limb. Tink tried to jump on the ghost, but passed through harmlessly as it grabbed a terrified Holly by the wrist.

“I’m here about your welfare,” it whispered from every corner of the room at once. For a moment, the spirit separated into several distinct entities that whispered to each other before snapping back together.

“Tink here to kick ass!” The goblin’s goggles were now switching lenses at a manic pace as she pulled the hammer from her belt. She dodged a flurry of blows, then threw the hammer hard at the spirit’s face. It passed through the entity and struck a pipe behind it. The pipe cracked, releasing a high pressure blast of water that caught the spirit in the head and sent it across the room. Kisa grabbed Holly by the hand and ran toward the door where Tink waited for them.

The goblin’s eyes widened, and Kisa looked back just as the ghost of Christmas Past lunged for them, sprouting spectral limbs. The trio clung to each other as they were carried across the hall and then passed through the opposite wall.

Darkness surrounded them as the spirit pulled them past spheres of light. Tink tried to bite the tentacle holding her while Holly screamed in panic. They spun as they fell, whirling about like a mutant maple seed. Tink was on the far end now, clinging tightly to Holly’s ankles. Holly’s tights slid along her legs, causing the goblin to lose her grip and fall away from them.

“Tink!” Kisa didn’t dare let go of Holly, and could only watch helplessly as Tink vanished inside one of the bubbles. Growling, she squeezed Holly’s waist as they collided with a bubble of their own, and the darkness washed away from them to reveal an old kitchen with a woman standing at a stove, stirring something in a pot.

The colors of the room were washed out like someone had wiped them away with a wet rag before they could dry completely. When the woman turned, it was to reveal that her face was missing. Where her features should have been was just smooth, dark skin. Her jaw moved, as if she was speaking, but no sound emerged.

A small girl walked into the room carrying a stuffed owl that had seen better days. Kisa stared, mouth open, as the child climbed onto a nearby chair and took the spoon from the woman. Other than the occasional clink of the spoon against the pan, the scene was silent.

The girl was unmistakably a younger version of herself. This completely human version of Kisa laughed in response to something the woman said, then continued stirring while the woman started chopping vegetables.

“Who is that?” Holly stood on wobbly legs, then grabbed Kisa by the wrist. “Where’s her face?”

“I don’t know,” Kisa replied. Was it her mom? Or someone else?

“It’s your grandmother.” Christmas Past’s voice was little more than a wheeze from the corner of the room. The spirit was splattered across the wall, its body a mess of limbs. Their face rested in the center of their torso near the floor. It had tilted sideways, light shining out of only one eye. “That’s all I can tell you for certain. Your past, it’s...I can’t...”

“Shh.” Kisa shushed the spirit and moved closer to the little girl. The child leaned away from the pot so that the old woman could dump extra veggies into the soup. She stole a carrot from the cutting board and munched on it casually as her grandmother pulled out a bowl of flour. It was a memory that was almost in reach, if she could just remember a bit more, maybe she would know who she was.

The spirit coughed, and the scene rippled as they were transported to another room. The woman and Kisa were sitting under a small tree in the living room, with only a couple of presents underneath. Pictures adorned a nearby wall, but any people inside the frames had been smeared away.

“Why am I with my grandmother? Can you tell me her name?” Excited, Kisa moved away from Holly and toward the woman. Her face was still missing, but Kisa felt the tug of familiarity when she got a look at the woman’s hands as she playfully shook a gift. They were covered in calluses and old scars, hands that had been used for hard labor. Despite this, Kisa somehow knew that they were gentle, and would feel like the softest leather if she could touch them.

“I...can’t...” Ink leaked from the corner of the spirit’s mouth. “Your past is... broken.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Holly knelt down by the spirit and took one of their hands in her own. “Why are you trying to hurt us?”

Christmas Past sighed, then squeezed Holly’s hand. “He’s taking over,” they replied. “He wants Christmas to... himself.”

“Are you dying?” Holly went to touch the ink flowing out of Christmas Past’s eyes, but they slapped her hand away.

“The past cannot be killed,” they whispered, then looked at Kisa. “But it can be lost.” They wiped the ink off their face and contemplated it on their fingertips.

“Don’t let his foul magic taint you, Holly. Don’t let him...change who you are. Or change Christmas.”

“We need to help the spirit,” Holly declared. “This isn’t what they’re supposed to be like, they’re meant to help people. I think...I think they’re dying.”

