

## Christmas Chaos

Kisa watched from the corner of Leppalúði's cave as the elves returned from their task. The giant was engrossed in another episode of *Friends*, so wasn't paying any attention when the elves entered from the warehouse cave. They crossed the living quarters and one of them dropped a bright pink blanket onto the floor near where she was hiding.

Obedying orders, the elves continued on their way and disappeared into the holding chamber. Kisa picked up the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders, then made sure her tail wasn't sticking out. Satisfied that her height would complete the illusion, she moved across the room toward the tunnel to the warehouse and pulled the blanket over her head like a hood.

"Hello?" she called, raising her voice an octave in an attempt to sound like a child.

Leppalúði stood so fast he broke his couch. His eyes were wide in shock at Kisa's sudden appearance, and a string of drool formed along his slack lower lip.

"A monster!" Kisa let out a shriek and ran for the elevator. Behind her, she could hear Leppalúði running as fast as he could, but Kisa was faster. She sprinted up the tunnel and toward the elevator, but her destination was actually the stairs. Leppalúði was huffing and puffing by the time he made it to the elevator, but Kisa was already most of the way down. She was hoping he would take the elevator and buy her extra time.

In the warehouse, the spotlight was already on and focused on a distant pallet. There a similar pink blanket was tucked between a pair of boxes, as if a child was hiding between them. It looked like the elves had gotten everything set up as she had asked. The only reason she hadn't helped was because she wanted to keep her eyes on the giant.

Kisa ducked out of sight from the stairs and tossed her blanket into a dark corner. Leppalúði, who had decided on the stairs and had gotten impatient, jumped over the railing and slammed into the floor. His long fingernails scratched grooves into the stone as he rose to his full height.

"Gonna rip, gonna tear," he muttered, then sniffed at the air. "I smell you, morsel!"

As planned, a toy baby started to cry. Kisa had asked the elves to plant one there and make sure the batteries worked. She didn't know if it was motion

activated or just cried at random. It honestly didn't matter, because it had come on when she needed it to.

Hearing the soft cry of a child, Leppalúði went absolutely still, his eyes focused on that small patch of pink out in the middle of the warehouse. He crouched down and moved forward, ignoring all the warning signs that this was an obvious trap.

When he disappeared into the darkness, Kisa moved to the dais. She could see Leppalúði's vague silhouette on occasion. It was clear the giant thought he was being sneaky. The pallet was set fairly far out, so she had to wait a bit to make certain he took the bait.

Once Leppalúði stepped into the spotlight, Kisa tried to think of something witty to shout. However, time was of the essence, so she simply clicked off the light and started flipping the pages of the warehouse book back and forth.

Leppalúði howled in pain and fury as the warehouse shuffled itself. Kisa waited until he sounded very far away before shutting the book. Satisfied that he would be out of the way for a long time, she pulled just enough of the crystal out of her pocket to navigate back to the stairs and ascended. Behind her, a distant voice cried out in anger. By the time she made it up the stairs, Leppalúði had gone silent, no longer a threat.

Once back in the holding chamber, she informed her elves that the Krampus needed to move all of the children right away to the safest place they could find. This was the part of her plan that she was the most worried about. If the elves had any sort of magical connection to the Krampus, they would know immediately that she was full of shit.

The elves, to her surprise, simply moved to the holding pen with the kids and picked a couple up before setting them back down. They stared at her for several moments before she finally responded.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

There was a long moment of silence, and then someone spoke from deep inside the holding cells.

"Safety is a relative term," an elf said, pushing his way through the huddled masses. By the time the speaker got to the edge of the cage, Kisa recognized him as Alabaster.

“You’re alive!” Kisa put her hands on the bars.

“So are you.” He licked his lips, then rubbed at the dark circles under his eyes. “I’m honestly surprised to see you’re still around.”

“You’re not under the Krampus’ influence?” She moved toward the door of the cage and fiddled with the locking mechanism.

“Not quite. I was created before Nicholas died and the Krampus was born.” He opened his mouth to reveal sharp teeth. “So his legacy does not run in my blood. But he sure tried. When he couldn’t convert me, he handed me off to Leppalúði and said I could be eaten.”

“How did you escape?” she asked.

Alabaster sighed. “I slipped free of my chains and hid. That idiot couldn’t count, so he ate someone else in my stead. It’s...not something I’m proud of.”

Kisa put her hand on the elf’s shoulder. “That’s on him, not you. I need your help. I trapped Leppalúði in the warehouse and want the elves to move the children to a safer location.”

Alabaster scowled. “Honestly, I don’t know that anywhere in the North Pole is safe anymore. The children are time-locked, so they can’t be harmed anyway.”

“But still, what if they wake up? What’s to stop Leppalúði or Grýla from taking the kids away and stashing them where we can’t find them?”

When Alabaster shrugged, Kisa grabbed him by his overalls and shook him. The elf let out a squeak and swatted her hands away.

“Fine, fine, I get it. Get your hands off of me!” He pushed her, but only succeeded in falling backward himself. “Damned cat.”

“I’m doing this with or without your help,” Kisa declared, baring her teeth. “But I want you to know that if you don’t, then you were wrong before, about being under the Krampus’ influence. Doing nothing when you had the chance to step up is just as bad as helping him.”

“Ugh, you’re almost as much trouble as that blasted goblin,” Alabaster muttered, then chuckled dryly. “But you’re right. We can at least take the children somewhere else. This will help the elves, too. That asshole won’t be able to snack on them if he can’t find them.”

Kisa grimaced at the reminder of Grýla eating the elves. She wondered how many of Alabaster's brethren were eaten right in front of him. There was a weariness in his eyes that she didn't like, but she couldn't worry about his future mental health right now.

"Are there any others like you?" she asked. "With your mind still intact?"

He shook his head. "Not that I'm aware of. The Krampus was in a hurry because of something you all did topside, I think that's the only reason I'm here. Come. Let's at least free everyone. They're amicable to whatever orders you give them as long as you...well, you know."

Kisa nodded in understanding. "Where are we heading?"

Alabaster screwed up his face for a moment. "We do have a train station near the edge of the North Pole. Only used it for a couple of years, so the building is abandoned now. We could store the kids inside the train and the elves can have the station."

"A train station, seriously?"

Alabaster shrugged. "If you think that's strange, you should see what Mrs. Claus starts wearing this time of year."

What a weird little dude, Kisa thought, then turned to a nearby elf. "Okay, new orders from the Krampus. The giants are no longer to be trusted and the children are no longer safe in this location. We are to move them quickly and quietly to the train station. Please repeat these orders verbatim to the elves nearest you before acting. Do you understand?"

The elf, a young woman with a candy cane button pinned to her dress, nodded and turned to face the elf behind her. In a monotonous voice, she repeated the instructions to a pair of elves who then repeated the process. The holding pens became a cacophony of sound as the elves gave their orders and then acted on them.

It was like watching an ant colony. The elves moved to where the time locked children were kept, and picked them up and began marching toward the open mouth of the cave.

"If your name is associated with cookies, you are to take the lead and warn the line of danger," Alabaster shouted. A group of about fifteen elves broke away

from where the children were being held and moved ahead of the others. “We’re going to take the long route, out by the Yeti’s hut!”

“You guys have a yeti? Why can’t we get him to help?”

Alabaster shook his head. “Santa kicked him out decades ago because his behavior was abominable. Guy was a real dick to everyone.”

“Are you fucking with me?” Kisa asked, which caused a couple elves to flinch and drop their children. She covered her mouth and scowled at Alabaster.

“I kid you not,” he told her, then moved toward the front of the line. The elves who had dropped their kids picked them back up and continued. Kisa watched them trudge toward the exit, her thought silently whirring. The elves had barely acknowledged being eaten, but a swear was enough to get through to them. What did that even mean?

Maybe they weren’t as far gone as she feared. Though they looked as if all the color had been sucked out of them, maybe they could be brought back, too. What was the opposite of swearing?

“Leppalúði!” Grýla’s powerful voice resonated throughout the cave, and Kisa turned her attention to one of the many openings in the earthen walls. A large hand appeared, thick fingers clutching tightly to the stone. With a massive heave, Grýla pulled her massive bulk into the central cavern, her eyes locked on the line of elves. Kisa was fairly positive that the giant didn’t used to be this big.

