

Quality Assurance

Mike stood outside the small, thatched yurt that the centaurs used as their infirmary. Nearby, Kisa paced along the top of a fence that created a small pen for sheep and pigs. A pair of centaurs stood outside the yurt, ready to run a message or retrieve supplies.

“She will be okay, Mike Radley.” Death stood to Mike’s left, holding a cup of tea in both hands. He had seen Mike carrying Tink and had followed them to the centaur village.

Cecilia hovered nearby as well, and Mike had fought the urge numerous times to tell them both to go away. There was a very real fear that Cecilia may open her mouth and start singing, or perhaps Death would suddenly offer his condolences. Their presence would have no effect on whatever actually happened, a fact that he told himself over and over again.

Yuki had heard the commotion and tried to come with them, but he had told her to stay behind in case Grace got out of bed. This was stressful enough. He didn’t need to worry about his daughter waking up to an empty home.

Zel stepped through the flap of the yurt and sighed. “She’s okay.”

Mike nodded, his eyes brimming with tears he hadn’t known were there. He wiped them away. “Can I go see her?”

“You could, but she’s resting comfortably now. She needs her sleep and you might wake her.” Zel walked toward him, the flap of the yurt parting as Kisa slipped inside. “But we should talk.”

Mike nodded. Zel led him away from the yurt a bit, then turned to face him. She opened her mouth to say something, then looked over his shoulder and paused.

The Caretaker turned to see that Death and Cecilia were both standing right behind him. He just shrugged. “It’s not like whatever you tell me will remain a secret,” he said.

“That’s fair.” Zel yawned and pulled a small notebook from a bag around her waist. She flipped it open and thumbed through the pages. “I’ve been tracking the

extraordinary events surrounding Tink's pregnancy. Everything goes in here, including signs of aging."

"I'm aware," Mike said. Zel had been meticulous about everything in regards to Tink. The centaur's primary fear at first had centered around the goblin's diminutive size, coupled with the unknown genetics of the baby. Goblins typically gave birth to multiples, but the half-human baby developing in Tink's womb had taken up all the available space already.

"So I've been tracking her age. Tink's actual age is elderly by human standards. We aren't even certain how long goblins can live due to the often violent conditions they are usually required to survive. Due to her own version of the nymph's blessing, her body has never aged, but the baby is somehow draining that magic from her. When you first brought Tink to me with this pregnancy, she had all the 'human' hallmarks of a woman in her mid-twenties." Zel found the page she wanted and held the book open for Mike. "As of today, based on human biology, I would clock her as a woman in her mid-to-late forties."

"Women in their forties have babies, though." Mike looked at the chart Zel had made, but his vision was too blurry.

"You're right, they do. But look at the progression." Zel took the book back and pointed at the data points. "When I add in today's incident, what shape does this line make?"

"A curve." Mike already saw where this was going. "She's aging at an accelerating rate."

Zel nodded. "Once the magic of the blessing is gone, I can only assume the pregnancy will drain her of her actual lifeforce. Goblins only have a four to five month pregnancy, and give birth to litters. But we know she's only carrying one child, and it is much larger than a goblin. If she were to give birth soon, it's likely she would do so as a fifty or sixty year old. But we have no idea how far along she actually is."

Mike scowled. "Tink keeps telling me that the baby is still growing."

The centaur sighed. "She tells me the same thing. Mike, if she carries this baby to a human term of nine months, we have to assume she will present as a two-hundred year old woman. And humans don't live—"

"I get it." Mike ran his fingers through his hair. "Fuck," he whispered.

“Yeah.” Zel closed her book and put it away. “We need to figure out how to help her, and soon.”

Mike stared at the ground, his thoughts caught in a whirlwind of emotions. What could he even do? Was there anyone who could help him? How could he—

“Hey.” Zel grabbed Mike by the hand and he felt the world snap back into focus. “We can solve this together. Let’s think about the things we can do right now to help.”

“Right. Um…” Mike looked up into Zel’s eyes. They seemed to sparkle, reflecting the light of nearby torches. The centaur was clearly concerned, but she was also full of hope. He took a deep breath, drawing strength from her. “Our main problem is the deadline. How long do you think she has?”

“Hard to say,” Zel replied. “But if my observations are correct, anything past two months would place her well within the lower range for dying of old age. I suspect her advanced years will make the pregnancy even more difficult. According to the medical texts you’ve brought me, human births past the age of forty are treated as geriatric. We’re officially in troubled waters if she were a human.”

Mike snapped his fingers. “What about the Library, then? We couldn’t keep Grace’s egg there because time doesn’t pass. I mean, living things don’t age. Would that keep the pregnancy from progressing?”

The centaur nodded. “I assume so, but that would also mean poor Tink remains the way she is for months, maybe even years. That’s probably a question for Sofia, but yeah, anything we can do to keep the baby from growing will give us and Tink extra time to solve the problem.”