“I’ll be fine...by next Christmas.” Their weak smile became a frown as the ink reversed course and flowed back into their eyes. The light in their eye flickered like a candle in the wind. “Shouldn’t have taken...all three of you. Was already hurt, but...so angry. Couldn’t...control...sorry...”

“Where is Tink?” Kisa demanded.

The spirit looked up. A large crack appeared in the ceiling above them, and another version of Christmas Past fell through it. It crumpled like a leaf on impact with the floor, then crawled toward its duplicate letting out a wail of agony. The two of them flowed together to form a slightly more cohesive spirit filled with sparkling lights that soon dimmed.

From the crack, a figure hopped down, murder in her eyes. She clutched an ink-soaked screwdriver in one hand.

“Tink!” Kisa hugged her friend, but the goblin ignored her.

“Stupid ghost fuck stay out of Tink’s head,” she growled, pointing her tool at Christmas Past. When she swore, cracks appeared all around the room. “Piece of shit read Tink’s thoughts, broke their fucking head! Now let Tink and friends go, or else.”

“Get her away from me!” Christmas Past’s voice altered in pitch as if two of them spoke. “Don’t let her touch me, she’s broken!”

“Tink show you what broken means.” Tink slid out of Kisa’s arms and reached for Christmas Past. The ghost let out a weak cry of agony as it tried to slap her away and failed. Tink stabbed Christmas Past in the face, her hand and screwdriver passing harmlessly through the spirit to strike the wall behind them.

The room shattered like glass, falling away from them to reveal that they were now somewhere else. Kisa felt her heart sink as the vision of her grandmother vanished, trying hard to get one last look at those hands that had raised her. She could almost feel them caressing her cheek, or wiping tears from her eyes.

They now stood in a dining hall, adorned with scraps of wrapping paper and broken decorations. Although the lights were off, large windows along the ceiling allowed the Northern Lights to stream in, providing plenty of illumination. On the floor, Christmas Past was nothing more than a shrinking ink blot with a face the size of a baseball.

“He’s coming for you,” they whispered, and then sank through the floor with a burbling sound like hot oil.

“Good,” Tink spat. “If Tink see stupid horn head, Tink smash dumb fuck face!” She looked over at Holly, whose features had gone pale. When she addressed the elf, her tone softened dramatically. “We go now. Find room with cameras. Watch for husband. Tink hate stupid Christmas ghost, make Tink see too much bad from childhood.”

Holly nodded, then stood. She rubbed her eyes like someone who had been asleep for a long time, then walked toward the door of the dining hall. Adjusting her outfit, she turned to face them and nodded.

“Let’s do this,” she said, her voice squeaking at the end.

“Hey.” Kisa grabbed Holly by the hand. “You’re not alone. We’re with you.”

Tink grabbed Holly’s other hand, then smirked. “Pretty elf owe Tink big thanks. Maybe give Tink special kiss later, use lots of tongue.”

“Tink!” Kisa looked at the goblin in shock. “Are you serious right now?”

Holly’s face was so red, she looked like a Christmas bulb about to burn out.

“Big serious,” Tink added. “Holly very good kisser, treat Tink like candy cane.” She winked at Holly. “Tink remember. Big fun, many hours. Way better than hammer.”

The tension broke when Holly laughed and shook her head. “You really are trouble, aren’t you?”

“Trouble for some. Fun for others.” Tink licked her lips lewdly. “Both if Holly lucky.”

Holly laughed again, then led them out of the dining room. They were in a large building built like a lodge with criss-crossing beams everywhere. Kisa lost track of the long hallways and huge rooms, and was baffled when they came to a

large set of wooden doors that led outside. The northern lights glowed ominously on Holly's skin as she turned to face them.

"If we cut across the courtyard, we'll save ourselves hours," she said. "But that does mean going outside. I suspect it may be colder than usual."

"You don't say." Kisa gazed at the ice-frosted windows. "As compared to what? This is the arctic."

"Yeah, about that. We vent excess heat from the furnace to keep the North Pole from freezing over, it's actually quite pleasant. The sunstone is essentially a tiny star, not sure if you were aware. Plenty of energy to provide heated walkways, hot cocoa stands every couple of blocks, we even tried a waterslide one year, but had to shut it down after a couple of reindeer got stuck." Holly gave the door a shove, but it was stuck. "Sprinkles, we might not even be able to—"

Tink kicked the door hard enough that the glass cracked as it burst open, sending ice skittering across the frosted walkways away from them. The icy breeze that blew in chilled Kisa through her fur, and she pulled her hood up.