“I need you to get your lazy ass topside! That stupid bitch Jack is...what is this?” she hissed, her gaze wandering across the elves. They ignored her, sticking to the task that had been assigned.

“Shit.” Alabaster looked at Kisa, then the elves. “This is bad.”

“WHAT IS THIS?” Grýla lurched forward and swatted the elves. Time-locked children scattered unharmed across the room, but the elves tumbled and fell, some of them going still.

“HEY!” Kisa stepped past Alabaster and stood on a rock to be better seen. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, you rancor lookin’ piece of shit?”

Alabaster sprinted away from Kisa as fast as he could. Grýla paused, her head swinging slowly so that she could focus on Kisa.

“What kind of food are you?” she asked, tapping her fat fingers on the floor. She was hunched over as if her spine could no longer support her massive bulk.

“The spicy kind.” Kisa picked up a loose stone and threw it. It was a poor throw, and missed Grýla entirely.

The giant shoved her fingers into the ground, the rock softening at her touch. She casually lifted up a stone the size of Kisa’s body and hurled it.

The catgirl felt the premonition way in advance, and not only dodged the first rock but the unseen second one that followed. The large rocks shattered against the stone wall behind her, causing some of the glowing crystals overhead to crack and fall.

“Fast food,” Grýla grunted. “I hate things that move fast.”

Kisa bolted away from her current position as a hand made of stone tried to close around her ankles. She hopped and leapt across the cavern floor, hoping to lead Grýla somewhere else, but the giant wasn’t budging. Instead, Grýla turned her attention back to the elves who were still carrying her food supply away.

“Shit,” Kisa muttered. Clearly Grýla was much smarter than Leppalúði.

Grýla slammed a fist into the ground. Golden light zig-zagged along the stone, and the line of elves froze in place as smaller stone hands grabbed their ankles.

“Snack for later,” she declared, then shifted her bulk toward Kisa. “Leppalúði! What are you doing?”

“He ran off with some other giant bitch,” Kisa yelled, trying to goad Grýla into action. “Said he was tired of sticking his dick in ugly!”

Grýla rolled her eyes dramatically. “He knows better. If he ever even attempted to leave, I’d eat his ass.”

“That...doesn’t sound like you think it does.” Kisa picked up another rock and threw it. This one actually hit Grýla, but didn’t do any damage.

“Nuisance,” Grýla declared, then lumbered over to an elf in a candy cane onesie. She jabbed the elf in her belly, causing the poor thing to drop her child and double over in pain.

“Don’t you dare,” Kisa hissed through her teeth.

“You are little more than a pest,” Grýla replied, then pinched the stone hand holding the elf in place. When it shattered, the giant grabbed the elf by the ankles. “And I’m oh, so hungry.”

Kisa dashed across the cavern so quickly that she ended up running on all fours. Grýla dropped the elf in surprise and raised her meaty fists to protect her face as Kisa leapt onto the giant’s shoulders and clawed at her face.

“You leave them alone!” She batted at Grýla’s head until the giant dropped her guard, revealing a bloodshot eye. Kisa jammed her thumb into it, pushing all of her weight into the strike.

Grýla laughed. Kisa didn’t understand why until she realized that her finger felt like it was being jammed into a stone. She pressed the point of her claw into Grýla’s pupil, and was surprised when it didn’t yield in the slightest.

“Stupid food,” Grýla muttered. The giant snatched at Kisa as she tried to scramble away.

“Idiot!” Kisa yelled, but she was cursing herself. The giant had lured her into a trap of her own!

Every time Kisa started to get away, Grýla would manage to grab a leg or tail and pull her back in. Kisa was quick, but not fast enough to evade the giant. Powerful hands clamped down on her waist, bringing her to Grýla’s cavernous maw.

Kisa, in a blind panic, put her hands and feet on the giant’s top and bottom lip in an attempt to keep from being eaten.

The cavern filled with the pinging sound of metal banging metal. The giant flinched, then shifted her bulk in the direction of the sound. Kisa was stunned to see a green figure standing by one of the pits, the one that had a vent directly to the furnace.

Standing with a red and white striped hammer in each hand was Tink. The goblin smacked the heads of the hammers together, the resounding clink echoing off of the cavern walls. She was wearing a ridiculous Christmas outfit, which looked similar to some of the lingerie from Mrs. Claus wardrobe.

“Stupid giant look like big bag of assholes,” Tink declared, continuing to ping her hammers together. Kisa noticed that Grýla winced a little with each ear-piercing ring. “Bag of assholes with small brain.”

“What is this? A booger?” Grýla distracted by the metallic racket, lowered Kisa. “Are you a booger?”

“Tink is not booger, you’ll see. Tink pound walking asshole into pile of rocks,” the goblin declared, walking forward. She was covered in oil, soot, and a fine layer of glitter. The goggles on her head were already whirring as different lenses clicked into place. “Knock shit out of stupid giant, flush it all down toilet.”

“Tink, run!” Kisa tried to pull herself free, but Grýla’s grip was too tight. “Don’t come any closer!”

Grýla licked her lips, then looked at Kisa. She opened her mouth and shoved Kisa’s head in her mouth.

There was a horrifying crack, and Grýla dropped Kisa on the ground. The giant was clutching at her eye and crying out in pain. Tink, who was running at full speed, shoved past Kisa and used her hammer to strike Grýla in the side of one of her knees.

“Move,” Tink cried, then rolled to safety as Grýla’s massive bulk tipped forward. Kisa gave the giant a wide berth, and was horrified to see that one of Grýla’s eyes had been punctured by the claw of a hammer.

“MY EYE!” Grýla cried, just as Tink jumped on her back and struck her in the temple with her remaining hammer.

Shards of gravel sprayed the ground as the giant groaned and toppled over. Kisa could see the widening cracks in the knee Tink had struck.

The goblin yanked the hammer free of Grýla’s eye and leapt away. Grýla tried to grab her, but missed. Tink slid to a stop next to Kisa.

“Tink hear racket, sense kitty cat nearby.” She twirled her hammers. “Tink always know where best friend is. See stupid fuck face, made of hard rock. All rock have flaw.”

Kisa responded by hugging the goblin so hard she squeaked.

“Enough!” Tink growled. “No hugs during big trouble!” She shoved Kisa back as stone hands sprouted from the floor and grabbed at their feet.

Grýla was reduced to crawling now, throwing rocks when she could. Tink managed to give Kisa a hammer, and the two of them took turns freeing trapped

elves while the other dodged rocks. The giant shouted at them in frustration, unable to do more than pester them.

“Enough!” Grýla cried in frustration, then rolled onto her back and extended her hands to the ceiling. The glowing crystals above hummed as the ground trembled, and then chunks of stone fell free from the ceiling.

“No, stop!” Kisa cried.

Golden light filled the chamber as a spectral figure phased through the wall. Ribbons of red and green coalesced around the body of Christmas Present, who scowled at the giant.

“Hey!” Tink cried. “Big hole over there, straight to furnace!”

Christmas Present seemed to take this information in stride as she soared over the chamber and grabbed Grýla by the foot. With a grunt, she lifted the giant into the air, and hovered over to the massive opening in the floor.

“Wait!” Tink cried, now staring at the hole. Her lenses flicked back and forth for several tense moments, then she gave the spirit a thumbs up.

Christmas Present dropped Grýla into the hole. The giant screamed for several very long moments, and then a gout of flame burst from the furnace, licking at the ceiling. Tink cheered, then let out an oomph when Kisa hugged her from behind.

“You have no idea how happy I am to see you,” she cried, tears flowing freely. Tink hugged her back. Kisa sniffed, then made a face.

“Oh, Tink, you stink!” She eyed the goblin’s outfit. “And what are you wearing?”

The goblin laughed.

“Tink old outfit catch on fire. Take break for new outfit, find cute one that almost fits! Work super hard again, fix vents for good. Tink big sweaty now,” she announced, then lifted her arm and sniffed at her armpit.

“Maybe too sweaty,” she added. “But furnace fixed! Santa owe Tink big.”

