

Future Problems

Mike was lying in the fountain, his head nestled between Naia's breasts as he watched the technicolor clouds of the Dreamscape drift overhead. The nymph lovingly toyed with his hair as he commanded the clouds to change shape above them, transforming them into nonsensical creatures that chased each other in circles.

"Does your head feel better?" she asked.

"Getting there." His eyes flicked to the large crack that still dominated one section of the sky. Shortly after proclaiming to Jack Frost that he was the man who was going to save Christmas, his entire head had exploded with pain. Yuki had managed to catch him on the way down, but everything went dark. When he next opened his eyes, he was in the Dreamscape.

Thinking he had just lost consciousness, he tried to wake up. Usually this was an easy feat, but a series of giant cracks in the sky had pulsed with a terrible light, driving him back to the ground in pain. The cracks were fading over time, and he intended to leave once they were gone. "I don't know why more spas don't offer this as a service. People would pay good money to relax in a hot spring with a perfect pair of breasts like yours."

"I'm sure someone out there does it for a living. You just don't get out much."

He laughed, then groaned when the crack widened. "Why does it have to hurt in here?" he groaned.

"Your first experience with soul magic was akin to running a marathon, silly." Numerous hands rubbed his body, helping him relax. "I pushed you much farther than you should have been able to go, and you accidentally absorbed some of that golden light. I was able to keep it from frying your brain, so the headache is a consolation prize."

"Thanks for that." He reached a hand up and patted her breast affectionately. "I don't know what would have happened to Yuki, but it wasn't good."

"She probably would have ended up like the snow bitch." Lily said from nearby. She was lying on a banana-shaped floaty. In the Dreamscape, Naia's fountain was often the size of a wave pool, likely for reasons Freud would happily spend hours dissecting. "With swiss-cheese for a brain."

“That’s not very nice,” Naia said.

“And?” Lily turned her attention toward Mike, lowering her sunglasses for dramatic effect. “Bitch brought an army, had a psychotic break, and is now playing the part of Stroke Victim Elsa on Santa’s couch.”

Even though he was asleep, this piece of Lily was able to hear what was happening around him through his ears if she sat somewhere quiet and concentrated hard enough. It had taken her quite a bit of time, but eventually she reported that half of Jack’s body was paralyzed, and she had been placed in an armchair by the fire. The ice monsters were still outside, but most of them had spread through the village to do whatever it was ice monsters did. To his relief, Yuki and Holly were watching over him while also keeping wary eyes on Jack.

Speaking of Yuki...

Mike looked over toward the house. A sullen kitsune sat there with her knees pulled up to her chest, staring at him from between her legs.

“You still good?” he asked her.

Yuki’s soul flipped him the bird, which caused a small bird to fly away from her that shouted “fuck you!” before it disappeared in the sky.

“She’ll adjust,” Naia said, rubbing his shoulders. “The part of her soul that she gave you was heavily damaged. It’s almost like she knew this was a safe place for it to heal.”

“As long as she’s house-trained, whatever.” Lily sipped on a fruity cocktail drink that she summoned from the ether. “Oh, and not that anyone asked me, but fucking that elf girl while messing with someone’s soul? Totally gave me a chub.”

Mike snapped his fingers, causing Lily’s banana to disappear. The succubus fell into the water, spilling her drink and disappearing beneath the surface. Naia laughed, then moved out of the way when Lily’s arms burst up from the water to grab Mike around the waist.

He was pulled beneath the surface, but wasn’t worried. It was his Dreamscape, and he could tell Lily was just playing with him. He wrestled with her under the water for a minute, her suddenly naked flesh against his. When she kissed him, he relaxed, only to grunt and break away when she pinched his nipple too hard.

“Bitch,” he muttered above the water. “That stings.”

“Ah, did I hurt your feelings?” Lily splashed him, and he reciprocated. Since it was the Dreamscape, Lily smacked the water hard, causing it to form into a giant dick. Much like a whale breaching the ocean, the massive member fell sideways, crushing Mike beneath its weight. He was going to reciprocate, but his head started pounding again.

“Okay, that’s enough. He needs rest.” Naia’s voice came from everywhere at once as a whirlpool formed, sucking Lily below the surface as Mike popped to the top. Moments later, Lily’s bikini floated to the top.

“Is she okay?” Mike asked.

“Unless she’s allergic to saltwater, she’ll be fine.” Naia rubbed his forehead. “And don’t worry about hurting her feelings. “She installed an intricate water slide under the fountain, she gets flushed on purpose at least once a week.”

“How intricate?”

“More than half an hour long. Has at least three loop-de-loops. Tink helped her install animatronics.”

“Dare I ask?”

“Just dinosaurs.”

“Sounds tame.”

“They’re all fucking.”

“There we go.” He laughed, then winced when it turned into painful thunder.

“Oh, lover. What am I going to do with you?” Naia held him tight against her body. Even though his arrival had been abrupt, his Dreamscape was always a good place to go to recalibrate. It didn’t have quite the extreme time bending properties it did if the real world Lily were here, but he was still capable of stretching a few minutes into an hour if he needed to.

Some of the others dropped by to keep him company. Though each woman was technically a part of his soul, they all had their autonomy and did the things they would largely do in the real world, which meant he didn’t always see them. The Dreamscape was basically his own personal version of heaven.

Eventually Ratu joined them, her elaborate kimono spreading out on the water like a giant lily pad.

“There you are.” Mike reached out for her and caught the tips of her fingers. With a small tug, Ratu floated in his direction. “What have you been up to?”

“Exploring the edges of this place. I find it fascinating that your soul is locked into a location without true spatial qualifications. If you dig deep enough, you reach water instead of bedrock or sand. After years of exploration, I can say that your soul truly is an island on the astral sea.” Ratu looked up at the clouds, then frowned at the dull crack in the sky. “What is that?” she asked.

Mike explained the events leading up to his current state. Ratu remained silent except to ask a few clarifying questions. Once finished, she contemplated for a minute, then turned to look at him.

“You do realize the impossible confluence of events necessary to get you to where you are, correct?”

“I think you mean improbable. If it was impossible, I wouldn’t be knee deep in all this shit that Santa started.”

“Bah.” Ratu waved her hand dismissively at him. “I don’t refer to what’s going on in the North Pole. You manipulated someone’s soul today, Caretaker.”

“Well...it’s just an extension of Naia’s powers, so I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

The naga snorted, then rolled on her side to look at him. “That’s where you’re wrong. You see, Naia’s ability to manipulate souls is intrinsic to her nature, and she did not gift it to you.”

“No? I figured that was all her.” Mike tilted his head backward to see Naia’s face. “Right?”

She shook her head. “Remember that I’m just an offshoot, a snapshot from the moment we first swapped. A nymph can grant many gifts, but the ability to do soul magic is not one of them. I know as much as you do about your current abilities.”

“You seemed pretty nonchalant about it,” he said.

“And?” She playfully tweaked his nose. “Where do we draw the line at being surprised? When you went to the Underworld? Fought the Jersey Devil? Banged one of Santa’s elves?”