"Guess we're headed outside," Kisa muttered as Holly led the way. She looked over her shoulder, feeling Mike shift away from her once more. Even worse, the memory of her grandmother's hands were already fading, her memories much like snowflakes on hot steel.

Together, they ran out into the cold, Arctic air.

---

Jack Frost stood before a bank of monitors, staring intently at the screens beneath the *Workshop* category. One of the displays was overrun with shadows and static that shifted around as the Krampus tore apart one of the many woodshops. The demon's presence couldn't be properly displayed by the monitoring system, a quirk of his unnatural existence, and so it appeared that dark static was ripping apart a drill press right now, metal and wood alike being tossed through the air with abandon.

When the Krampus left the camera's view, the screen returned to normal as the next feed scrambled.

Jack's eyes flicked across the monitors, hoping to see any sign of that man from earlier, Mike. The odds that the human would pose a problem were slim, but

still existed. When Jack had returned to the main level, the Krampus had been waiting in the central hub for a full report.

It was surmised that an elf must have brought the man and his friends here, so the Krampus had left Jack behind to hunt them down. Apparently an elf had gotten away by fleeing into the vents, which had sent the Krampus into a rage.

Jack shivered at the thought of all that unbridled rage. The damage to the exterior of the furnace had been extensive, and would have been worse if the Krampus had not needed to use it later for his own reasons.

The floorboards behind Jack groaned as a heavy figure pushed the top of her bulk through the doorway.

“Has he found them yet?” The deep voice had a hiss to it that reminded Jack of escaping steam.

“Not yet, Grýla.” Jack turned and saw that the giantess had only squeezed the top half of her massive bulk through the door. Her face was misshapen and her hair dull with grease and filth. Gnarled fingers left gouges in the floor as she shifted her weight from one hand to the other. “Any news from your sons?”

“They still seek the sleigh.” Grýla licked her lips anxiously. “There were...complications.”

“How so?” When the Krampus had taken the North Pole, he had become enraged to discover the sled was missing. Luckily, Jack had the foresight to place a tracking beacon in Santa’s bag. The Yule cat was capable of tracking it, but Jack had learned long ago that you never rely on a cat for anything of importance.

“The sleigh has been discovered by someone else.” Grýla grimaced, then flexed her torso. The frame of the door cracked, then splintered. “My sons chased them, but they escaped by flying away.”

“So who has the sleigh?” With the entire world frozen, there should have been no competition for the sleigh. Were these allies of Santa? If so, then why hadn’t they just helped him defeat the Krampus? What did they want with the sleigh?

At the thought of Santa, Jack looked at the monitor in the far corner of the console. The camera there overlooked an unfurnished room with a crystalline mirror set in silver. Fog swirled just beneath its surface, but the bulky figure of a man in a red coat trapped on the other side of the polished surface could be seen.

It was the same mirror the Krampus had been trapped in up until this morning. If not for Jack, the Krampus would still be there, slamming fur covered claws against his shimmering prison.

Jack picked up the large snow globe that sat beneath the monitors. With a quick shake, sparkling snowflakes swirled around the interior. As they parted, it revealed a bony figure in Santa's robes, sitting next to a woman clutching a thermos. As the scene shifted outward, it revealed a massive three-headed dog pulling the sleigh through the air.

"What in the world?" With another shake, the scene vanished, revealing the Earth. A tiny golden light was now over the Pacific with a golden arrow pointed at Australia. "It looks like they're taking Santa's usual route."

Grýla bowed her head. "These are formidable adversaries. We need your help."

"I am unavailable." Jack looked once more at the monitor where the Krampus was. Until the human or the elf was found, there was simply too much at risk. "Do you not have other allies?"

"Bah!" Grýla spat on the ground. "My children are many, but they are stupid. The cat is no match for the hellhound, and my lazy husband is of no use to me."

"Fine. Here." Jack summoned a handful of ice crystals and approached the giant. Grýla bowed her head in reverence. "When they land somewhere cold enough for snow, have your children sprinkle this on the ground. It will summon the help they need, but they need to actually participate. They say that opportunity only knocks once for a reason, so make sure your sons actually put in the effort."