Death cleared his throat, a clear reminder that he was still nearby. “While Tinker Radley is in the Library resting, perhaps we should take a trip to the North Pole and ask Santa for more details. After all, this is the result of a Christmas Wish, and I wonder if we may learn something from him or Miss Holly that could help us.”

“That’s a really good idea,” said Mike.

“We could also visit the Hot Cocoa Lounge.” Death sipped at his tea. “I have been unable to find a hot chocolate I enjoy outside of the North Pole.”

“These both sound like great ideas,” Zel said as she stepped into Mike and hugged him. He let out a sigh and leaned into the centaur. She smelled of campfires and hay. “If someone can have the rats open a portal from here to the Library, we can move her once she seems stable enough.”

“Thank you,” said Mike, wrapping his arms around Zel’s torso.

“Of course.” Zel’s hug suddenly became tight. “And since I’m awake and have you here anyway, maybe we can talk about how Callisto managed to get into the Vault while you were supposed to be keeping an eye on him.”

“Um...” Mike made a face. “Yeah, about that...”

“Come, Miss Cecilia. It would seem now is the time to leave Mike Radley to his fate.” Death cordially held a hand out for the banshee, who flashed Mike a wry grin and then took the Grim Reaper’s hand in her own and walked away with him.

Don’t leave me, Mike thought at Death and Cecilia as Zel released her embrace and fixed him with a stern glare. If he had a choice between arguing with Zel or fighting monsters in the Vault, he would take the Vault every time.

Daybreak flooded through the skylights, illuminating the marble chamber. The light was scattered by the thin silken fabric draped over the top and sides of the massive four-poster bed in the center of the room. Sofia winced at the light. It was an artifact of the Library, the fake light streaming from the ceiling of the room. The Library was truly located between realms in a place devoid of the true passage of time or space.

Yet somehow, a previous Head Librarian had managed to use this function as a gentle alarm clock meant to let them know it was time for work. No matter which room Sofia chose to sleep in, the skylight appeared and woke her when she was rested and it was time for work. Sighing, she sat up and grabbed her head.

“Shouldn’t have drunk so much last night,” she muttered. The events of the evening had started to blur after her third bottle of wine. She told herself at the time that she was simply taking a night off. The more truthful part of her admitted that the goal after Ratu’s visit had been to drown herself in the misery of her own thoughts.

It hadn't been the naga's fault. Facing hard truths was always difficult. However, there was a difference between acknowledging a problem and having it smack you right in the face.

When Sofia leaned forward to get out of bed, the pain shifted forward, as if it were a molten hot fluid in the back of her skull. The cyclops groaned and sank onto her knees next to the bed, then assumed the fetal position on the cold floor. From down there, she could see the empty bottles under her bed. She counted way more than three, and the remains of what was probably once a party sub. Groaning, she crawled across the floor to her staff, which was leaning against the other side of her nightstand. The cold marble felt good through the silk of her nightgown, and was probably the only thing keeping her from puking everywhere.

When she got her fingers around the bottom of the staff, she knocked it over. It smacked into the ground with a crack, like thunder, and Sofia felt the world spin around her. She squeezed her eye tight, tears flowing down her cheeks in agony. It took her a good minute before she reached out to find where the staff had landed, then pulled it to her chest and sent her will through the ancient wood.

A soft glow could be seen through her closed eyelid, and the staff's magic burned through her, scouring her clean of the agony of her hangover. She sagged with relief, then opened her eye to stare at the ceiling.

While the staff was capable of balancing her symptoms, it didn't actually cure her. To do that, she would need plenty of water and probably a meal that didn't sit in her stomach like a brick. Sitting up, she used the nightstand to pull herself to her feet. The staff acted as a crutch as she shuffled to the bathroom.

After using the bathroom, she moved to stand in front of the mirror. The sclera of her eye was red all over, and the long braid of her hair had come undone. It was going to take forever to brush all the tangles out of it.

"Gods," she muttered, then stumbled out of the bathroom to the armoire that contained her clothes. Sofia undressed and slipped into a long, white gown which she cinched around the waist. The gown folded in the front, which accentuated her already large breasts. Satisfied that she hadn't screwed up and put something on wrong or backward, she went back into the bathroom and looked in the mirror.

“You’re a hot fucking mess,” she said, then picked up the nearest brush and got to work. Some of the tangles were bad enough that she ended up yanking out the strands instead, which did nothing good for the state of her head. After almost twenty minutes of brushing her waist length hair, she figured it was good enough and threw it into a braid.

Sofia checked her outfit one more time in the mirror and nodded. If she squinted, she didn’t look too bad. Her stomach growled and the pounding in her head increased. She needed breakfast, and maybe some orange juice.