“That’s fair,” he admitted. “Speaking of Holly, I haven’t seen her in here.”

“Oh, she’s here.” Naia grinned. “She snuck off with Tink a while ago to see her hammer collection.”

“Sounds like a euphemism for something,” he muttered.

“Back to what I was saying,” Ratu said. “You have the ability to touch and manipulate spirits, which I imagine is due to Cecilia’s presence. Magic is typically a separate entity altogether, so I assume that ability may come from me. When I break down objects for enchanting, I can pull several of these threads and weave them somewhere else. So you are using some variation of my own ability to do a similar task with magical beings.”

“That sounds kind of dangerous, actually.”

“Indeed.” Ratu fixed him with a serious look. “The immediate ramifications would put you in quite a bit of danger should it become public knowledge.”

“How so?” he asked, but realized immediately what she referred to. Ratu had the ability to isolate magical properties in an object and transfer them to another, thus combining enchantments. The soul swaps he performed with the others had already granted him fantastic abilities of his own, but what if he could simply rip the desired traits from one person and implant them in another? Could he theoretically rip away Jack’s ability to use ice magic and put it in himself? Would it destroy Jack in the process?

If people found out he was capable of wandering the Earth and sucking magical creatures dry of their abilities, he would absolutely become public enemy number one. The society would be small fry compared to people like the Order, or even other cryptids wandering about. It wasn’t just about magic, either. He would be damaging souls. What sort of ramifications would that have for the afterlife?

“Holy shit,” he muttered. This single bit of knowledge could put him at risk from everyone who knew about magic.

“I see you understand.” Ratu rolled onto her back and looked at the sky. “That crack isn’t just from manipulating Yuki’s soul. What you’ve been doing with your magic is spiritually draining, but from what you told me about that golden light, you have contaminated your spirit with some form of divinity. We’re probably watching it integrate with your soul.”

“I didn’t mean to. I was just trying to keep Yuki from melting or whatever.”

“Your intentions were pure, and that’s what matters most. If you had decided to grab that light for yourself, then I imagine we might already see signs of corruption. You tapped into something you shouldn’t have. If not for your already altered state, it probably would have killed you.”

“Oh.” Mike looked at his fingers, remembering that blast of lightning he had struck Grýla with. It had been instinctive, and not something he should have been able to accomplish. Even here in the Dreamscape, his hand ached. “What is divinity?”

“I’m a bit of an expert on that, actually. I was actually a minor deity for a while.” Ratu smiled, suddenly lost in memories. “I had become one of the river gods in my area, and people would pay me tribute in the form of celebration, prayers, and some of the best fish you’ll ever taste.”

“Sounds nice,” he said. “What happened?”

Ratu’s face tightened. “It’s not something I like to talk about. Anyway, you’ve experienced divinity before in your encounters with Titania. When a being becomes powerful enough, they can tap into different sources of power. Divinity is one of these.”

“Different like how you tend to use big fireballs while Yuki uses ice?”

Ratu nodded. “Kind of. Our magic is elemental in nature, and we are manipulating variables that already exist. Divinity is something else. It doesn’t have the same rules as the magic you understand. For instance, I could not use elemental fire to build a boat, nor could Yuki use ice to warm a house. Divinity is the magic of miracles, and has some very stringent requirements to attain.”

“Such as?”

“Worship is both the easiest and the hardest. For the bigger names, it’s become self-sustaining. For smaller beings like me, it can be easily lost or taken away by losing believers. Blessed by the gods is a pathway, but a very tricky one, because they can always change their mind later if you become too powerful. Becoming a fundamental force of nature will do it. For example, if Jack had become the absolute epitome of cold, she would be eligible for ascension. But godhood isn’t just raw power, it isn’t that simple. On the other hand, any sufficiently advanced form of magic could be mistaken for divinity. This truth, by the way, is how we end up with false gods.”

“Huh.” Mike looked at his fingers again. “So I’m contaminated by divinity? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. I’m just a fragment of your soul, I can’t exactly pop outside for a look around, so...hmm.” Ratu stroked her chin, suddenly deep in thought. “Anyway, it would behoove you to speak to my real world counterpart when the chance presents itself. You’re toying with powerful yet delicate forces, and I would prefer you avoid blowing your own face off with them. After all...” the naga moved toward him, her arms sliding around his body. “It is a rather pretty face.”

“No.” Naia manifested nearby, her hand in the shape of a gun. She pointed it at Ratu and blasted her with a stream of cold, high-pressure water. “Bad snake, not until he’s better!”

“Ugh, fine.” Ratu licked her lips with a forked tongue. “Come find me next time you’re napping, Caretaker.”

“I’ll do my best.” He watched Ratu walk away from the fountain with mixed feelings. A dalliance with the naga sounded like fun, but he really needed that crack in the sky to go away so he could wake up. Even though Jack was disabled, he had no idea how long her condition would last.

However, Ratu had been a treasure trove of information, and he summoned that golden glow into his fingers once again. It made a sweet bass sound that was very much like a heartbeat. It had never occurred to him before that he had a veritable library of information in his head at all times, accessible anytime he was asleep. The pulsating light in his hand sent out a couple of electric streamers that danced along his forearm.

“Please don’t turn me into a cum fountain,” he said, dismissing the magic. Orgasms were fun, but the idea of having one powered by divine magic was a little terrifying. Not only had it left him exhausted, but the mess had been a bitch to clean.

The air filled with the sound of static. Mike turned toward the house to see Kisa emerge from the back door, her body outlined in heavy dark lines. She brushed herself off, then took a wary look around.

“Are you taking a nap?” she asked. “Or did you go somewhere nice without me?”

“Got knocked out, kinda,” he replied.

“Is everything okay?” Her face turned serious. “Do we need to come back?”

“We’re fine. You need to watch out for a seriously pissed off giant named Grýla and an army of ice monsters. Oh, and we captured Jack.”

Kisa stared hard at him for a few moments. “Yuki did come back, right?”

Reminded of their earlier conversation, he nodded. “Yep. She’s officially in charge again, and keeping me out of trouble.”

“I can’t even with you some days,” Kisa muttered. “Anyway, we’re still wandering the vents, but having bad luck finding a suitable exit. Some of these buildings are in sad shape, and I’m not about to go wandering through the snow.” She tilted her head to one side then swatted away something Mike couldn’t see. “No, I won’t show him my tits and say they’re from you, leave me alone.”

“Tell Tink to behave,” Mike said. “We need that furnace up and running soon, it’s getting cold.” Now that he had Santa’s coat, he wasn’t too worried about himself, but what about the elves? Holly might joke that she wouldn’t mind hiding under his jacket, but that wasn’t a solution for the rest of the elves.

“She knows. We had to take a break, we’ve been keeping a pretty fast pace trying to find a vent big enough for me to leave. Stay out of trouble, I’ll check in with you later.”

“Bye.” He waved at Kisa just as she faded from view, then let out a sigh of relief. Even though no progress had been made in finding the elves, he was happy to know that they were okay.