"You are too kind." Grýla pulled a small bag from her belt and held it out for Jack to tilt the crystals inside. "I will see it done."

"Good. There is too much at stake. A chance like this will never come again." Jack looked back at the monitor with the mirror.

"Why doesn't he just smash it?" asked Grýla. "And seal away the Saint for all time?"

Jack had pondered that same exact question hours ago. Santa's capture had been a private affair for the Krampus, but it had required that Jack lure the big man himself to the mirror room. Great pains had been taken over the last six



months to brainwash a group of elves into complying with the Krampus' plan to free him. They had been taught to lie, to conceal, and most importantly of all, to obey Jack and the Krampus.

Nobody knew why the protective wards around the North Pole had weakened earlier in the year, but it had allowed the Krampus to reach out to Jack and the others using some type of astral projection. His arguments had been very persuasive, and they all stood to benefit from a change in ownership. Tonight was supposed to be the culmination of all that hard work.

Now, though, Jack had doubts. At first, the Krampus had been singularly focused on the elves, dragging them to an unknown location beneath the Workshop. They had largely obeyed him, though Grýla had been forced to hunt down a few stragglers with strong enough willpower to resist the Krampus' commands.

But then, instead of solidifying his victory by banishing Santa to the void, the Krampus kept him as a trophy. In fact, he had been visiting Santa when Jack had called up to let him know that mortals had been tracked to the furnace room. It was as though the demon couldn't help himself, he was consistently dropping by to torment Santa, but to what end?

"Grýla? Out of curiosity, what did the Krampus promise you?" Jack looked back at the monitors to check that the Krampus was still tearing apart the woodshop. He could move surprisingly fast when he wanted, and the last thing Jack wanted was for the Krampus to show up unannounced and interrupt Grýla's answer.

The giantess blinked as if processing the question, then grinned. "A return to our former glory," she said, the bag now tied to her belt. "No longer will my family be trapped in the ice, our legacy mocked and forgotten. Santa found a way to bind us here in the name of protecting his precious little believers, and we want out."

"To do what?" Jack asked.

Grýla started to say something, then smiled instead. "To live as we would," she replied. "No more, no less."

"Hmm." Jack frowned, wondering what that even meant. Grýla was being coy, which wasn't something the giants were known for.

Grýla coughed into her hand, as if aware of Jack's sudden scrutiny. "And what does the Krampus have to offer Old Man Winter himself, I wonder?"

An icy wind blew through Grýla's greasy locks, causing the giant to cry out in surprise as she bowed her head. Frost formed along her flanks and spread across the wall over the door.

"I am neither old, nor a man!" Jack retorted, grinding her teeth together. It was a centuries' old misconception, one that angered her to no end. There had once been a period when winter had been ruled by the old gods, mighty beings across the world who could steal the heat from a summer's day with a single breath. But their time had long passed, leaving behind others in their stead. Once a minor deity, Jack Frost had outlived those ethereal beings and risen in power to rightfully claim the mantle of winter's ruler, only to live in the shadow of those who had come before her.

It didn't help that her body lacked feminine curves, nor that her hair was short. She kept most of it tucked beneath her hat to keep the ends from becoming brittle. Once her hair was past shoulder length, it lost whatever natural protection her body had from the cold. She definitely wasn't about to wear a dress to clear up any confusion either, and she would often spend so much time in the ice that a beard of frost would form along her chin. The misconception was understandable, but nobody seemed to care when she corrected them. Jacqueline Frost wasn't even her real name, but it was still the one she had chosen for herself upon becoming winter's mistress.

The worst offenders were all those stupid movies and cartoons about Santa that had depicted her as a man. The Krampus had promised her that things were going to change for the better, that he would ensure that the world would properly recognize her for who she was. Christmas would mean something again and not just be a commercial holiday intended to bail corporations out of debt.

She fondly remembered the old days, before Santa had donned the red suit. The two of them had been friendly, and she had even ridden in the sleigh with him a few times to deliver gifts. She would ice the roofs over to ensure a smooth landing for the sleigh, and he would bring her spare cookies and treats that had been left out for him.

Now, though, he was so concerned about his own image that she was ignored, relegated to ensuring the North Pole was adequately frozen when Christmas came rolling around. At some point, she had become background noise,

just like Grýla and her kin. Unlike the giants, she still had a job to do, but received no compensation or appreciation for it.