“We all do,” Christmas Present said, kneeling next to the two of them. “But for now, we need to get everyone to safety. The fighting on the surface is really bad. Do you know where the elves are heading?”

Kisa nodded, then held up her hammer and struck a pose. If Mike got to do shit like this, then so did she. “As a matter of fact, I do. Help me get them all free. We’ve got a train to catch.”

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Mike was perhaps twenty steps down the spiral staircase when he heard the wooden door above explode. Splinters showered him after bouncing off the walls, and he felt his magic surge deep inside him.

When his precognition triggered that danger was a breath away, he jumped forward, legs pinwheeling underneath him. Lightning crawled along his arms and legs, forming into thick tendrils that stabilized his rapid descent. At one point, he nearly spilled head over heels forward, but a pair of electric limbs sprouted from his waist and caught him before he could take a potentially lethal tumble.

“What’s the matter, Caretaker?” The Krampus laughed from up above. “Have you finally run out of tricks?”

Mike didn’t respond, his legs pumping as fast as he could move them. He was now taking the steps six or seven at a time, occasionally bouncing off the curved walls with his legs. His magic flowed through him, guiding his arms and legs as blue and gold lightning lit the way ahead of him. By the time he got to the bottom, he was breathing harder than he could ever remember, and wondered if his lungs were about to burst. Spinning on his heels, he clenched his fists and opened his mouth so wide his jaw cracked.

The Krampus appeared on the stairs, his face fixed in a manic grin. That smile faltered when Mike unleashed a horrendous scream that shook dirt loose from the stones around them. The Krampus actually retreated, eyes and ears forming all along his body as he struggled to hold one shape.

The acoustics of the stairwell ensured that there was nowhere safe, so the Krampus reappeared and threw himself free. Once on the floor, he fought to rise, his limbs distorted.

Mike unleashed another banshee’s cry, constantly backing up into Santa’s old workshop. The Krampus was shouting something, but Mike couldn’t hear it. His own ears were ringing, and he didn’t dare let up. He almost tripped a few times, but he managed to make it next to the North Pole.

He unleashed one more scream, then coughed into his hand. Blood splattered on his palms.

The Krampus rose, now standing nearly twelve feet tall.

“And now, Caretaker, you’re out of tricks.” The Krampus sneered, then snatched Mike’s foot and yanked him into the air. “It’s time to claim what is rightfully mine!”

“About that.” Mike turned his attention to the North Pole. There was a tiny sliver of golden light at the very bottom, likely all that was left of Christmas. The light it cast threw ominous shadows all around the room, manifestations that danced. The moment the Krampus seized control, it would all be over. “I’m never out of tricks.”

Mike concentrated electrical energy in his hands and sent it in a beam toward the North Pole.

“NO!” The Krampus dropped Mike and leapt forward just as Mike’s magic made contact. Mike wasn’t entirely certain how the rules for this sort of thing worked, but the magic was part of him. He concentrated his will on the North Pole, wrapping it around the cylindrical surface like a ribbon. The air sizzled like hot bacon in a pan, and then his magic popped out of existence, the room now quiet.

Silence reigned eternal, or at least it felt that way. The Krampus was frozen in mid-air, his body stretched tight as his muscles distorted in an effort to reach the Pole. Mike stood and brushed the dirt off his pants and coat, then frowned. His movements didn’t make any noise whatsoever.

*Of course they don’t.* A young boy came out from behind the North Pole. He wore a simple robe, as if he had stepped out of a 14th century church service. He held an hourglass full of golden sand that cast out light like a lantern. The sand was flowing back and forth as if it couldn’t decide where to go. There was more than just a passing resemblance to the ghost of Christmas Past, but the child appeared to be human.

*Not quite.* The boy’s lips didn’t move, but it was definitely him speaking. Or thinking. Whatever.

“Who are you?” Mike asked.

This time, the boy’s lips moved, but no sound came out. His lips blurred to prevent Mike from reading them.

"I'm sure you never get tired of that," Mike muttered. "Great Game has its rules."

The boy shrugged, then walked over to the Krampus. He easily could have been a child on a trip to the museum, studying a dinosaur skeleton or a sculpture. There was just a hint of fascination, but the interest faded and the boy looked at Mike now.

*You are the one who broke my spirit.* There was no anger or malice in the statement. Mike could see that the boy's pupils were so wide that they took up nearly his entire eye.

"You're gonna have to be more specific. Are we talking Christmas Past, Present, or Future?"

*Yes, the boy replied. They are all the same entity, just at different frequencies.*

Mike wasn't quite sure how to parse that particular piece of information. He also noticed that the boy looked a bit older now and had the start of stubble on his chin. "Yeah, well...I guess I'm sorry about some of that."

*No matter.* The young man waved off Mike's apology. *These things happened quite some time ago, and have yet to happen. It's hard to be angry when everything is in a state of superposition.*

Mike frowned. He wasn't even sure what that meant and worried that the explanation would be even worse.

"So I didn't necessarily want to do this, but I sort of took control of the North Pole, if you know what I mean." Mike jerked his thumb at the Krampus. "I think I accidentally killed the human part of him off, which means this place should be up for grabs."

*It is.* The man blinked at him and scratched his chin. The robes had stretched to accommodate his new height.

"Great, so can I institute a 'No Assholes' rule? Boot this guy out? Make him swim around in the Arctic ocean until he gets tired and sinks?"

*If you were the one in charge, perhaps.* The man moved to the North Pole and stared at the golden light at the bottom. *Keep in mind that if you had taken over, this last piece of belief would have vanished already. The holiday known as Christmas would belong to you. So you have claimed nothing.*

“But I thought...didn't I take over? I thought that's why we're talking?” Mike made a face and moved next to the North Pole. He slapped his hand on the surface. “Finders, keep—”

A wave of light blasted him off his feet and sent him sprawling. The impact hurt his pride more than anything else. When he looked up, the middle-aged man stared at him in amusement.

“What gives?” he asked. “And what's with the getting older thing? That seriously freaks me out!”

*This place was designed by the Architect, the man replied, looking around. With my help, specifically. I am not truly of this realm anymore, and may only interact with the help of the mortal soul who claims me.*

“Yeah, that would be me...right?”

The man shook his head. Wisps of grey had formed in his beard and along the side of his head. *It is not my right to grant permission, nor is it yours to demand it. The being in charge of such matters is still quite alive, and standing right next to you.*

Mike turned to look at the Krampus in horror. “But...I pulled Santa out, so...I don't understand!”

*The guardian of this place still exists. The First Elf and Saint Nicholas created a loophole in the rules by combining a human soul with the body of the guardian. Though you may have defeated the prior owner by removing his soul, technically the guardian remains. If you wish to claim this place, you must either have the guardian's permission, or you must defeat him.*

“Oh, fuck me...wait! Does this mean that the Krampus can't claim this place either?” Hope welled up in Mike's chest.

The old man nodded. *Indeed it does. The loophole that prevents you from taking it also prevents him from doing so. Try as he might, he shall have no reign over this place without a mortal soul to assist him. That has ever been the rule, and it shall remain that way until the end of time.*

Mike looked at the Krampus, then back at the old man who was now stooped with age, his beard nearly to the floor.

“You know, most people don't end conversations with temporal theatrics,” Mike said with a frown.

*I am not a person.* With that, the old man crumbled into dust. Time resumed and the Krampus completed his leap across the room.

“Mine! It’s all mine!” He shouted in glee, wrapping several new limbs around the pole. It almost looked like the Krampus was humping the damned thing. Mike moved toward the door of the chamber, then cursed inwardly when he heard the Krampus go completely silent.

There was a tearing sound, like cloth being pulled apart, and then the Krampus was blocking the stairwell. He grabbed Mike by the arms and lifted him until they were eye level with each other.

“What have you done to the North Pole?” asked the Krampus, his eyes wild. “I have lost my claim and cannot redo it!”

Mike summoned his magic and ran an electrical current through the Krampus. The eldritch being gritted his teeth and rode through the pain, clenched teeth dangerously close to Mike’s face.

“Human souls only, asswad,” Mike spat, then tried to kick the Krampus in the balls. He missed, then got hurled to the ground.

“What?” The Krampus blinked in surprise, then turned to look at the North Pole. “WHAT?!?”