He spent a bit longer with Naia, then wandered out to the beach to stretch his legs. Zel met up with him, and the two of them chatted for a while. It was weird that they had a child together, but this version of her had never been pregnant and was forced to learn about their son second-hand. She didn’t seem bothered by it. At the end of the day, she was still just a part of his soul.

Out in the waves, a dark figure appeared. It was Lily in an inflatable donut. Mike bid Zel farewell and waited for the succubus to make it to the beach. She walked out of the water, a breeze kicking up blue and gold sand that stuck to her legs in patches.

“Surprised you’re still here, Romeo.” She was completely naked except for her black leather boots. “Thought you’d have woken up by now.”

“Soon enough.” He nodded in the direction of the crack, which was almost gone. “So I hear you’ve got a water slide?”

“Girls just wanna have fun.” She brushed some sand off of her inner thigh, then blew him a kiss. “After all, there’s only so much of you to go around, and when you’re awake, the orgies and pillow fights in here get a little boring. Besides, I’ve got a T-Rex doing things to a velociraptor that would make you blush.”

“You certainly have my attention. What other weird stuff are you guys building in my head?”

“Well, you know how some people say you only use about ten percent of your brain?” Lily moved close to him, her bare breasts in his face. The scent of cinnamon washed over him, and he licked his lips in anticipation.

“Yeah?”

“Those people are idiots.” She was even closer now, her hand on his crotch. “That’s not how brains work.”

The way she was rubbing him through his pants, he was definitely using less than ten percent of his brain right now. The ocean around the island went still, and even the breeze paused as Lily rubbed his stiffening cock.

“Where were we going with this?” he asked, having forgotten the original question.

“This place isn’t your brain, Romeo. It’s your magic, and your soul. It’s got more cracks than a sidewalk, and I’m all about ensuring that every crack is filled.” She pressed against him, her breasts expanding to fill his view.

“Is...it seems like everyone is a little extra...aggressive, today.” Not that he was going to complain, but there was certainly a change in the air. It wasn’t limited to the Dreamscape either, but he couldn’t tell how much of that was Holly being a horny elf, or if something else was going on.

“We’re just parts of your soul. When things change here, it’s because things changed out there. So you should probably ask yourself...what’s different about you?” She grabbed the front of his pants and ripped them off. They flickered out of existence as she knelt down and sucked his cock into her mouth. He moaned, his hands finding the horns on her head and holding them as she blew him for a minute.

“Oh, that feels so good.” He let out a little groan as Lily spat him out and then stroked his cock with both hands.

“Speaking of cracks, that one in the sky is gone.” Lily jerked a thumb over her shoulder. Mike looked and saw the sky had a faint aura around where the last crack had been, like a fading bruise in the sky.

“Oh.” He looked down at her, then back up at the sky again. Doing a quick bit of mental math, he wondered if she could get him off in the Dreamscape before he woke up.

“Looks like it’s time to nut up, Romeo. Give them hell for me.” With a laugh, Lily flicked him in the balls, making the decision for him. The Dreamscape vanished as his eyes popped open, both her laugh and the phantom pain in his testicles fading away.

“Gah!” Holly had been leaning over him when his eyes opened and fell backwards in fright. “Oh, Santa, you scared the sprinkles out of me!”

“Sorry about that.” He blinked his eyes a few times and coughed, his throat very dry. Holly offered him a mug of something, and he was surprised to discover it was ice water.

“Yuki had me melt some ice for you,” she said. “Thought you might appreciate something other than hot cocoa.”

“She was right.” He sucked the water down greedily, going fast enough that a bunch of it spilled onto his white coat. Interestingly enough, the water slid off the fabric and onto the floor without leaving any trace of moisture behind. “How long was I out?”

“A couple of hours.” Holly took the mug back and held out a sandwich. “I finally got around to making these, if you’re hungry.”

He took the sandwich from her and bit into a slice of heaven. It was thin sliced roast beef with caramelized onions and cheese on a brioche bun. Groaning in delight, he was almost halfway through the sandwich when he remembered Yuki.

“Has she eaten yet?” he asked.

Holly shook her head. “She had me move you a bit ago. Jack was semi-conscious for a bit, but she’s awake now. Well...half awake.”

“Take me to her.” Mike stood with some effort, then rubbed at his face to get the circulation flowing. The North Pole was so dry his sinuses were starting to hurt.

He had been moved to a small office just off the main hub of the house, and he walked into the main room to see Yuki standing across from Jack, a pair of tarot cards in her hands.

“You’re up.” Yuki didn’t bother looking at Mike, her eyes on their prisoner.

“I am.” He moved to her side and held out the other half of his sandwich. “You should eat.”

“I’m not—”

“Yes you are.” He shoved the sandwich at her, and she took it. When she looked at him, she frowned.

“Your eyes are all bloodshot,” she said.

“Not surprising.” He moved away from Yuki and grabbed a rocking chair from over by the fireplace. He dragged it across the floor to sit down next to Jack, who was reclined in a chair and watching him out of one eye.

“I don’t think you should do that,” Yuki warned, but Mike waved her off.

“If she could have done something, she would have done it sooner.” It wasn’t just false bravado behind his words, but the fact that Jack emanated an aura of defeat. One side of her face now drooped, and there was pain in the one eye she had open. She shifted uncomfortably when she saw how close he sat, then looked away.

“If you’re going to kill me, just do it.” Her voice was haggard, her words slurred.

Mike watched her for a moment, then opened his senses to look at her soul. It was not only in turmoil, but looked like someone had tried to rip it apart. Only a few loose threads connected the two halves, and a red light pulsed through the entire structure. The same golden light that was embedded in Yuki’s spirit was here as well, but the rings it had formed had sliced cleanly through entire sections of Jack’s soul. The longer he studied it, the more it looked like the light had tried to form a symbol, but it fuzzed out any time he tried to study it.

“I don’t see any need for that,” he told her, taking her by the hand. She yanked it away and glared at him.

“I don’t want your pity.” Her lip trembled as a tear formed in her eye.

“Good. Because I’m not offering pity.” He patted Jack on the leg. “But I do have some questions, if you don’t mind.”

Jack looked away, her face twisting up.

“Look, Jack, we can do this the easy way or the hard way.” He stood and moved across the room to pick up a pillow from one of the other couches, along with a blanket. “If you choose the easy way, you tell me what I want to know, and then we figure out what happens next.”

“And the hard way?” Jack’s tone was chilly, and the room grew colder. When he turned around, he saw that her skin was pale, but her breath was now visible as the temperature dropped.

Mike moved closer, the pillow clutched tightly in his hands. He moved behind her, pushing her helpless body forward and shoving the pillow down next to her hip. When he grabbed her by the shoulders, she tensed up and frost crawled up his arms, but the coat protected him.

“It’s a lot like the easy way, only you’re stubborn and we never move on to trying to figure out how to fix you. Does that feel better?”

“I...what did you do?”

Mike moved in front of Jack and draped the blanket over her. “You were slouching to one side. I imagine your back was starting to hurt. Do you eat or drink? We have plenty of hot cocoa and cookies.”