Jack wasn't dumb. She knew that freeing the Krampus would be seen as a betrayal. But the demon had known all the right words to say, and she had jumped into this mess with both feet, thinking there was no other choice. Impulsive decisions were rare for her, but she was simply full of them these days.

"Leave," she commanded. Grýla groveled for a moment longer, then forced her bulk back through the doorway. The floor creaked as Grýla moved down the hall away from the monitor room.

"Fuck." Jack turned her attention back to the monitors and noticed that Santa was staring at the camera, as if he could see her. He nodded knowingly, and she was half tempted to go down and shatter that mirror herself.

Instead, she turned off that monitor. With the Krampus still digging for that last elf, there was nothing to do for now but act as his eyes while he threw a tantrum. The silence gave her plenty of time to consider the ramifications of her actions, and even more doubts began to surface.

What if the Krampus didn't keep his promise? It was hard to know if his word would be any good, especially if they couldn't retrieve Santa's sleigh. It had once been a chariot fit for a god, capable of sailing across the sky. She had no idea how Santa had gotten his mitts on the thing, but there was plenty she didn't know about the big man.

Somewhere, a bell rang. Jack turned her attention toward the far wall where a shadow melted through and fell to the ground. It was the spirit of Christmas Past, its pale features like melted wax.

Jack vaulted the railing and ran to the spirit, then knelt by their side.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

The spirit shook their head, casting dark splotches onto the ground. "I was not made for this," they whispered. "Do not let him remake you in his own image."

"Who? Krampus?"

The spirit sighed, the lights in their eyes flickering out. "Am I the last of my kind?" they asked.

Jack laughed, but there was no humor behind it. “Of course not. Next Christmas, you’ll have a brand new sibling.”

The spirit shuddered. “I’m not so sure,” they whispered.

“He did this to you? That man. Mike.”

Christmas Past tried to answer, but couldn’t. Their lips moved, but no sound came out. Dark fluid pooled in the corners of their eyes, and then they let out a maniacal laugh. The spirit’s body shimmered with twinkling lights as it proceeded to melt into the floorboards.

Jack’s hands trembled as she pulled the silver ornament from her pocket and willed it to life. Whirling lights spun around the spirit, pulling it back inside the ornament to wherever it went while it slumbered. The spirit hadn’t just been defeated—it had been corrupted. Guilt flooded through her. How was she to know that the spirits could be damaged, let alone altered by their encounters?

Maybe that was the reason Santa used them sparingly. It had been decades since the last time they had been unleashed, and any harm that came to them lay solely at her hands. All she had expected was for the spirits to delay Mike, or scare him off completely. The Krampus had explained that they could be used for such purposes, but now she wasn’t sure.

No. The human in the ducts was clearly a tougher foe than expected, that was all. She didn’t dare consider the possibility that the Krampus had lied to her, because it was an idea she was unwilling to accept.

Storming back to the cameras, she glared at them intensely. If Mike was going to try and sneak out of the vents, she would see him. There were dozens of monitors, and hundreds of cameras. She cycled through them until she felt like she had identified the best locations to catch anyone sneaking around.

“I’m going to find you,” she whispered, thinking of the man from the furnace. When he had spoken to her, she had felt an odd compulsion in the center of her body, a sudden willingness to not only obey, but to please. For a short moment, there had been nothing she wanted more than to do absolutely whatever he asked of her in the hopes of gaining his favor. She wasn’t sure what kind of magic he was using, but she wouldn’t let it happen again.

Movement on a corner monitor caught her attention, and she spotted three figures standing next to a door. It was a goblin, an elf, and a woman with cat ears. Jack thumbed the walkie-talkie at her hip, ready to call the Krampus, but paused.

She thought once more about her interaction with Mike, and how he had deliberately targeted the napkin she had used to track them.

It wasn't the elf, she knew that much. Either the goblin or the cat had some sort of connection to him, one she could exploit. If she told the Krampus, he would rush there and potentially kill them. But if she got there first, maybe she could figure out how to use that link to find Mike.

On the camera, the goblin kicked the door open, and they ran outside.

It was selfish, and a stupid idea, but after watching the Krampus trash several rooms while having a temper tantrum, she felt entitled to it. With a grin, she dashed out of the monitor room, her body hovering inches off the ground as she glided down the hallway and toward an exit of her own. When she shoved open the door, the cold air greeted her with welcoming flurries.

"Let it snow," she commanded, and the northern lights were soon hidden away by whirling snowflakes.