The creature went into a rage and started smashing furniture. Mike crawled toward the exit, hoping to get away this time, but was grabbed by the ankle and dragged back toward the North Pole.

“Explain!” The Krampus demanded, picking Mike up and pressing his face against the North Pole. Mike made a point of thinking really hard that this wasn’t an attempt to claim it. Last thing he wanted was to get blown apart in a misunderstanding.

“You should know this,” Mike mumbled, his face squished so much his words were barely legible. “Great Game ring a bell? It has rules, asshole.”

“FUCK!” The Krampus smashed Mike into the North Pole hard enough to knock the wind out of him. “I was so CLOSE!”

“Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades,” Mike wheezed. His magic churned inside him like a thunderstorm, and he felt like his gut might burst. He placed both hands against the pole and pushed himself away.

“Hopeless. Hope. Less!” The Krampus smacked Mike into the pole to punctuate each word, then held him there. “When will you learn, Caretaker? You are little more than a bag of meat with tasty bones inside, no matter how much magic you possess.”

“And a soul, you crusty fuck.” He could feel it now, his magic building to a deadly crescendo. Mike refused to succumb to the desire to lash out and destroy, thus changing his magic in the process. Instead, he drove the magic inward in an attempt to keep his ribs from being broken.

The Krampus stroked his beard. “Unfortunately, you are correct.” He dropped Mike and crouched down over him. “A human soul is the only currency the gods will accept and I lack proper payment.”

“Whatever you say, man,” Mike wheezed, clutching his sides. “Maybe you should apply for a loan, or whatever.”

“I had finally been freed of the golden anchor that weighed me down so, only to discover that I am lacking.” The Krampus steepled his fingers together, and Mike noticed that the demon’s hands didn’t match up. It was as if the number of fingers kept changing. “For so many years, I have been a slave to his whims, the desire to keep true to the spirit of Christmas and honor its traditions.”

“How so?” Mike asked, hoping to keep the Krampus talking.

Dark eyes glittered at Mike from beneath a furrowed brow. “You know all about it, Caretaker. When this first began, it was about warmth, family, and keeping children entertained over the long winters. But the tales spread, and my workload was suddenly a hundred times larger than ever before!”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” Mike asked, speaking in a neutral tone. The Krampus rose and started pacing around the room. He was about to monologue, and Mike far preferred that to getting kicked around.

“No, it isn’t what I wanted! I didn’t mind the work, but the nature of my holiday was corrupted by greed, twisted into a parody of what it once was! False wars on Christmas were declared in my name, and the season of giving became a season of hate!” The Krampus spun on his heels so fast that a pair of shadowy tails briefly sprouted from his body. “I don’t give a fuck if you celebrate Christmas! For me, it was never about recognition, or spiritual salvation! Love is what I craved! Joy! Peace on Earth!” The Krampus pointed a sharp finger in Mike’s direction and stabbed at the air. “And you fucking flesh-bags spoiled it for me! All that stress,

anger, and greed has shaped me into the being that stands before you. A creature who wants to end it all.”

“Oh.” Mike thought about the magic churning inside him, and how it had almost blown his arm apart when he had twisted it toward violence. The magic wasn’t truly a separate entity, but he had thought of it as one for so long. It was his desires that shaped the magic, but the magic, in turn, shaped who he became.

He finally understood the true price that magic demanded. Mike took a deep breath, willing the magic to extend through his limbs instead of lashing out. It was already seeking an outlet, crying out to obey his needs. What he needed right now was to stay strong until an opportunity presented itself, and so it obeyed.

Unlike the Krampus’s situation, Mike’s choice was ultimately his. The Krampus had been created by a limitation of the magic, and the ramifications were long lasting. Mike could choose to blast the Krampus with lightning and further his own journey toward darkness, or find a different way. The last thing he wanted was to be standing in the Krampus’ shoes in twenty or thirty years, with someone else desperately trying to take him down.

“I see you’re finally getting it.” The Krampus snarled and swung at the air. “I rarely had a choice, Caretaker. I am the spirit of Christmas, and I am foul, angry, and broken. And I intend to take it back.”

“By stealing children?” Mike felt his magic surge, ready to lash out, but he held it back. He wasn’t even certain he could hurt the Krampus at this point, but intent was what mattered.

“You see it as stealing children, I see it as culling a disease.” The Krampus licked his lips. “Even now, the giants have the children stored away for me, under the impression that they get to eat them. Grýla thinks she’ll become something special when I rise to power, but she is little more than a game piece. You should know all about that. My plan was to dispose of her once the pole was mine. Her, the giants, the elves, and especially the children.”

Mike felt the magic surging across his body. “You were just going to slaughter them all?”

The Krampus nodded. “They will still be food. You see, Caretaker, I can feel my kin, just waiting on the other side of the veil. The my hungry brethren will

return to this world and finish what we started before our banishment at the hands of the Architect.”

A cold blue light illuminated the Krampus. The demon stared at Mike in surprise, then grinned and moved closer. Mike realized the light was coming from him, his whole body covered in an electrical aura.

“I can feel your power,” the Krampus whispered, moving close. “And once you release it, you’ll be too weak to resist me. You see, I may be lacking a soul, but you aren’t. Once I take your body, all I have to do is suppress you and I’ll be free forever more.”

Mike swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. The Krampus had been monologuing in the hopes that Mike would act.

“Thanks, but I’m already in a relationship,” Mike replied, his voice hoarse.

“All I have to do is wait.” The Krampus held up a finger, which lengthened into a blade. He pressed it against Mike’s forehead. “How much flesh can I remove before you give in?”

Energy crackled along Mike’s body, but he commanded the magic to stay in place.

“I’m not afraid of you,” he whispered.

The Krampus snorted. “I don’t really care,” he replied, then ran his finger along Mike’s brow. Magic crackled and licked at the Krampus, but Mike forced it to remain in place.

“Your will is strong, Caretaker.” The Krampus licked blood off his finger. “I look forward to breaking it.”

He moved his finger just below Mike’s eye when a soft voice broke the silence. The Krampus froze in place as the opening lyrics to *All I Want for Christmas is You* echoed in the spherical room.

The demon turned around, a look of horror on his face as Holly stepped into the light of the North Pole. She had tears in her eyes as she continued to sing, the words coming loud and strong. Mike had no idea how long she had been there, and tried to wave her away.

When the Krampus twisted around to attack Holly, she held out Mrs. Claus' glasses. The demon paused, watching in horror as the elf held them out for the Krampus to take.

Mike was surprised when the demon let out a howl of agony and crumpled to the floor, clutching at his ears as tears streamed down his dirty cheeks.

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Yuki jumped off the roof of a clock tower and slammed her hands into a pair of giants so hard that they exploded into gravel and gore. From her back, Freyja rained down torrents of icy blades that sliced through Yule lads and snow monsters alike. The air was filled with glittering gold lights that Freyja pulled into her body, the air around her shimmering with power.

She wasn't the only one. Different versions of Grýla were also absorbing the light, then sneaking off to split apart. It was a dirty trick that ensured the whole affair had become a battle of attrition. For every giant they killed, another clone could possibly take its place.

Yuki didn't dare take on any more divinity. Even now, she worried about the long-term implications of forcing her body to age. Her bones were brimming with so much magic that they hurt.

"This isn't working," Freyja shouted, summoning a wall of ice to block a barrage of boulders. "They just keep coming!"

*Reindeer ahead.* Yuki narrowed her eyes at the dark figures that zapped through the air. They could be defeated, but only temporarily.

A barrage of ice missiles, summoned by Yuki and Freyja together, tore through Dasher and Prancer, scattering the reindeer into an electrical cloud of energy that would eventually reform somewhere else. A couple more reindeer tried to flank them from the sides, but Yuki summoned a stone pillar from the ground that flew like a missile and destroyed one of them. She caught the other in her jaws and bit down, shaking it until it exploded.

The damned thing tasted like licking a giant battery.

*It's a numbers game, Yuki told Freyja. Two of us versus all of them. Can you summon more of your warriors?*

"Not really." Freyja summoned an ice wall tilted on one side like a ramp. Yuki sank her claws into the ice and ran up the ramp, catapulting herself off the

top to get them closer to Santa's house. She didn't know why, but she had a very uneasy feeling about Mike. "I may have some of my powers back, but my summoning is very weak right now. It's pulling them from my home that's the problem."