“You...what?” Jack blinked a few times, then groaned. “My head, it hurts so bad.”

“I bet.” He looked over at Holly. “Let’s start with cocoa, but she needs a straw.”

Holly looked dubious, but obeyed. The elf disappeared into the kitchen for a minute, then returned with a mug and a straw colored like a candy cane. He took it from Holly, then looked over his shoulder at Yuki, who had been strangely silent.

The kitsune was asleep in an armchair, a stray onion still clinging to her lips and a piece of sandwich clutched in one hand.

“Trade me.” He handed Holly the mug, and walked over to find a blanket for Yuki. When he covered her, she let out a whimper, but then went still. When he looked at her soul, he saw that the golden light was busy trying to shine through the rest of Yuki’s magic, but was still tucked in nice and neat.

When he returned to Jack, it was to see that she was trying to sip cocoa through the straw with Holly’s help. The elf was using a monogrammed hand towel to wipe chocolate off of Jack’s chin before it could freeze. He moved his chair closer to Jack and looked at her.

“So let’s start with an easy question. To the best of your knowledge, are you currently dying?”

Jack looked startled at the question, then shook her head.

“Okay, a good start.” There was a thud on the roof, and he looked up. “Okay, second question. Any way to call off your snow goons?”

Jack pondered this for several seconds, then pushed the straw out of her mouth with her tongue.

“I don’t think so,” she replied with a thick drawl. “Can’t feel them anymore.”

“Any idea why?”

Half of Jack’s lip curled into a sneer. “Divinity. Some of it went into them, and now they are... unique. They no longer obey me.”

“Okay, we can circle back to that problem later.” He let out a deep breath and studied Jack. He could see a tiny storm forming just beneath the surface of her soul. It was easy to understand what that meant, he didn’t blame her for being angry or afraid. In her position, he would be, too.

Maybe it was her vulnerability, or the way she stared at him like a wounded animal, but something about Jack resonated with him. Even though she was in league with the Krampus, he felt that there was something more there to be explored.

“What is the Krampus planning?” he asked. “Other than just being a general bas...bad guy.”

Holly smiled at him in appreciation. Despite using her as a sexual battery earlier, she still required PG language.

“I’m not...entirely certain.” Jack winced, looking away from him.

“Hey, are you okay?” He moved closer, ready to help her in any way he could. After a couple of moments, Jack turned to face her, doubt in her eye.

“Here.” He took the mug from Holly and held the straw to Jack’s lips. “We can get you water, too, just say the word.”

“I don’t understand.” Jack stared at the straw like it was a blade held to her face. “Why show me kindness? I was coming here to kill you.”

He looked over at Yuki, who snored contently in her seat. The sight summoned a big smile to his face.

“To be fair, I get that a lot.” He moved the straw closer to her lips, and she reluctantly parted them, then sipped some more of the warm concoction. “I’ve met some of my best friends that way.”

Jack let out a sigh and leaned away from the mug. “I’m starting to think this is all a bad dream.”

“It isn’t. I’m practically an expert on dreams these days.” He set the mug down and moved to adjust the blanket. Leaning over Jack, he could feel the cold aura that she radiated, a chill that somehow made it through his coat. He was tucking the blanket behind one shoulder when her other eye popped open, the iris cracked like a piece of glass. That dilated pupil shifted upward to focus on him, and his mind was assailed by images of bountiful valleys. Miles of lush landscape were revealed to him, broken up by the remains of thousands of dead warriors, their skeletons rotting in bent and broken armor. Harp music played in his head, and now he stood on a cliff overlooking the ocean. In front of him was a voluptuous woman with long tresses of golden hair who looked back once before throwing herself toward the tumultuous waters below.

Mike snapped back to reality as ice bloomed through his entire body. The once limp half of Jack’s body lunged at him, a dagger of ice clutched tight in her hand. There was a moment where time distorted, his brain processing her movement in slow motion. He pushed her wrist to the side, zapping her with electricity. The dagger slid out of her hand and shattered on the floor.

“YOU!” Jack’s voice shifted in pitch and timbre as she slid her wrist from his hand and tried to slap him. He lifted his arm to block the strike, his eyes on Jack’s other arm. It was wrapped around the back of the couch, keeping her from moving any closer.

“Stop it! Just stop it!” Jack begged, her voice back to normal. Yuki was by Mike’s side now, her eyes wide and blazing with light as she held up a spear of her own.

“What have you done to me?” The shrill voice turned into a wail, and Jack started to slide off the couch. Mike pushed aside Yuki’s spear and knelt down to catch her before she could crumble on the floor.

“Easy,” he told her, watching cautiously as her soul undulated in wild circles. An inner light emerged, threatening to consume what was already there. “We aren’t going to harm you.”

“That would be Freya,” Yuki said. “Goddess of War, apparently.”

“War, huh? Met a guy earlier this year, big sword, he was a huge dick. Fancied himself a horseman. Friend of yours?” Mike pushed Freya/Jack back onto the couch and was impressed at how both her eyes conveyed a different sort of confusion.

“Just stop it, Freya, please. They saved us.” Jack was staring into her own lap when her voice shifted again. “They’re luring us in with a false sense of—”

Mike took the spear from Yuki and pressed it against Jack’s throat. Both Jack and Freya held perfectly still as he pushed forward on it.

“Sorry, Jack, but your friend is a little intense and needs a reality check. Freya, is it?”

“I’ll kill you,” Freya whispered.

“Not if you don’t get stronger,” he told her, moving the point of the spear to avoid accidentally stabbing her. “We’ve had nothing but opportunity. Poison in the cocoa, stabbed with a spear, or we could have just let Grýla kill you, it would have been far easier on us.”

“Grýla would have eaten you, too.” Holly stood from where she had ducked down, then adjusted her dress. “There wouldn’t have even been a body to bury.”

“See? So many ways we could have let you be someone else’s problem. But my friend here dragged your ass across the arctic to give you a shot at survival. Why, you may ask?”

“Because I’m a Radley.” Yuki moved next to Mike, her eyes shining as she put an arm on his shoulder. “And being a Radley means looking out for those who need help. I was planning to kill you, I’ll admit it. But when you blew in, shouting

in two different voices, I could tell you weren't in a good place. Heck, I spent decades in the same position, just a giant ball of hatred. You make terrible decisions when you're in that place, even when your intentions are good.

"Even before Grýla knocked you out, I had decided that you needed help. This was a chance to balance the scales for everything this man has done for me, to pay his good deeds forward. I even asked myself what he would do in my situation, because his methods are...unorthodox. But ultimately, he would have wanted to help. Maybe you aren't seeking redemption, but I can tell you're definitely looking for something. And you will never find it by fighting your way through us."

Surprised at Yuki's words, Mike smiled and nodded his agreement. "So what do you say, Freya? I think Jack gets it, but we need you on board as well. We were never your enemy. We just came here to help Holly figure out where everybody went." He gestured to the elf, who had moved away from the altercation. Holly nodded her agreement. "We don't have to be friends, but I don't think we need to be enemies. I know Jack was working for the Krampus, and suspect she realizes now that was a terrible idea. Help us undo her mistake, to make things right at the North Pole. And if you help us, we want to help you."