Stepping out of her room, she heard the rustle of moving furniture, followed by guttural grumbling. Walking down the long hallway of the librarian’s living quarters, she saw a parade of rats in and out of the last room. She looked through the doorway and saw that Tink was lying in the room’s bed with a large plate of deli meats by her feet and a massive jar of pickles on her stomach. The goblin was grumbling to herself as she watched what appeared to be a home improvement show on a tv that had been installed on the wall.

“Stupid fucking dumb fucks,” she muttered, then grabbed the jar of pickles. Tink unscrewed the lid. “Angle flooring, make nicer fit.” She put the jar to her mouth and tipped the thing back, drinking a big mouthful of juice in her attempt to grab a pickle with her teeth. When she lowered the jar, she turned to look at Sofia, three pickles sticking out of her mouth.

“What. Are. You. Doing. Here?” Sofia stared in horror at the mess of wrappers and plates around Tink’s bed. A small group of rats were busy trying to clean it all up. They all scattered when Tink tried to set the jar back on the nightstand and dropped it instead.

Tink shoved the pickles in her mouth, chewing as she talked. “Tink live here now until husband find way to keep Tink and baby booger safe.”

“Baby...booger?”

Tink shrugged. “Goblin baby called booger. Tink called booger one time, think it funny after.” The goblin stretched, which caused her nightgown to ride up, revealing that her stomach looked like an over-inflated balloon. Her belly button had popped inside out. “Library neat, keep bringing Tink food!”

Sofia backed out of the room in horror, then walked wide-eyed into the lobby. At the help desk, a large platter with a big breakfast and some orange juice

was waiting for her. A pair of rats hopped onto the counter and picked it up, then started marching toward the hallway.

“That’s mine,” she said, pointing her staff at them. “Don’t you fucking touch my food.”

The rats squeaked in terror and scattered. Sofia moved to sit at the help desk, then fumbled for the knife and fork on the platter.

“Tink spilled again!” The goblin’s voice echoed out into the lobby. Sofia picked up her tray and found a pedestal to get on. Using her staff, she had the platform lift into the sky to carry her anywhere but here.

Nearly ten stories up, she found a ledge with a small reading table that overlooked the main lobby. She landed her pedestal and sat down with her meal to watch.

The rats were busy streaming in and out of Tink’s room, like ants serving their queen. Sofia glared down at the activity from above, shoving food in her mouth. Halfway through her meal, a dark form dropped down from the ceiling on a silken strand.

“There you are.” Eulalie was hanging upside down, her hair tied back with a red ribbon. “You were slow getting out of bed.”

“Hmmp.” Sofia picked up a piece of bacon and held it out to her. “Why is the goblin here?”

“Ah, that.” Eulalie took the bacon from Sofia. “She almost died last night.”

Sofia choked on her own spit. “What?”

The Arachne nodded. “Maybe not that drastic, but her baby is causing her to age at a faster rate. They moved her here to keep her from getting any older.”

“But the baby won’t get older either.”

“And thus, we have a conundrum.” Eulalie stuck the bacon in her mouth. “Which is why Mike and Death are headed to the North Pole to ask Santa about it.”

“Wait, what?” Sofia stared at the Arachne. “They’re...just going to see Santa, just like that?”

“Not sure why they wouldn’t. Mike just texted to let me know he was leaving.” Eulalie pulled another piece of bacon off of Sofia’s plate. “They’re hoping that Santa might have answers about how to help Tink. The sooner they can fix her, the faster she can go home and—”

Sofia stood and jogged over to her pedestal, her staff in one hand and the orange juice in the other. She stepped onto the platform and tapped it with her staff.

“Can I have the rest of your bacon?” Eulalie asked as she stuffed it all into her mouth. Sofia waved dismissively, willing the platform to move even faster. It dropped from the air so fast that the cyclops felt her aching stomach lurch upward, and she almost lost what little she had eaten. Before the platform had even touched down, Sofia stepped off, landing in a crouch.

The rats in the Lobby stared at Sofia as she broke into a run. She slid to a stop by a large bookshelf against the wall, then paused to lean her staff against it. The Head Librarian’s staff was a powerful artifact that only functioned in the Library itself, so leaving it behind was always the safest option.

Sofia pulled a book out of the shelf and the world distorted as she was transported immediately to Mike Radley’s home office. She set the book elsewhere on the shelf and ran for the living room. Yuki was sitting on the couch, playing some sort of hand game with Grace. The fireplace crackled with purple fire, and the tattered edges of Death’s cloak could be seen disappearing through it.

The cyclops sprinted across the room, then dove headfirst into the fire as the magical portal snapped shut.

Mike stepped out of the fireplace and then stopped to admire the new lobby of the Workshop. The last time he was here, the place had still been quite a mess. Since then, any damage done by the Krampus or his buddies had been undone. In fact, the place actually looked bigger, as if some serious renovations had been done. Large tv screens were installed on several walls, most of them monitoring and tracking data from across the world. Toy commercials were playing on several of them and there was a Naughty/Nice pie chart that ticked back and forth as it tracked the children of the world.