*Damn.* Yuki swatted away a ten-foot tall snowman, sending more golden light Freyja's way. *There wouldn't happen to be a bunch of dead warriors buried here, would there?*

Freyja laughed, then filled a nearby Grýla with spikes of ice. "There's about to be two of them if this keeps up."

*Not funny,* Yuki growled.

"I don't think it's funny either..." Freyja's eyes went up to the sky where the Northern Lights shimmered, the colors rolling over each other like a bundle of snakes. "Oh. Oh!"

Yuki never got a chance to ask what had the goddess' attention, because Freyja hurled herself into the sky, ascending rapidly under the wind's power.

*Wish I could fly,* Yuki grumbled. Not that flying would help her now. There was still the issue of Grýla's army on the ground, which would no doubt be waiting for her at Santa's house.

With Freyja off doing gods knew what, Yuki threw caution to the wind and made another mad dash forward. This time, she shape-shifted as she went, resuming her human form to fit through smaller openings. Yule lads and snow creatures had filled the interior structures of the village, and Yuki tore through them like paper. The Yule lads would often explode into a green mist, which meant they would come back later. Some stayed dead once slain, and she wasn't entirely sure what process ensured their destruction.

Outside again, she resumed her fox demon form and barreled through the snow monsters that waited for her. Up above, the Northern Lights churned as if caught in a storm, and she could just barely make out a golden figure at the center of the swirling mass.

*I hope that's a good thing,* she thought to herself as she dashed into another building and transformed into a woman. A trio of Grýlas ambushed her, but she flash froze one of them in a block of ice before spiking the other two. She was running on pure adrenaline now, and could feel her control on the magic slipping.

After running up a flight of stairs, she made her way toward a large window with a view of Santa's home. Shadows danced around the building, as if waiting permission to enter. She was at least a mile out, and her attackers were increasing in number.

"Fucking hell," she muttered, pushing open the window and sliding out onto the roof. A massive paw smashed into her, sending her sprawling on the ground. Yuki groaned, rolling away from the Yulecat as it tried to crush her under a massive paw.

They had lost the giant cat some time ago, but the damned thing had caught up. Yuki summoned ice and stone, smashing both into the cat's face. The beast took the brunt of the assault without flinching, then swatted her aside again before she could transform.

"I really hate you," she muttered, summoning an icy shell to protect her. From within, she could see the dark shape of the Yule cat as it tried to crack the ice with its front paws.

The cat hissed, the sound reminiscent of a train releasing all of its steam after stopping. Yuki crouched down, ready to explode into fox demon form the moment the barrier was breached.

The ground beneath her trembled as an ominous trio of growls filled the air. The Yule cat turned away from the barrier, the giving Yuki an opportunity to create a hole in the back and sneak out.

The Yule cat hissed, its back arched as it faced the new arrival. A dark shape emerged from the rubble of a nearby building, all six eyes blazing.

Cerberus growled in response, hackles raised. They opened their mouths, hellfire washing over the square, devouring Yule lads and snow creatures alike. At least one Grýla was caught in the blast, her features melting away beneath the supernatural heat.

The Yule cat fled. Cerberus turned to face Yuki, all three heads bowed in greeting.

"Your timing is perfect," Yuki said, moving to the beast's side and scratched the first ear she could reach. "We need to get to Mike. He's in trouble, I can feel it." She hopped onto Cerberus' back, and pointed at Santa's house. Cerberus stomped out a snowman and turned toward their destination.

Up above, the maelstrom of green and red lights were now forming into funnel clouds and spiraling toward the ground. In those lights, she could see the spectral forms of thousands of humanoid figures.

“Whoa,” Yuki whispered. The funnel clouds crashed into the ground, and she heard cries of alarm from Yule lads and Grýlas as the spirits charged into battle. Nearby, dark shadows fled to safety as the Northern Lights washed over them.

A shooting star crossed the sky, leaving a sparkling trail behind it. Yuki gasped when she realized that the star was a reindeer. On its back was the Grim Reaper himself, wearing an oversized Santa coat and carrying a large bag over one shoulder. The twisted reindeer of the Krampus threw themselves into the sky, chasing after their new prey.

“Merry Christmas to all!” Death cried, then threw himself free, tumbling through the sky before bouncing off the roof of Santa’s home and landing in the snow.

“Let’s go,” she yelled, clutching the hellhound’s fur. Cerberus sprinted across the North Pole, breathing fire on all that stood in their way.

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From her vantage point above the North Pole, Freyja could see the small army closing in on Yuki’s location. Dozens, if not hundreds of iterations of Grýla were running amok, and that didn’t include the snow army she had created earlier. That was her divinity down there, tearing the North Pole village apart right now. It was unlikely that Yuki would be able to make it to Mike’s side in time without some extra help.

She turned her eyes back up to the sky, her heart pleading. Tens of thousands of spirits watched her, many of them with one foot already in the mortal plane. She could feel their anger, the spirits eager to go down and help undo the madness she had caused. There would be a price for bringing them over, one far greater than she had paid for the limited soldiers from her native plane.

Freyja took a deep breath and gladly paid it.

A seam in the sky opened up, and the spirits poured forth. They weren’t warriors—most were simple fishermen or farmers. It was the spirits native to this region, angry at Grýla and her ilk. They spiraled down, riding the wind much like Freyja did, crying out in languages that had been unheard in hundreds of years.

Down below, the mob chasing Yuki looked up in time to be ripped apart by the vengeful spirits. Hundreds of them assaulted Grýlas, stray snow beasts, and even a few Yule lads that got caught up in the fight. The spirits gave a wide berth to the three-headed hellhound breathing fire. Freyja smiled at the sight of a cerberus free of its domain. She was very familiar with the breed, and couldn't think of a more loyal companion.

Though the wind held her aloft, she felt her body weakening as her magic and the divinity she had acquired held the rift open. With eager eyes, she watched as Yuki arrived at Santa's home and ran inside, leaving Cerberus to defend the home from attackers. Letting out a sigh of relief, she turned her attention down to the ruined village. It had been in bad shape before, but now large portions of it were on fire, and she could see different variations of Grýla trying to flee in a panic.

"Run," she hissed, her lips curling into a sneer. She summoned a spear of ice as more spirits gathered behind her, their rage palpable. "Make it fun for me, you rotten bitch."

Freyja fell from the sky like a meteor, followed by the fury of thousands of years of tradition. Sculptors, hunters, mothers, and fathers crashed into the snow, reaping the enemies of the North in a one-sided slaughter. Golden orbs of light drifted toward Freyja, filling her with strength as she took back the power that was rightfully hers. Divinity flowed through her veins like liquid starlight, and she let out a mighty battlecry that shook the remaining snow off of nearby buildings.

She had forgotten this feeling. It had been centuries since she had walked these lands, and it was time to make her reappearance count.

"Death to my enemies!" Raising her spear skyward, Freyja rode the winds up and to victory.

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Watching with horror as Holly walked toward the Krampus. Mike sat forward, magic surging through his veins in case he needed to intervene. It was one thing to allow rage to guide his actions, but protecting someone he cared about?

That was an entirely different matter.

Holly sang the final verse of her song, then knelt down by the Krampus. The demon was weeping openly now, and had assumed the fetal position.

“Don’t cry,” she told the Krampus, placing her hand over his. “You don’t have to cry.”

“She would have hated to see me like this,” whispered the Krampus. “All dark and twisted. I felt it when she was gone, it was such a relief to know that she’d never be here for this.”

“She isn’t gone.” Holly rubbed the Krampus’ forearm. “Mrs. Claus is in my heart and yours. We can still make things right and bring her back.”

“Foolish girl.” The Krampus covered his face with a free hand. “These emotions, they’re only echoes. They hold no power over me.”

Holly shook her head and looked at Mike. “I don’t think they are,” she said. “I don’t pretend to understand what you are or how you came to be, but you’re still Santa. You’re just the side of him that we never see. You’ve been bottled up, and that wasn’t right. It is never right to hide away a part of yourself that is so integral to who you are. I know what it’s like to feel incomplete all the time, like there’s a side of you that you can’t show the world. That’s no way to live.”