The figure on the couch regarded him for several moments, then let out a sigh. Jack/Freya muttered to herself for a couple of minutes, the words unintelligible. Mike couldn't tell if it was another language or if she was muttering fast, but it was obviously a conversation not meant for his ears.

"My weaker half thinks that we should hear you out," Freya said. "But I admit that I think she's a poor judge of character. After all, she's the one who got us into this mess."

"And I'm the one who wants to help you out of it." Mike lowered the spear, then handed it back to Yuki. His danger sense had gone quiet as Freya studied him. He could sense the wisdom and judgment in that broken eye, but something far more interesting was starting to shine through.

It was hope. Jack wasn't just one broken person, but two, and he needed to figure out how to make them whole again. He was being given a chance

"Okay, Jack, Freya. I'm going to ask you one more question before we do anything else, and I need you both to be completely honest." He picked up the mug of hot cocoa and took a sip, his throat suddenly dry. He flinched when he

realized the cocoa had gone ice cold. Jack had sucked the heat right out of it. He set the mug down and rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“What on earth is the Krampus up to and how do we stop him?”

The long ductwork of the North Pole frustrated Kisa. It wasn't just that they randomly shifted and often smelled of burnt hair, or even the fact that Mike's presence would move nonsensically all around her.

It was the darkness. Some parts of the system were lit, but most weren't. Kisa kept her flashlight off unless absolutely needed, meaning that most of her time was spent following blind behind Tink (who could see in the dark with her goggles). Cats could see very well at night, but that still required some form of ambient light, of which there was none.

“Stop.” Tink sniffed the air, and Kisa heard the clicking of lenses. “Okay, safe now.”

“Does it usually take this long?” Kisa grumbled.

“Air flow bad,” Tink responded for perhaps the hundredth time. At least the goblin was being patient with her. “Think good vent soon.”

Soon. That was Tink's answer every time, but it did little to assuage Kisa's anxiety. She hated the idea of getting stuck in here, running until she died of thirst or fell down a hundred story shaft. They had seen one a bit ago, both of them navigating a ledge that was less than a foot wide. Down below, Kisa had thought she had heard things moving in the darkness, but Tink told her she was imagining things.

There was a metallic thud, and she felt the ducts change again. Tink paused, then turned around and pointed behind them.

“Tink find good vent,” she declared.

Kisa spun in place and saw a vent that looked just big enough for them to fit through. Being pessimistic, she waited until Tink inspected the grill and then undid the screws on the inside. Almost all of the vents unscrewed from the inside, the ones at Santa's house being the exception. She assumed that it was maybe a security issue, or that Santa and his spouse knew better than to wander into a shapeshifting deathtrap, but the reasons didn't matter. Tink pushed the

decorative grating outward, then twisted it sideways to retract it into the vent. Kisa slid through the opening, her hair snagging on the rough edges.

“Finally,” she whispered, seeing that she was in some sort of administrative building. The room was lined with desks that held glowing lamps and scattered stacks of paper. Tink followed Kisa into the room, then looked around with a frown on her face.

“Tink not sure where this is.” She pulled out her map and examined it. While she was busy doing that, Kisa moved to one of the desks to look at the paper. It had a fancy letterhead, and on the desk was a spilled basket containing unopened letters. They were addressed to Santa, and some of them had been written in crayon.

“This is where the letters go,” Kisa said. “So we’re somewhere in the Mailroom.”

“Tink understand now.” The goblin wrote something on her map and folded it back up. “Kisa safe here. Move quiet, no get hurt.”

“I’ll do my best.” She hugged her friend, then let out a sigh. “I’ll wait a bit to check in with Mike, let him know where I’m at. Then I’m off to check things out.”

The goblin nodded, then squeezed back into the HVAC system. She put the grill back into place with Kisa’s help and let out a sigh.

“Tink fix furnace, come find Kisa and husband. Make good decision, come home safe. Okay?”

“Okay.” Kisa stuck her fingers through the ornate grating and Tink gave them a squeeze before disappearing into the darkness. For the first time in a while, she was truly alone.

After a couple attempts at Cat Radio, she managed to connect with Mike. It sounded like Jack Frost was being cooperative for now, but apparently had never been clued in to whatever the Krampus was planning. While frustrating, it just meant that Kisa would have to cover more ground in the hopes of discovering anything.

The psychic phone call over, she pulled out the map she had drawn and studied it. The odds were pretty slim that the elves or Krampus were holed up in this administrative building, but she decided to be thorough. The last thing she wanted was to miss something important.

She also had an entirely different reason for checking here.

When she left the room, she was careful to crack the door first and check the hallway. While her ability to go unnoticed was powerful, an opening door would still be visible and cause questions to be asked. Once out in the hallway, she wasn't nearly as cautious. All that was required was her desire to go unnoticed.

Not that it mattered. The administrative building was deserted. Half eaten snacks and unfinished mugs of cocoa had been left at desks and on tables. It was as if the elves here had walked off the job, no questions asked.

There must have been an open window somewhere in the building, because it created an eerie howl that made her think of a lone wolf in the forest. Maybe the sound was a manifestation of the soul of the North Pole, calling out for the lost sounds of the workshop. Maybe it was the spirits of the Northern Lights, singing a funeral dirge for the elves of the workshop.

Or maybe it was just the fact that she was wandering through abandoned buildings that were spooky as hell, knowing the Krampus could be around any corner. Her anxiety built as she wondered if she could hide from such a being. During the fight with the horsemen, they had lost track of her more than once. Was the Krampus more powerful than the physical manifestation of War? Or was he just a scary ass fucker giving her walking nightmares?

"Focus, dammit." She patted her cheeks, and pulled a cookie out of her pocket. It was delicious and filled her belly, but she was already missing the taste and ambiance of one of Sofia's home cooked meals.

It took her an hour to clear the building, and she saw no sign of the elves or anything else of interest. She found the tunnel system under the building and used it to go next door. This massive building was a warehouse with giant rolls of wrapping paper and several push carts for carrying them. It was much faster to check this one as it only had a few offices.

After checking the map again, Kisa skipped the tunnel and went outside to cross the street. The snow was up to her waist in places, and she frowned when she heard the crunching of ice behind her. Looking up, she saw that a snow griffon had landed on the roof of the warehouse, surveying the city with a steely gaze.

Unsure how her abilities would work on a creature that wasn't alive, she knelt down behind a drift and waited. The griffon paced the roof, then let out a shrill cry before taking flight again, leaving Kisa by herself.

The next few buildings yielded nothing of interest, though Kisa found a pair of pouches similar to Holly's. One was empty, but the other had been stocked up with cookies and candy canes, so she took it. She didn't recognize the type of cookies inside, but her danger senses triggered when she went to take a bite, so she left it alone.

After a check-in with Mike, Kisa decided it was a good time to take a break. She found a building with a big door, twenty foot high rafters, and replacement parts for Santa's sleigh. Satisfied that it was a safe place to hide, she used a ladder to climb a nearby wall, then sunk her claws into the wood and scaled the remaining distance until she was up above the work zone.