“That’s predictive,” said Death from right behind him. “It uses a complex algorithm based on probability. This gives the elves advance notice on how hard they—”

Mike felt his stomach tighten up and turned to see somebody come through the fireplace. He should have moved out of the way, but the sight of Sofia had him so shocked that he stuck his arms out to catch her instead. The cyclops crashed into him, causing both of them to fall and skid across the floor together. Passing elves froze in their tracks to watch.

“Ow!” Sofia put a hand to her forehead. “Fu—”

Mike slapped a hand over her mouth. “Don’t,” he said, flicking his gaze toward the elves. “It doesn’t go over very well.”

“Right.” The cyclops shifted her arms to try and stand on her own. This caused her large breasts to get shoved into Mike’s face for just a moment, and then she was up. She dropped a hand to assist him.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“You stuck a goblin in my Library without asking,” she said.

“We tried,” he replied. “The rats said they couldn’t wake you up. Since it was literally life or death, we spoke with Eulalie instead and she told us where to set up.”

“Oh.” Sofia put a hand to her head and winced. “Right. It was a difficult ...evening.”

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Of course,” she snapped, then cleared her throat. “Um...it’s just inconvenient is all. The rats are being pulled away from their duties and we’re still way behind.”

Mike wasn’t buying it. Tink was clearly part of the problem, but it had to be something deeper than that. Her soul was twisted up in places, indicating some form of internal struggle. He had gotten good at interpreting emotions by watching the souls of others, but it hardly made him a mind reader. However, the lobby of the North Pole Workshop was not the place to start having a discussion with Sofia about what the actual issue was.

“Excuse me.” Mike turned to the nearest elf. “We’re here to see Santa and Holly. You can let them know Mike, the Caretaker, has come for a quick visit and then I’ll be out of their hair.”

The elf, clad in an outfit that was the epitome of a candy cane, nodded and jogged off, the bells on their shoes ringing.

“Ah!” Death turned his attention toward the Hot Cocoa Lounge. “If you’ll excuse me, I intend to stock up.” The Grim Reaper walked toward the lounge, opening his robes to reveal that he was carrying a large, insulated liquid dispenser. This left Mike alone with Sofia, who was busy adjusting her gown.

“So this is the North Pole?” Sofia walked over toward the entrance to the building. A large bay of windows had been installed, revealing the frozen village outside. It was nighttime, yet a large group of elves were busy having a snowball fight under the glow of the lanterns.

“Yep.” Mike moved up to the door. “It’s got a much different vibe than the last time I was here. It’s nice to see them having fun outside.”

Sofia moved up next to him and frowned. “Aren’t they supposed to be making presents? Christmas is in a couple of months.”

“They’re not slaves. They get days off.” Mike could see a group of elves beyond the snowball fight. They were hard at work building a massive snowman. “In fact, I know that’s something Holly was trying to find a better balance for after she took over. These guys were created for one purpose, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t deserve better.”

“You could almost say it was a Christmas miracle.” The high pitched voice came from none other than Holly herself. He turned around to see that she was holding a computer tablet that she swiped at with her fingers. The elf was wearing a red and green dress with cream-colored pinstripe tights. Satisfied by whatever she saw there, she handed the tablet off to the elf Mike had sent for her. “Will you let the Ribbon department know that I approved their request?”

The elf nodded and ran off.

“If you’re doing everything electronically, why not send an email?” asked Sofia.

Holly laughed. “Because, silly, that would make it less personal!” She moved next to Mike and looked outside. “Ooh, that looks like fun.”

“Hello, Holly.” Mike stuck out his hand. “You look well.”

The elf grinned, then stepped past his hand to hug him. “You’re looking good,” she said, then sniffed the air. “You smell good, too.”

Sofia cleared her throat.

“Holly, this is Sofia. She’s the Head Librarian.”

Holly turned and craned her neck to make eye contact with the cyclops. “Hi there!” She stuck out a hand for the cyclops to shake. It disappeared inside of Sofia’s palm.

“A pleasure.” Sofia gave Mike a look. “We’ve come on business.”

“Right. Speaking of Christmas miracles, I was hoping to speak with Santa about my own regarding Tink.” Mike looked down at Holly, who was staring at Sofia’s breasts. They were the size of her head. “Unless you know how all that works.”

“Eh.” Holly wagged her hand. “I understand some of it, but Santa could definitely describe it better than I could. If you all want to wait in the Hot Cocoa Lounge, I could set up a meeting right away.”

“You can’t just take us to him?” asked Sofia.

“Nope!” Holly’s tone was cheery as she turned and craned her head back to look up at Sofia. The cyclops was nearly twice the elf’s height. “I have no idea what he’s doing right now, and would prefer to let him finish in case it’s important.”