At those words, she threw a look of fierce longing in Mike’s direction. He nodded for her to continue, then turned his attention back to the Krampus.

“Don’t you understand? Nicholas is gone and I’m all that is left of him.” The Krampus rolled into a crouch and wiped at his eyes. “I am just the cancer that was left behind, when all is said and done.”

“You aren’t a cancer.” Holly moved her hand to the Krampus’ cheek.

“But I am, Holly. I truly am.”

“I don’t see it that way. You’re still the same person who did all those wonderful things for children around the world. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that people have layers and they wear masks to protect themselves and others from what’s inside.”

“I’m evil, Holly. How can you not see that?” The Krampus bared his teeth, his eyes glowing red.

“Because I still believe in you.” Holly held out Mrs. Claus’ glasses. “And I believe that you could go back to the way you were. All you have to do is remember.”

The Krampus stared down at the silver-framed glasses, then took them carefully from Holly as if afraid they would break. The horned demon sniffed, his eyes briefly reflected in the lenses.

“I can’t ever go back to the man I was, Holly.” The Krampus looked up at the elf. “Don’t you see? I was the First Elf, forever bound by the nature of this holiday. Christmas is tainted, and has become about money and profits and pushing agendas. It’s about expectations of forgiveness and miracles for no other reason than it’s the 25th of December. Humans are gross, and lacking in decency. I would know, because I am nothing more than a reflection of their wants and desires.”

“Santa, ple—” Holly was cut off when the Krampus seized her by the throat.

“Santa is gone. No more words,” he hissed, crushing the silver glasses with his other hand. He rose to his full height just as Mike crossed the room, his clenched fists brimming with lightning.

The Krampus swatted Mike away so hard that when he landed, he had tunnel vision. Darkness crept in at the edges of his vision as the Krampus stared into Holly’s eyes.

“It’s time for you to find your inner darkness.” The Krampus bared his teeth as shadow tendrils crawled along his arm and onto Holly’s skin. She didn’t struggle—instead, she stared defiantly. The shadows moved along her face and through her hair as if searching for somewhere to burrow inside.

Somehow, Holly found the strength to hum the tune to *Jingle Bells*.

“You will submit, Holly!” The Krampus shook her, but she continued to hum. This enraged the Krampus, who lifted her high as if to smash her on the ground.

“That will be quite enough of that.” Death walked into the room carrying a large sack over his shoulder and a small gift box beneath his arm. He was wearing a Santa coat that was too large along with a matching hat that hung awkwardly to one side and a fake beard. When Death set the bag down, the Krampus stared at it with bulging eyes.

“You!” He declared, tossing Holly to the side. “You’ve been quite the thorn in my side, reaper.”

“Indeed.” Death’s eye flames burning like distant stars in his sockets. “I have worked very hard today to bring joy to the children of the world. You, on the other hand, have been nothing but a huge asshole.”

The Krampus laughed so hard he grabbed at his own gut.

“And I assume you’re here to stop me? Bah! Humbug!” The Krampus waved his hand dismissively. “I know exactly what you are, reaper. You have no power over that which does not truly live.”

Death adjusted his beard and then held up the present. “I am not here to stop you. In fact, I have decided that it would be in the spirit of the holiday to bring you a present.”

The Krampus stopped laughing and leaned toward the Reaper, his face a mask of confusion.

“Do you think this is a game? Some sort of holiday special?” The Krampus chuckled and shook his head. “The elf dug up some old emotions, but I have buried them anew. It’s easy enough when you don’t have a soul. There’s nothing on Earth that you could give me that would magically make me feel bad and change my ways.”

“I disagree.” Death clenched the gift in two hands and held it over his head. “Because I’m about to give you the gift of a proper ass whooping.”

With those words, Death hurled the gift forward. The immaculately wrapped package twisted and shifted in mid-air, revealing long bladed limbs and whirling edges. Mike immediately averted his gaze as Tick Tock collided with the Krampus.

“No!” howled the Krampus, and the available light in the room dimmed. Tick Tock had transformed into a weird monstrosity that was all teeth and sharp edges, and the Krampus was doing his best to keep up as the two of them attempted to rip each other apart. “Stop, we’re on the same side!”

“Now that is something you don’t see very often.” Death watched the melee for a few moments, then came over to Mike’s side. “It would seem that I have arrived exactly when I should have.”

“You’re telling me.” Mike looked over at Holly, who had crawled out of the way. “Where are the others?”

“I do not know. It is rather grim up there, Mike Radley. I am not certain there is much more we can do.” Death looked sadly at the battle taking place. The room trembled as Tick Tock slammed the Krampus into the North Pole.

“Yeah, it’s been a shit Christmas.” Mike pulled himself toward the edge of the room and saw Holly. He waved her over, mouthing the words ‘don’t look.’

“On the plus side, I did get to meet Santa,” Death continued. “Though our meeting was nothing as I expected.”

“Yeah, you should never meet your heroes.” Mike frowned as the Krampus slammed Tick Tock into a nearby wall, causing the wooden beams to crack. “We should probably get out of here before this place comes down.”

“Would you like to meet him, Mike Radley?” Death reached into his cloak. “I don’t know how much longer he will last in this form.”

“Say what, now?” Mike looked at the Grim Reaper in puzzlement as he held out a hand to reveal a red and gold light that looked like the end of a sparkler.

“I found him floating outside. He was headed toward the Northern Lights.” Death contemplated the light in his hands. “I probably shouldn’t have interfered, but I figured it was going to be my only chance to—”

“Death, you’re brilliant!” Mike turned his attention toward the Krampus. Tick Tock was now a multi-legged abomination trying to bite the Krampus’ head off. “Tick Tock, hold that fucker down!”

The mimic twisted around, then stabbed the Krampus through the foot and pinned him in place. In response, the Krampus ripped his leg free, trailing black blood everywhere as he got underneath Tick Tock and grabbed the mimic by the legs. With a twisting motion, he slammed the mimic hard into the North Pole.

“You are a lesser being!” The Krampus shouted, then stomped on the mimic. Tick Tock fought back, clamping down on the Krampus’ wrists.

“Death, I can put Santa’s soul back!” Mike summoned his magic, creating a small cage made of electricity. “I pulled him out because I thought it would put him back in charge of the body, but that was a huge mistake.”

“You should never pull souls out of people, Mike Radley.” Death shook his head. “That’s very naughty.”

“You can yell at me later. For now, you’ve given us a second chance to get things right.” Mike thought about how Holly had briefly appealed to the eldritch being. This wasn’t like Freya and Jack, two pieces of a separate whole. It was a colossal fuck up on his part, but if he could put Santa back, Holly’s appeals might make it through.

“Caretaker!” The Krampus head butted Tick Tock so hard that the mimic went still. “I will not let you put that man’s soul inside of me again!”

Mike concentrated, sending magical streamers across the room and focused on the void around the Krampus. What he had mistaken for nothing was in fact something he simply couldn’t see. Though he couldn’t identify what made the Krampus, he could see the gaps in reality left behind by its presence.

“No!” The Krampus shot across the room so fast that Mike didn’t have a chance to blink. In a single moment, he found himself staring at bladed fingers reaching for his face, but frozen less than an inch away.

Standing between him and the Krampus was Lily. Her entire body glowed as if it magma ran beneath her skin. Lily squeezed the Krampus by the wrist until something cracked.

“Hands off my man,” she growled, then whipped around and stabbed the Krampus in the face with her tail. She speared him in the forehead, and he clutched at her tail and shrieked.

The Krampus staggered back and was grabbed from behind by Tick Tock. Lily and the mimic tore into the Krampus, who was now on the defensive. He shifted back and forth, dancing away from his attackers until he was at the far side of the cavern. Meanwhile, Mike was busy hooking his magic into those dark edges, coating them in his own magic to see them better. In his hand, Santa’s soul bounced back and forth, ringing like a silver bell.

Holly grabbed Mike by the leg, almost breaking his concentration. Her wide eyes followed the fight as the Krampus once again took the upper hand. He had grown a couple more feet and had grabbed both Lily and Tick Tock in his many hands to slam them together.