Closing her eyes, she pictured the map in her mind. Not only had she found no trace of the missing elves, but she hadn't found any sort of records room. It was an idea that she had come up with after the encounter with Christmas Past and asked Holly about in a roundabout way. Somewhere in the North Pole, there was a room where Santa kept track of all the gifts he had ever given out and who he had given them to.

Holly had explained that Santa gave gifts in a way that allowed for adults to take credit for them later. Kisa had this potentially insane idea that the old man who took her in would have addressed any gifts for her with her nickname, meaning that Santa would have done the same thing. A records room would potentially have such information, so why not her true identity, or the identity of the old man?

Even if she found out who she was, it technically wouldn't change things for her. To anybody who knew her in her old life, it had been several years since she just disappeared one day, never to be seen again. And it wasn't like she had family that was looking for her.

If nothing else, she wanted to remember the man who took her in and cared for her when nobody else did. It seemed only right that someone mourn his death, even if it was so long after the fact.

She had told Mike some of this months ago, and he had done what he could to help. Private investigators had been of little use, and even Eulalie had been unable to narrow down a location or date based on Kisa's descriptions of her home. After enough dead ends, she had given up.

But now she knew she had a grandmother, too, one that loved her. That knowledge alone had reopened her desire to learn about her past.

When she fell asleep, she was in Mike's Dreamscape again, which meant he was asleep. It was such a strange sensation, knowing that she was walking around inside his mind, a feat made possible by being his familiar. Her winter coat was gone, replaced by a midriff and dance shorts. Far happier in these clothes, she wandered the grounds of his soul for a bit, headed in his general direction. He was waiting for her on the roof of the house, one of her favorite places in the real world.

"There you are." He patted the shingles next to him, and she climbed the trellis to join him. "How is the Christmas village?"

"Spooky as fuck." She laid back and let out a frustrated sigh. "I haven't found out anything, I feel like I'm letting everybody down."

"Hardly." He rubbed her exposed belly, scratching the fur near her waistband. This was something she enjoyed in the real world, too, but didn't indulge in unless it was just the two of them. She embraced quite a few things about being more cat than woman, but this one was more embarrassing than others.

"I also have something to confess," she told him. "My intentions weren't exactly pure. I had this stupid idea in my head that I might figure out who I was by digging through old records or something."

Mike looked at her with curiosity. "That's a bit of a leap. Do they even keep records up here?"

It took her a few minutes to explain it to him. By the time she was done, she had moved her head onto his lap where he now ran his fingers through her hair.

Mike was quiet, and Kisa worried that she had disappointed him. She didn't used to care, but their bond had gotten much stronger in the last few months, making her put him on a pedestal in a manner he wouldn't agree to. It had bothered her at first, idolizing a man she barely knew only because of their magical connection, but he had never taken advantage of it.

"Can you make her? Your grandmother." Mike lifted an arm and an image of a generic old woman appeared. "Just change the things you remember and we can get her as close as possible."

"How will that help?" she asked.

"Because I'll have Lily copy it and then show Eulalie in real life." Mike examined the floating picture while chewing at his lip. "We could even do that for

the old man, you remember him better. I wish I had thought of it sooner. Or maybe it would be better for her to dive into your dreams? Whatever you're most comfortable with."

Stunned, Kisa did as he asked, spending several minutes sculpting an image of her grandmother with Mike. Once finished, it wasn't quite right, but it was passable.

"Oh, and if you find the records, don't get caught up digging through files. I don't want you losing track of time or your surroundings." He sat back and admired their handiwork. "The blank face must have been unsettling to see in person."

"Very." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "So what are you up to tonight? Banging your way through your dream harem."

He laughed, wrapping an arm around her waist. "You sound a little jealous."

"Yeah, well, I always get this background buzz whenever you're getting busy with someone, doesn't matter whether you're awake or asleep. It's not as bad as that full moon incident in the centaur village, but still, it drives me nuts! End up horny all the damn time while you're busy laying more pipe than a plumber."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I'll admit it, I spend time trying things out with everyone in here. It's also a lot safer, because nobody can get hurt."

Kisa lifted an eyebrow. "What the fuck are you all doing in here that would hurt you?"

"There was that one time we had a game of naked Twister and Abella fell on Tink." The stupid grin on Mike's face meant he was telling the truth. "Oh, and the fairies can be life size, if they want. That's always interesting."

She snorted. "Then why bother with fucking anybody while you're awake? Sounds like it's way more fun in here."

"Because I prefer the people these souls belong to. After all, I'm just borrowing them until, well..." His face clouded over, and he sighed. "But you'll be happy to know that the extreme beach sex tournament was cancelled. Ratu, Naia and I are going to talk about how to fix Jack."

He had alluded to this in their updates over the last day. Jack Frost was apparently a fragment of the goddess Freya, who had manifested inside her body, or their body, Kisa was a bit fuzzy on the details. Mike had gotten the idea into his

head that he could keep her from falling apart completely, maybe even fix her, but Kisa had doubts.

“But we’ve got to work on repairing those broken threads,” Mike said. Kisa realized she hadn’t been paying attention. “If we can get her functional, she might be able to help with the ice monsters roaming all over.”

“That would be a big help,” Kisa admitted.

They chatted on the roof for a while longer, then Mike left to meet with the others. Kisa stayed behind, enjoying the feeling of the faux sun on her shoulders. She didn’t mind the mini vacation from the North Pole, and hoped that she could curl up with an actual sunbeam sometime soon.

A harsh, guttural voice severed her connection to the Dreamscape, and Kisa opened her eyes. Below her hiding spot, she heard a loud rattle followed by a crumpling sound.

“Clear it all out,” the Krampus demanded, and Kisa moved to the edge of the beam to take a look. The Krampus stood on a rickety sleigh hooked up to seven demonic reindeer. Around him, a mountain of presents had appeared. Dozens of elves surrounded the sleigh, and they dutifully picked up the gifts and rushed them away in carts. “I expect you to have this place ready for my return.”

Oh, shit, she thought to herself, her tail flicking back and forth. The elves obeyed without hesitation, pushing the carts toward a doorway she hadn’t noticed before.

“Krampus.” The grating voice sounded like gravel in a rock crusher, and an immense figure appeared in the opening to the barn. It was Grýla, her face concealed by long, greasy locks of hair. “I have news.”

The Krampus ignored her at first, dumping an impossible amount of presents out of his sack. It wasn’t much bigger than a backpack, but he swung it by the bottom, casting out hundreds of gifts in a wide arc. Once empty, he gave the sack an exploratory squeeze and turned toward the giant.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

“That mortal.” Grýla limped forward, then bowed. “Jack had been gravely wounded, and his people captured her. When I went to retrieve her, he did this to me.”

She pulled her hair away from her face in a dramatic reveal. The mottled skin underneath had been blasted apart, making it look like she had taken a hot iron to the face. Deep gashes had been instantly cauterized, her eyes stuck looking wider than normal. In some places, the skin was missing, revealing the fat and muscle beneath behind.