Sofia crossed her arms and scoffed. Holly turned back to Mike and jerked her thumb at the librarian. “This one seems tense,” she said.

Mike gave Sofia a dirty look. “Unusually so,” he added. “We’ll be in the lounge. If you can, have someone let us know how long we’ll be waiting. Otherwise she might explode.”

A nearby elf stopped in their tracks and stared at Mike in horror.

“I’m kidding,” he said. “She won’t literally explode.”

Holly waved the elf on, then turned back to Mike. “That one is new,” she said. “Only a few months old.”

“You create them fully grown?” asked Sofia as they started toward the lounge.

The elf nodded. “We’re still replacing the lives lost from that Christmas. However, instead of just making all of them at once, we’ve been looking at how to create improved versions with a better sense of free will.”

“Why not copy you?” asked Mike. “You have free will.”

“Part of that is because I’m now in charge of this place.” Holly waved her hand around. “Technically, I rank above Santa now. There’s no telling how the magic may interpret something like that.”

“And the other part?” asked Sofia.

Holly giggled, then gave Mike a longing look. “Because I’m *tainted*,” she said in a sing-song voice. “Somebody filled me up with a little holiday spirit of his own, and we don’t know what that will do.”

“Of fucking course,” muttered Sofia. Several elves passing by immediately dropped whatever they were carrying and ran off, covering their ears.

“I warned you,” said Mike to the cyclops. Then he turned to Holly. “I thought that was something else you were going to work on.”

Holly chuckled. “Swearing in general is very rude,” she said, throwing Sofia a dirty look. “But there are plenty of older elves who will react...poorly to it.”

Sofia blushed, then stared at her feet as the three of them entered the lounge. When they opened the door, Mike heard soft Christmas jazz playing and saw a live band on the stage. Remarkably, Death was up on stage with a saxophone in the middle of a solo.

“Death?” Mike stared at the Grim Reaper as he finished up the *Carol of the Bells*. When he saw Mike, the Reaper handed the instrument to an elf who stood nearby. “You play the saxophone?”

“I play this one, yes.” Death gestured back at the stage as he stepped down. “The instruments here are magical. Anyone who wants to play is given the ability to do so.” The fires in his eyes flickered. “Mike Radley, do you want to join the band with me?”

“Er, not today, buddy.” Mike surveyed the room where dozens of elves chatted amicably while drinking hot chocolate. “What happened to the jukebox?” he asked.

“Moved it to my room after it was fixed.” Holly smirked. “Once the elves found out how it was broken, they started drawing...inspiration just from the sight of it. Now we do live music when we can, otherwise we just play recordings through the speakers.”

Mike winced. “How much do I owe you for the jukebox?” he asked.

Holly raised an eyebrow. “Hold onto that thought,” she said, then patted a seat at the bar. “I’ll go find Santa.”

“We’ll be here.” Mike sat down and was immediately approached by a Christmas elf dressed as a bartender. The man had a mustache that had been curled upward into a loop on both sides. His nametag said that he was Felix.

“What’ll you have?” asked Felix.

“Cocoa. Make it hot.”

The elf nodded, then knelt beneath the counter to grab a mug. Mike looked at Sofia, who was still standing behind him. “I’ll buy you a drink,” he said.

“Don’t be asinine.” Sofia winced, then looked around to see if anyone had flinched. A couple of elves regarded her with suspicion, but that was it. “I assume the drinks here are free.”

“But it’s the thought that counts,” said Death, who turned to Felix. “Put Mike Radley’s drink on my tab.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Death, sir.” Felix winked at Mike and set a steaming mug in front of him. “I assume you know the rules?”

“Never, ever let it cool,” Mike responded, then picked up his cup.

Felix turned to Sofia. “And for the goddess? he asked.

Sofia turned bright red. “I am no goddess,” she replied.

“Well, you’re built like one.” Felix threw a towel over his shoulder and started wiping down a nearby mug with a rag. “So what brings you crazy kids here? Honeymoon?” He waggled his eyebrows.

The cyclops sputtered a reply, but it was unintelligible.

Mike chuckled. "Just getting out of the house. You know how it is. Now that the kids are here, we just never seem to get any time for ourselves any more."

Felix nodded in understanding. "Kids, am I right? How so much trouble and terror can be packed into those little miracles, I simply can't understand."

"Are you two for real right now?" Sofia sat on the stool, which vanished from sight under her butt. "Did you plan this?"

"No idea what you're talking about," said Felix, who pulled a clean mug from under the counter and tossed it up from behind his back. He caught it with his other hand and slid it under the spigot to fill it up with cocoa. After topping it with whipped cream, he set it in front of Sofia and tossed a handful of shaved chocolate on top with some pink sea salt. "Here. It's from the old country. Seems like it would be your speed."

"I feel like I'm in a bad movie and half the dialogue is missing." The cyclops frowned at her cup. "It's just hot chocolate."