“You may think you have powerful allies, Caretaker, but I will splay your innards across this room soon enough!” The Krampus hooked Tick Tock with his horns and tossed the mimic away before punching Lily in the face. “I am infinite!”

“He very much enjoys his own voice,” noted Death, who was now munching on a candy cane.

“Indeed,” Mike agreed, his magic now coalescing and creating a cage inside of the Krampus’ spirit.

The Krampus grabbed Lily and threw her at Mike. This broke his concentration as he jumped out of the way to avoid getting crushed. Lily snarled

like a tiger and got to her feet, her skin now covered in scales. He had never seen her so angry.

The Krampus charged toward Mike and was clotheslined by a foot-thick horizontal spear of ice that appeared in the middle of the room. As he flipped head over heels, Yuki appeared in the doorway, her face covered in cuts and bruises.

“Where the hell have you been?” Lily snarled, then jumped once more into the fray.

“Pleasant as always,” Yuki muttered, then raised her hands and sent a beam of white light at the Krampus. Ice formed wherever the beam struck, causing the Krampus to slip and stumble.

Mike sent out dozens of streamers, which wrapped around the Krampus’ torso. The Krampus let out a hideous shriek and bolted for the back of the room. If not for Lily and Tick Tock, he would have disappeared almost immediately. Tick Tock’s bladed limbs kept tripping up the Krampus’ legs, and Lily’s tail was wrapped around the demon’s throat, holding her in place as she punched the back of his head. Still, the Krampus disappeared through the cave mouth in the back of the room, taking his attackers with him.

“Shit!” Mike kept Santa’s soul tightly bound with his magic and gave chase with Holly and Death right behind him. Yuki sprinted past him, her tails whirring behind her so fast that it looked as though she had five instead of three.

Mike really hoped he didn’t have a concussion.

By the time he caught up, they were in the caves where Santa had fought the frost giants. Massive sheets of ice had been built into the cave walls, blocking off the available exits. Globes of foxfire illuminated the room, revealing that the Krampus had been pinned once more.

Gone was any vestige of humanity or thought. The Krampus’ face had extended outward, like a crocodile’s, and he snapped his fearsome teeth at his foes. Lily was actively trying to strangle him with her tail as Tick Tock ripped chunks of darkness out of the Krampus’ legs.

Mike tried to loop his magic around the Krampus once again. The monster was squirming so much that he couldn’t figure out what he was looking at.

“Hold him as still as possible!” He shouted, Santa’s soul pulsing in his hands.

Lily looked like she wanted to say something, but she was too busy punching the Krampus in the back of his skull. Her features were twisted now, and her magnificent horns had become gnarled and brimmed with fire. Yuki put her hand on the ground and the stone beneath the Krampus twisted into thick shackles that bound him to the floor.

“Noooooo!” The Krampus’ cry reverberated through the cavern as he tried to break free of his earthen shackles. Yuki responded by freezing his limbs in ice, her eyes brimming with golden light as red lines manifested on her cheeks.

Tick Tock and Lily piled on, holding the Krampus down as Mike ran loops of magical energy all around the monster. The golden light in his hand sparkled as he pulled those loops toward him and placed Santa’s soul inside. As if by instinct, Mike pulled the loops tight, causing Santa’s soul to sink into the Krampus.

A foul energy permeated the room, and Mike was driven to his knees. Santa’s soul swirled and expanded, trying to bond with the Krampus once again. The shifting mosaic of spiritual energy was painful to look into, but Mike didn’t dare risk letting up. At times, he became disoriented, as if he had forgotten the task he was in the middle of. Losing focus, his thoughts drifted away until—

Holly took his hand and squeezed. The room came into focus once again.

“You can do this,” she whispered. “You have to.”

Mike nodded, wiping the blood from his lips. Pain blossomed inside of his head, but he willed it aside and weaved the Krampus and Santa back together. He felt guilty tucking that golden light away in skeins of darkness, but there was no other choice.

The Krampus shrieked and bucked his hips, but it was too late. Already, the extra limbs were dissipating into a dark mist, rendering him mostly human once more. His supernatural strength fled him, and both Tick Tock and Yuki backed down on their restraint.

Lily, however, gave no quarter. She grabbed the Krampus by his horns and yanked them apart, causing the base of one to splinter.

“You ready to make a wish?” she whispered. “Cause I’m about to wish so hard that you’ll be nothing more than a stain on the earth.”

“Lily.” Mike put his hand on her wrist and winced at the heat. It was hot enough that it burned him, but he didn’t dare let go. “Ease up. It’s over.”

“It’s not over, Mike!” Her eyes blazed with fire as she looked up at him. “Don’t you see? This bastard will always be a ticking time bomb, ready to go off! If it isn’t our children today, who will it be next? What if Callisto had been taken? How would you have felt?”

“You’re right.” He moved close and touched the rough skin of her cheek. “And that’s something we can figure out later. But...” he sighed and looked up at the ceiling of the cave. He was exhausted, and his nose was still bleeding. “There’s gonna be a huge mess up there. We’ve all worked hard enough tonight. Let’s get his better half back to at least lighten the load.”

Lily contemplated him for several long moments as the Krampus cried out in pain. Snorting in disgust, she snapped off the Krampus’ horn.

“He said to stop!” cried the Krampus.

“You’re right, I did.” Mike knelt down to stare the Krampus in the eyes. “And right now, that’s the only reason that horn hasn’t been shoved up your ass.”

The Krampus stared at his captors, his face twisting up in hatred. He opened his mouth to speak when Holly knelt by his side.

“Santa, I know you’re in there.” She clutched the edges of her dress. “Properly, this time.”

“He can hear you, but he ain’t—” The Krampus went quiet as Lily wrapped her tail around his mouth.

“This was a terrible evening,” Holly continued. “A lot of elves died, and the North Pole... I don’t know how much of it is left. You’re the cause of this, but I know now it’s not entirely your fault. I’ve been thinking about what you said, about me being free from Christmas to make my own choices. You wanted something for me that you couldn’t have. For a while, I struggled with the realization that you and the Krampus are the same creature, and...” she shook her head.

“It is our choices that make us who we are.” Death said, kneeling behind Holly and placing a bony hand on her shoulder, causing her to flinch. “You see, mortals don’t really have that many choices. They just appear, like moss on a rock. But you haven’t had the privilege of making your own choices for a long time, and I think I understand why you’ve become so broken inside.”

“We’re different people, really. We lived entire lives in a matter of years.” Yuki said, crossing her arms and scowling. “So yeah. You’ve done some really bad

things tonight, and probably deserve worse. But all of us here, we know what it's like to need forgiveness." She looked over at Lily, who was almost back to normal.

"No thanks," she replied. "I'm not participating in this emotional circle jerk."

Mike shook his head and stared into the Krampus' eyes. "You owe us. No matter what you're feeling, or how deep you're buried, you need to come make this right. It's not what you do when you fall that matters, but rather what you do when you pick yourself back up."

Holly put her hands on the Krampus' temples, then pressed her forehead against his. "Father Christmas, please," she begged. "Please come back to us. The world still needs you. I need you. And...I forgive you."

Lily made a face and released her hold on the Krampus' mouth. He was breathing raggedly, his features stretched tight while he gasped for air. The demon shook as his features twisted, his long limbs shortening and filling out with muscle. The dark hairs of his beard brightened and turned white as snow with matching hair emerging from his scalp. The remaining horn slid into his skull, causing the dingy cap on his head to tumble free and land on the ground.

The Krampus grunted as rosy light flooded his face. Dark shadows detached from his skin, withdrawing into the folds of his jacket to reveal glowing red cheeks and a bulbous nose. Eyes blue enough to be mistaken for sea glass now looked out from beneath a furrowed brow, regarding them with relief.

Santa sat up straight, his large belly hanging free from the remnants of his coat. Tears were caught in the corners of his eyes, and he stood with Mike's help. Santa's beard wrapped itself around Mike's arm, but Santa smoothed the hairs away with his hands.

"So the fat man finally makes an appearance." Lily huffed, crossing her arms as her tail vanished behind her. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Santa surveyed the room, his eyes red from crying. A small smile broke out on his face, and he wiped the tears away.