The Krampus laughed. It was a horrible sound that made Kisa sick to her stomach.

“It’s an improvement,” he said, then tossed his bag back in the cart. “What would you have me do, hmm? Try to break into my own home? Not with that old crone in there, oh no!” The Krampus smoothed down the fabric of his coat in contemplation then leaned on the sleigh. “But we won’t have to worry about her much longer. This sack doesn’t hold as much as the big one. If your idiot children hadn’t failed at the one job I gave them, I would have retrieved all of Santa’s gifts already and your face would be, well, as it was. Your revenge will come in time.”

“I don’t want time, I demand compensation!” Grýla slammed her fist into the ground, causing the whole building to shudder. Kisa had a horrifying mental image of falling from her hiding spot and landing right between the giant and the Krampus.

“Interesting.” The Krampus studied the giant anew, stroking his scraggly beard. “It would seem there have been more changes here than I realized.”

“I am stronger now.” Grýla held her head up high, which was still somehow lower than her stooped shoulders. “I have more power.”

“Without Jack, I do need someone I trust to monitor things up here. But perhaps on my next trip out, I could bring you a special present?” The Krampus laughed. “Though you would have to wait for Christmas day to eat it.”

“Eat?” Grýla’s eyes lit up. “You would bring me something...to eat?”

“The one thing Santa wouldn’t let you have, that’s right!” The Krampus smiled and hopped onto his sleigh. “Things are going to change, Grýla. The world is about to change, and you’re going to be right there by my side when it does. No more bowing down to the humans, nor obeying their whimsy. I will not be beholden to the same rules as Santa, I’m going to do things my way. The children of the world will quake in their boots, knowing that I watch their every move, ready to dish out punishment on Christmas Day!”

Grýla was ignoring the Krampus, long beads of drool now hanging from her mouth. "After so many years," she muttered to herself. "I had almost forgotten how they taste."

"All in good time." The Krampus hopped into the driver's seat, his reindeer stamping the ground in excitement. "I shall return soon enough. If you get the chance, kill the Caretaker."

"Caretaker?" Grýla asked.

"The mortal, or Mike, as he likes to be called." The Krampus scowled at her. "Now get out of my way."

Grýla dutifully moved aside, and the Krampus snapped the reins. There was a loud crack, and he was gone, leaving behind only a set of tracks in the snow.

"Food," muttered Grýla, staring in the direction the Krampus had departed. She patted her belly a few times, then looked over at a nearby elf.

"Appetizer," she declared, picking the poor thing up in both hands. The elf didn't even struggle as she carried it outside into the snow. Kisa covered her mouth in horror, the elves below continuing their task without fail, seemingly oblivious to the loud crunching that came from outside.

Mike stood on the edge of the fountain, a swirling mass of energy overhead. Lily sat cross-legged in front of him, one hand gripping his wrist as she helped him manage the Dreamscape and maintain the virtual soul they had constructed. Though she typically saw souls as tiny lights or humanoid forms, the shifting lights were common between all three, and she was responsible for making it shine.

Naia lay beneath the pseudo soul, contributing her own knowledge of how a soul functioned, the miraculous threads folding through each other like a kinetic optical illusion. Between the three of them, the result was still a very basic knock-off of what Mike saw compared to the real thing, but simulating a true soul was essentially impossible.

"Fascinating." Ratu had been walking around the fountain for several minutes now, deep in contemplation. "It's unlike anything I've ever seen. I have studied sentient magical objects before, but even then, I only see the magic itself. The threads aren't as plentiful, nor are they as interwoven."

Mike said nothing, his concentration centered on the projection. "So with Mrs. Claus, I did something like this." He severed a couple of the threads, causing them to unravel and turn into mist. After several seconds of letting them unravel, he started weaving the loose ends together and tucking them back in.

"Okay, that makes sense to me. To you, it's like making sure a string doesn't slip loose, but these are non-Euclidean. Look." Ratu pointed to something he couldn't see. "The moment you tuck them in, they merge with the original body."

"Are you sure that isn't just an artifact of the Dreamscape?" Lily didn't even bother pretending to be bored. In fact, she seemed just as fascinated as Ratu.

"It isn't." Naia's eyes were closed, her hands raised upward as if summoning the soul into her arms. "This is how stability feels to me. During the swap, small pieces are exchanged, and this is what it's like both before and after the process."

"Show me Yuki's soul." Ratu was licking her lips and pacing in anticipation as Mike tried to recreate the general shape and colors he could remember from the kitsune. Other than making some of the threads look like scattered waveforms, he made no progress.

"It's too complicated," he explained. "But here." The golden light was easy enough to tuck into the soul, some of it bleeding out.

"Wow." Ratu looked at Mike. "Are you sure we can't just get a volunteer to let us examine her soul? I bet somebody here would be happy to help."

"Not gonna happen." Mike threw the naga a hard look. He didn't like the idea of taking one of the souls in his head and picking it apart like a science project inside the Dreamscape. He also had no idea what sort of effect it might have on him or whoever the soul belonged to when they inevitably returned.

"I would love to see this in real life." Ratu shook her head. Though the ladies of the Dreamscape had access to his mind and memories, they weren't able to just ride shotgun on his shoulders like a team of devils and angels.

"I may be able to do something about that." Lily looked at Mike. "I can broadcast what you see, to some extent. It will be like watching a movie."

"We could call it Mike TV." Naia laughed. "We could see everything you do!"

"Ooh, I like this idea." Lily licked her lips. "Maybe we could set up a big screen out here so everybody could watch it."

“Later, ladies. I need to figure this out.” He twisted the dimensions of the soul again until it looked reminiscent of Jack’s soul. With her and Freya’s permission, he had spent hours studying their unique condition. The former goddess was quite the enigma, but considering two separate personalities controlled only one leg apiece, their presence no longer threatened him.

That, and if he was being truthful, her soul was fragile enough that he wondered what would happen if he grabbed onto one of those weaker threads and just ripped it out.

“Okay, this is a mess.” Ratu crossed her arms and walked back and forth. “It reminds me of something, but I can’t think of what.”

“A scrambled protein.” Zel appeared as if by magic, a journal in her hand. She was frantically sketching the design, her eyes stuck on the soul. “It’s something you’ll see a lot in alchemy. You had something that looked like string, but when you cooked it, the cells changed shape.”

“I would say that it’s more complicated than that,” Ratu began, but then nodded. “But the analogy holds true. We can’t treat this as purely a magical endeavor, nor a scientific one. We tread a spiritual realm that doesn’t obey logic, so must rely on ideas we can understand.”

“And that’s not what they look like.” Cecilia was there, too, hovering up above. “Not to me, nor to Lily, or even Naia. The three of us see souls very differently than you do, and that may be part of the problem.”

Mike pondered this idea for a bit. “So you’re saying that how I perceive the soul somehow affects it?”

“More like your mind is translating it into something unique to you.” Ratu bit her lip and then clapped her hands together. “Of course! I think I get it now!”