"Or is it?" Felix grinned. "Perhaps I'm just a slinger of confections. Or maybe, just maybe, I'm secretly more."

"Gods, I'll drink it if you'll actually shut up." Sofia picked up the mug, which looked tiny in her hands. When she sipped it, her whole face flushed with color and she gasped. "This...this is..."

"Magic," replied Felix, making a little explosion with his hands. "You all let me know if you want more."

Mike held back a laugh as Sofia drained half her cup in one swallow. Whipped cream and chocolate curls were stuck to her upper lip.

"And thus, the Head Librarian discovers the true meaning of Christmas," Death said with a chuckle. "Felix, is my special order ready yet?"

"Not yet, Mr. Death, sir. I've got a special blend being frothed in the back for you. It's made from a secret recipe of dark chocolate that's been caffeinated to give you a delightful buzz."

"You're a good man. I'll name my first child after you." The Grim Reaper watched Felix go, then turned to Mike. "Naturally, I won't ever have children. This is just something fun I said for spontaneity."

“I figured,” said Mike.

Death looked at Sofia. “I like the North Pole and the Hot Cocoa Lounge because, to the elves, I’m not the personification of their inevitable end. Here, I’m Santa’s number one helper and get to be something more than what I am. It feels good, doesn’t it?”

Sofia actually paused mid-sip, then turned to look at Death. “Have you been speaking with Ratu?” she asked.

“Of course. There is no reason I shouldn’t speak to her. It would be rather impolite.” The Grim Reaper stood and pulled a pair of sunglasses from his robe and put them on. “If you’ll excuse me, the band needs a guitarist.”

Mike laughed and watched Death cross the lounge to go back to the stage. Several elves actually cheered for him as he picked up an electric guitar and slung the strap over his shoulder. As the band started up, Death leaned over to the microphone.

“This one goes out to my best friend, Mike Radley.” When there was a lack of reaction, Death pointed at Mike. “You may know him better as the Caretaker.”

Heads immediately swiveled toward Mike, and he gave them all a playful wave, then turned his attention back toward the bar. He couldn’t help but notice how stiff Sofia seemed to be all of the sudden.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

Sofia stared into her mug, then shook her head. “I really don’t,” she replied.

“So you admit something’s wrong.” Mike sighed. “Look, I’m really sorry about the whole Tink thing. If I could have put her anywhere else, I would have. Did you know the Library started providing her food almost right away? Her cravings have been unreal. I can’t even tell you how much more money we’ve spent on food in the last month. I know there’s that whole thing about eating for two, but Zel clocked her daily caloric intake somewhere above fifteen thousand calories a day. We have no idea where it’s going.”

Sofia picked up her mug and drank the rest of the cocoa. As soon as she set it down, Felix appeared with a replacement. Behind them, Death was playing the opening licks to Christmas Eve/Sarajevo by the Trans-Siberian Orchestra. The jazz instruments had been replaced with violins and a drum kit and some elves had

stationed themselves at the foot of the stage, bouncing up and down on the balls of their feet in excitement.

“It’s not Tink,” Sofia replied. “Well, it is, but not really.”

Mike set his mug down and turned to face her. “I’m listening.”

The cyclops stared at her hands for a really long time. She sighed and slumped forward. “It’s more about what Death said about the opportunity to be a different person.”

“Yeah, he’s like that sometimes.” Mike smiled and waved at Death. The Grim Reaper waved back, the guitar playing itself as he did so. “He’ll say something that sounds so innocent on the surface, but is secretly powerful and enlightening. For a while, I wondered if he could read our minds, or maybe had some sort of precognition. But do you want to know the truth?”

Sofia shrugged.

“He’s genuine. That’s all it is. Ever since he was summoned, he has always been true to himself and to others.” Mike turned toward the cyclops. “When Cyrus’ spirit moved on, I think it really hit him that they would never meet again. All of us seem to have some version of eternity promised. But him? He’s eternal, the doorman to a place he cannot enter. So stuff like this? He finds ways to live in the moment.” He slid his hand over and put it on top of Sofia’s. “And if something that he said struck you so hard, I get the feeling that maybe you’re experiencing a similar revelation.”

“I don’t understand you,” Sofia muttered. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t always seem so...perceptive.”

Mike laughed. “I live in a household full of women I’m in various relationships with. I’m married to a goblin and a mermaid. Both of my kids are half-breeds, and one of them keeps eating beetles she finds in the gardens. My home is located at the nexus of multiple pocket dimensions I’m expected to maintain. These moments of clarity might not be the norm, but that’s only because it seems like I’ve always got a lot going on.”

“I don’t know what my place is anymore,” Sofia confessed.

“What do you mean?” asked Mike.

Sofia pulled her hand from his to rub a tear from her eye. "I mean all of it. I'm the Head Librarian, but only because the others died off. I have all this responsibility now, but I never asked for it."