"You've all been really good this year," he whispered, then looked down at Holly. "And you never fail to impress me, my dear Holly. I am so proud of you."

Holly threw her arms around Santa. He patted her on the head affectionately, then looked at Mike. "The North Pole is unclaimed," he said. "Should you wish it—"

“No.” Mike shook his head immediately. “This place, it’s too big of a job for someone like me.”

Santa nodded, then moved to go back through the caves. Yuki melted her ice walls as they went, the group walking in silence as they returned to the North Pole. The small bit of magic brightened at their approach, and Santa stared at the artifact in reverence.

“So, wait? We’re just going to let this guy have it all back?” Lily moved between Santa and the North Pole. “Were none of you paying attention to me earlier?”

“I was,” Mike said, pondering the situation. If they let Santa reclaim it, they were effectively setting a timer for when he went out of control once more. “But this is a better place to discuss our options. Last thing we want is to leave it unguarded.”

Santa moved to sit in one of the remaining chairs. When he spoke, his voice was low and rumbly. “If given no other choice, I will resume ownership. But Lily is correct. As I exist now, I am a being outside of time consisting of a human soul and an outsider’s body. It will not be a matter of if, but when I slip again. Nothing short of peace on Earth will rectify the issue.”

Lily raised an eyebrow at Mike. “See?”

Mike ignored Lily. He needed to focus on the solution, not the problem, and he was exhausted from the fight. “Binding requires a human soul, correct?”

Santa nodded. “As it must be. And though I have existed outside the game on a technicality, the new owner will be caught up in the machinations of the Architect anew. I...will choose whoever you believe is fitting.”

Mike contemplated Santa for several moments, rubbing his jaw. He looked at the others, then back at the North Pole.

“Shit,” he muttered, causing the elf beside him to flinch. “Sorry, Holly, that one slipped out of me.”

“Wait a second.” Lily moved next to Holly and inspected the elf. “You’re hot, kind of in a weird Oompa Loompa sort of way.”

“Hey!” Holly took a step forward and jabbed Lily in the knee with her fist.

“I’m willing to bet Romeo played ‘hide the Christmas pickle’ with you, right?” Lily took a dramatic sniff over Holly’s head. The elf turned bright red and covered her face. Yo, fat man. What’s the price for admission?”

Santa raised an eyebrow at Lily, then looked over at Mike. “I’m afraid I don’t know what she means.”

“I believe I do.” Death stepped forward and put his hand on Holly’s head. “You see, Mike Radley has likely engaged in rather vigorous intercourse with this woman, and it is likely that...oh dear, she must be tired.”

Holly had crouched down and was covering her face in horror.

“Anyway, there is likely a piece of his soul residing in her now. Or rather, a piece of her soul that has been rewritten as human. I’m unsure how it works, perhaps Lily could explain more.”

Lily’s face had gone completely white. “What...do you mean by that?”

Death contemplated Lily for an unusually long time. “I am, of course, referring to your diet and knowledge of spiritual matters.”

Lily bit her lip and looked at Mike. “Anyway, how much of a human soul is required? Because I know for a fact that what Romeo left behind will grow. So even if it’s tenuous at first, maybe the connection will improve?”

Santa nodded. “It could work. If Holly chooses to become the new master of the North Pole, she will not be beholden to the shifting beliefs that have influenced my downfall. I would resume my role as guardian and be beholden to her commands.”

“But only if she chooses.” Mike looked down at Holly. “Because this is a pretty big decision. And once you make it, there isn’t any going back.”

Holly gazed into Mike’s eyes as if searching for something. She looked over at Santa, then the others.

“This...isn’t at all what I expected when I came to your home,” she said. “And if you had asked me then if I would do it, I would have said yes without hesitation. I would have felt it was my duty, and would have been honored to accept. But after so many days together, learning more about who I am and what I’m capable of, I can honestly say that I feel differently.”

Mike nodded. "I know how you feel. This is a big responsibility, and nobody here begrudges you for your decision. So, how do we go about finding a suitable replacement?" He looked at the others.

"Hey!" Holly grabbed Mike's coat and gave it a tug. "I never said I wasn't going to do it!"

He looked at her in confusion. "I'm sorry, but didn't you—"

"I said I feel differently now. I am free of outside influences, and this is a decision I get to make on my own. No matter what happens next, this decision will always be mine, and I have you to thank for it." She pulled hard on his coat until he knelt down, and she planted a big kiss on his lips. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm the woman who's gonna save Christmas."

She turned toward Santa, who led her to the North Pole. He had her place her palm on the shining surface of the artifact, causing the chamber to fill with light.

Mike didn't know what to expect once the light faded, but Holly looked no different. Santa, on the other hand, was in far better shape. He looked like he had stepped straight out of a storybook, wearing his trademark red and white colors.

Santa looked at the others and smiled. "HO HO HO!" He shouted with great cheer. "MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

"Santa!" Death did a little dance that reminded Mike of a dog doing tippy-taps.

"If you'll excuse me, I've got some work to do." Santa slid his hands into his pockets. "There are some very naughty creatures up above that are deserving of some Christmas cheer!"

With that, Santa pulled his hands from his pockets to reveal chrome brass knuckles inlaid with gems. The words *Christmas Cheer* was carved intricately into each one, and he slid them over his gloved fingers. With a wink at them all, he placed one finger on the side of his nose and transformed into a glittery mist that circled the North Pole twice before disappearing through an unseen crack in the ceiling.

"What...on earth was that about?" Lily asked.

Holly smirked. "I was given a choice," she replied. "And so I made a few modifications."

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Kisa walked behind the column of elves, holding her coat tightly against her skin. Ahead of her, thousands of elves carried hundreds of children, led by Alabaster and Christmas Present. They were climbing the ridge of what was either a snow-covered mountain or a massive glacier, she had no idea which.

At the top of the ridge, she found herself looking down into a small valley with an empty train station. Her vantage point made the structure look more like a model than an actual building. Christmas Present glowed like a distant lantern, leading the elves and the children to safety.

Kisa looked back at the North Pole and sniffled, her nose sufficiently frozen and runny. Smoke rose from shattered buildings, and she could see the Workshop in the distance. The roof had caved in, likely burying the Hot Cocoa Lounge. She smiled fondly at the memory of being bent over that jukebox as Mike railed her from behind.

“Hey!” Tink swatted Kisa in the butt. “Cat keep moving, Tink’s feet freezing!”

“Sorry, weird headspace is all.” She watched the eerie glow of the Northern Lights as they began a slow ascent toward the sky. They had encountered a few spirits wandering around about while on their journey, but had been left alone. She had no idea how that had even come about, but wasn’t going to complain. On at least two occasions, Grýla had tried to ambush them. The giant had been no match for Christmas Present, who had torn them both apart.

Kisa watched another building fall, the sound of the crash reaching her several seconds later. Her ears twitched as she heard a faint voice carry over the divide.

“Did you hear that?” she asked.

“Hear what?” Tink looked around, then adjusted her goggles.

Kisa tilted her head back and forth, hopeful she would hear it again. It was faint, but she picked it up.

“Ho ho ho!” The distant voice cried. “Merry Christmas!” There was another crash, followed by the sound of a cat yowling. Another building collapsed.

“It’s Santa!” Tink declared, pointing excitedly in the distance. Kisa couldn’t see Santa, but didn’t doubt that Tink had. “Santa come back, open big can of whoop-ass!”

Nearby, an elf flinched as he walked past, blank eyes on their destination.

“So does that mean it’s over? The Krampus is gone?” Kisa looked at the elves as they trudged forward.

“Tink think so. Still keep going, before ass freeze off. Santa owe Tink big.” The goblin adjusted her goggles and moved to rejoin the line.

Kisa contemplated the distant destruction, then turned to face their destination, untouched by the fighting. It would be hard work, but the North Pole would be restored, she was sure of it.

With an extra spring in her step, Kisa moved back into line and started humming to herself. It was nothing more than the tune to *Jingle Bells*, but the elf in front of her froze for a moment, her pointed ears twitching.

Before Kisa knew it, several of the elves were humming the song. Gradually, color returned to their skin and clothing as the humming grew louder and eventually transformed into open song. By the time they reached the train station, the elves were openly singing Christmas carols as they carried their precious cargo to safety.