“You do?”

“The little spiders you make. They are a manifestation of your soul and your magic. When Velvet passed, it had a profound effect on you spiritually, and this is yet another evolution of your abilities!” Ratu explained, clapping her hands in delight.

“And now Mike is seeing souls almost like a web-analogue for human beings. It’s because humans don’t weave webs, but you do braid string.” Zel scribbled more notes, making Mike wonder if he had a way to access what she

wrote down or if those etchings would simply disappear into the Dreamscape once she looked away.

He let out a sigh. "Okay, so these are some great ideas, but that doesn't help me with Jack's situation."

"It may, actually. You see, spider webs have different shapes and designs based on their function. You may be able to discern these properties if you consider them from that perspective," Ratu said.

Aymone, who had been hiding behind her tree, leaned out to reveal herself. "And you should be pretty good at it," she told him. "After all, weren't you a web developer?"

She ducked away as the others all threw rocks, the projectiles bouncing harmlessly off the trunk of her tree.

"I feel like she was just biding her time on that one." Mike couldn't help but chuckle. Even he had considered the programming angle. "Okay, so how can I use this information?"

"Next time you inspect Jack's soul, I want you to think about it using the web analogy." Ratu pointed at some of the lone strings holding the soul together. "This looks more like two separate webs than one to me. How would you put such a thing back together?"

"Or maybe I'm meant to pull it apart?" Mike frowned.

"I wouldn't do that unless you want to kill her. If you had another body for Freya to inhabit, then maybe, but I suspect you would end up with two incomplete webs if you attempted it. Neither would be good for much, other than falling apart in a stiff breeze." Ratu waved her hand and summoned a cup of tea. "Now perhaps—"

"Mike!" Kisa manifested in front of him, terror on her face. Her appearance startled Zel, causing the centaur to race off as the others watched her. "I just saw him, the Krampus!"

"You did? What happened?" Even though they were in a dream, he could see how hard Kisa was breathing. "Wait, is he after you? Are you safe?"

"No. And yes, I'm fine, but..." She took a calming breath. "He has his own sleigh, he's using it to steal back the presents the others have already delivered. The elves are taking them somewhere, I'm getting ready to follow them."

“Shit!” Mike ran his fingers through his hair, then summoned a copy of the map. “Where are you now?”

Kisa pointed, and a red X appeared on one of the buildings. “I think it’s some sort of maintenance building for the sleigh, I’m not sure. Also, the giant was here. Krampus told her that Mrs. Claus was going to disappear soon, and then...” She took a deep breath and trembled. “After Krampus left, she ate one of the elves.”

“Fuck.” He put his hands on Kisa’s shoulders. “Okay, priority one is your safety. Priority two is finding out where the elves are being kept. Maybe we can rescue them, or whatever.”

Kisa nodded, rubbing tears from her eyes. “I can still hear her, Mike. I think she’s eating another one.” Her voice was little more than a whisper.

He pulled her in for a hug, holding her tight. “There’s nothing you can do. She’s all hopped up on god juice right now, I doubt anyone but Yuki could stop her.” Or maybe Jack.

“I have to go.” He kissed Kisa on the forehead. “It’s time to do six impossible things before breakfast.”

“What?” Kisa stepped away from her and wiped her eyes. “I don’t get the reference.”

“It’s from *Alice in Wonderland*.” He had no idea why he had even said it, but his eyes flicked to the boughs of Amydome’s tree. Yuki was squatting in the branches, watching the two of them. The kitsune nodded her approval, then vanished. *That was different*, he thought to himself as he turned toward Kisa. “Stay safe, little kitty.”

He opened his eyes and sat up from his recliner, the blanket covering him falling to the floor. Yuki looked up from where she sat, a Tom Clancy book in her hands.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“No. Stay here with the others, I need to check on something.” He ran for the stairs, ascending them two at a time. When he got to Mrs. Claus’ bedroom, his heart dropped through his stomach. She had the body of a ninety year old woman, her body much smaller than before. Not only had she shrunk physically,

but her threads had almost vanished. The old woman would be gone soon, snuffed out like a candle.

“Shit, shit, shit.” He burst out of the room and ran down the stairs. Holly, who had been asleep on a nearby couch, watched him in curiosity, then got up and ran toward the stairs, presumably to check on Mrs. Claus.

“Mike?” Yuki was standing now. “What’s going on?”

“I need to check on something.” He looked over at Freya/Jack, who remained slumped on the couch. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Without waiting for a response, he moved to the door that led down to the North Pole. The trip was faster this time, but mostly because he was running as fast as he dared, his magic spiders lighting the way. It still took a while before he reached the bottom, and by the time he got to the massive artifact, he could see that the magic spiraling around the bottom had been depleted.

On the magical globe, he could see a dark circle (which was probably the Krampus) moving across Asia, the light of the sphere fading away beneath it. The light representing Lily and the others was somewhere over Europe now, their speed far slower.

“Shit!” He moved closer to the pole, staring hard at the bottom third of it. The magic was unwinding, turning into a fine mist when it touched the air. Clicking his tongue as he examined the structure, he fought the urge to touch it. The surface of the pole looked like molten metal, and his precognition practically screamed that this would be a bad idea.

Once the magic was gone, it would be lights out for Mrs. Claus. Holly would no longer be protected, which meant the Krampus would come back to take her.

Watching those threads unwind, he made a knee-jerk decision to reach out with his magic and grab onto them. Maybe he could force them back around the pole, or tie the world’s most powerful square knot.

The North Pole made a sound like screeching metal, and the ensuing blast hurled him across the room. The impact would have hurt far less if he hadn’t hit one of Santa’s abandoned work tables.

Mike wheezed for several seconds, the air knocked out of his lungs. It took him several seconds to crawl toward the closest table, his whole body tingling.

“Good god, that was stupid,” he said with a groan, pulling himself to his feet using a nearby chair. “Note to self. Don’t grab the Christmas magic. It grabs back.”

Unable to stand, he collapsed into the chair. Leaning forward, he took several deep breaths, trying to collect his thoughts. How much time was left before this home was no longer safe? Should they run and hide?

No. Hiding would do nothing. When the Krampus came, they needed to be ready for him, but how? Maybe if they found a way to meet up with the others, they could be strong enough, but then what? He needed more time.

“Wait a second.” Mike looked up at the spinning globe. The others were spending months out there for every day he was in here. Could he use that to his advantage? Holly had been able to travel to his home with a fireplace, could he do something similar?

The feeling now back in his legs, he got to his feet and wobbled toward the exit. Climbing those stairs was going to be a bitch, but he would muddle through. He was almost to the door when he noticed the tall apparition blocking his way, barely visible in the glow of the pole.

“I don’t suppose you’re here to tell me I’ve been a good boy?” Mike asked, trying to step away from the Ghost of Christmas Future.

The cowed figure shook its head ominously. Mike turned to run away, but the spirit had appeared behind him, bony arms stretched wide to embrace him. He desperately summoned his magic, but it was too late.

The world turned to darkness as the Ghost of Christmas Future whisked him away.