"I never asked to become the Caretaker," Mike replied.

"See, that right there is what I meant earlier." Sofia sneered at him. "How could you understand what I'm going through? Although your position was thrust upon you, much like mine, I would say your life is markedly better than it used to be! You went from being a miserable loner to a billionaire sex-god with a family that loves you and kids that..." Her lips trembled and she sipped at her hot cocoa to try and hide it.

"You don't want to be the Head Librarian anymore."

"Yes! No. I don't know. But that's not all of it." Sofia set her mug down and put her head in her hands. "Eulalie does everything I can do, only better. The only thing she can't do is cook. I started cooking for the family because I love doing it and taking care of everyone, but...so what? I'm not particularly gifted at it. What else am I good for? I've been so caught up in chasing my duties that I'm the odd woman out no matter where I go. I don't even know who I am now. What's my role? My purpose?"

Felix appeared as if by magic and slid a napkin toward Sofia. She picked it up and dabbed at her eye.

"I had no idea." Mike reached over to rub her back. "I wish you had told me sooner."

"Why, though? You don't exist to solve my problems. I don't even entirely know what my problem is. I'm the Head Librarian, not some woman who lives under your roof. I'm not your responsibility."

"But it's more than that. Tink has something to do with it, doesn't she?"

"She knows her roles." Sofia sniffed. It looked like she wanted to say more, but Mike could tell she struggled to get the words out.

"Hold that thought." Mike turned on his stool and waved at Death. The Grim Reaper paused mid-song, the band continuing without him. "Silent Night!" Mike shouted.

Death gave him a thumbs-up and strummed the opening notes on his guitar. The elves on stage immediately switched to the new song and swapped out their instruments. Mike stood and took Sofia by the hand.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Dance with me,” he said. “Please.”

Sofia snorted. “You want to dance? To Silent Night?”

“I want to dance with you,” he replied. “I don’t care what song it is, as long as it’s slow.”

The cyclops reluctantly rose, and Mike pulled her away from the bar and wrapped his arms around her waist. She dipped her head down as he held her, turning his head to avoid being smothered by her breasts. His magic danced along her skin, but he wasn’t doing it to seduce her, or to alter her mood. It was his way of letting her know that he was all around her and that he cared.

“You don’t have to live under my roof to be special to me,” he said. “I’ve always thought of you as this badass cyclops who can take care of herself and didn’t put much thought beyond it. If you’re struggling, I want to be there for you, even if I don’t have any answers. But I’m also not a mind reader. Well, not yet, anyway. It wouldn’t surprise me if that became an option, someday.”

Sofia snorted, but remained silent. He could hear her heart beating, and the semi-frantic hammering had dropped down to a more reasonable pace. He lowered his hands from her lower back, which put them around her ass instead.

“Are you seriously trying to seduce me?” she asked.

“Not currently. I didn’t bring enough rope with me, today.” Mike smiled up at her. “My arms were just getting tired at that angle.”

“Typical human.” She glared at him, but the hint of a smile tugged at her lips. “Always a reason.”

“Ha!” Mike laid his head back against her chest and squeezed her butt. “There’s that smile I like.”

Her heart rate jumped, and she accidentally stepped on his foot. He winced, but said nothing while he continued to hold her.

The song finished and the elves clapped. Death started on a rendition of Jingle Bells that had a bunch of the elves singing along.

"I want more out of life," Sofia confessed. "But I don't know what that looks like."

"I'd be happy to help you figure it out," Mike offered. "Say the word and I'll be your man."

This time, he thought he heard her heart skip a beat. Sofia pulled herself away, muttering something about not letting her cocoa get cold. Mike couldn't help but smile as he watched her.

"Having fun?" asked Holly as she walked up.

"A bit," he admitted. They walked back toward the bar as a group. "We meeting up with Santa now?"

"Not quite yet. He's in the middle of something." Holly lowered her voice. "With Mrs. Claus."

"Really?" Mike held in a laugh. "How long do you think he'll be?"

"Well, they started this morning, so maybe another hour or two."

"They started this morning?!?" Mike blinked in shock. Holly shushed him and pulled him down by the collar of his shirt to whisper in his ear.

"Santa takes his relations with Mrs. Claus *very* seriously," she said. "Add that to the fact that he's not exactly human. He reminds me a lot of someone else I know."

"Hey, more power to him. I'm just surprised, is all." He looked at Sofia. "Sounds like it'll be an hour or so before we can see Santa."

"Figures," she muttered. Sofia already looked contemplative again.

"Since we're waiting anyway, I do have a problem that you might be able to help me with." Holly put her hands together and smiled. "If you have time."

"I can do that." Mike turned to Sofia. "Do you want to come, too?"

The cyclops was staring at her own reflection in the surface of the bar. She sighed and rubbed her temples.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’d rather just wait here,” she said. “I have some things to think about.”

“I see.” Troubled that the cyclops had fallen back into a state of melancholy so quickly, there was nothing more he could do for her right now. “I guess I’m all yours,” he told Holly.

“Wonderful. Come with me, please.” She walked toward the exit of the Hot Cocoa Lounge and he followed. Once in the Lobby, she led him to the door and paused to hand him a coat. “Put this on,” she said as she wrapped a scarf around her neck that transformed into a coat that matched her dress. “It’s cold outside.”

Mike slid on the fur-lined coat, then stepped outside with Holly. The two of them strolled down the cold streets of the North Pole, the magical lanterns flickering as Holly walked past them. Looking into the sky, he could see the spirits of the Northern Lights watching them.

“We’re almost there.” Holly led him down a side street between two factory buildings. Through the windows, Mike could see a variety of elves wrapping gifts and sticking them on an assembly line. Further down the building, he actually stopped to watch a room full of elves assembling shoes.

“Are those Yeezys?”

Holly chuckled. “Yep. There’s nothing we can’t duplicate here, given enough time, that is. Speaking of, is there anything special that Grace or Callisto want for Christmas?”

“Does Santa hand out better behavior?”

“I’ll remind you that they are both on the good list.” Holly started walking again. “I keep a personal eye on them, actually.”

“We don’t want any special favors.”

“Really? Even after you saved this place?” They got to the end of the street where a small, cottage-style home had been built. “How many children did you save from the giants? And what about Maui? We actually have a tally here of how many kids are alive because of you.”

“That’s, um...” Mike blushed. “I was only doing what was right.”

“I know.” Holly stopped at the door of the house. “Which is what makes you special.” She pushed the door open and walked inside. “Welcome to my home!

Your shoes can go under there,” she said, pointing under a bench by the door. The home had vaulted ceilings constructed from timber, and smelled like chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

“Yep, no problem.” Mike took off his coat and hung it on a hook by the door. His shoes went under the bench. When he stood, he noticed that Holly had disappeared.

“Holly?”

“Down here!” Her voice came from around the corner. When Mike followed it, he saw an open doorway with descending stairs in the middle of the hall. The stairs squeaked under his weight, and he found himself in a basement workshop with a small wood burning stove in the corner.

“Holly?” He looked around the room and finally spotted the elf as she stood up from behind a stack of boxes. Next to them was the jukebox from the Hot Cocoa lounge. “I like your workshop. It looks kind of familiar.”

“Tink helped me design it.” Holly grinned and walked over to Mike with a fancy suitcase in her hands. “With my new role up here, I kind of wanted to get into toy design. I never really had an interest before, but I think it’s probably because of my bond with Santa. I just get this itch to make stuff.”

“So what are you working on?” Mike asked as Holly set the suitcase on her workbench. “Next year’s top toy? A Tickle-Me gargoyle? A cauldron that spits out cat girls?”

“You’re so silly.” Holly undid the locks on the suitcase and opened it up. “Look familiar?”

“Uh...” Mike stared at the trio of large, sparkly cocks that had been packed into the customized foam liner of the case. They were roughly identical in shape and size. “Should they?”

“Darn.” Holly rolled her eyes and pulled one out. “I worried that they wouldn’t.”

“What are they supposed to remind me of?” Mike pulled one of the dongs out of the case. “Wait, these aren’t like the rod of Osiris, are they?” The idea that Holly was somehow collecting severed god dicks was pretty unnerving.

“Oh, gumdrops, no!” Holly laughed and held the cock next to Mike’s crotch, then wiggled the base so it flopped. “I was trying to replicate yours, silly!”

“What?” Mike fumbled his dong and just barely managed to catch it. “You tried to copy my dick?”

“Yep!” Holly took the one she was holding and smacked the base against a nearby column. It stuck in place, despite having no mechanism to do so. “From memory, honestly. This has been my secret pet project, trying to replicate the feel and sensation of your huge dick inside of me.” Her cheeks turned bright red. “And not just for me, either. I want to make a bunch of these for the other elves at the North Pole who want them.”

“Um...okay, so I sort of get what you’re trying to achieve, but I’m more than just a big dick.” Mike pushed the dong he held onto the wall and laughed when it magically held in place. “Discounting my magic, which you can’t replicate, I’m a person. The experience is meant to...meant to...”

Holly had picked up the third dildo and stuck it directly to the fabric covering her stomach. “I know that,” she said. “Why do you think I made them so they stick to anything? The other women up here are gonna love these. This is a North Pole exclusive if you want the special features.”

“Will they stick to anything?” Mike gave the dick he had stuck to the wall a tug, but it didn’t budge.

“Give it a mental command,” Holly suggested, removing the cock from her outfit. “It’ll come loose that way.”

Mike did just that, and the dildo popped free. On a whim, he stuck the dick to his forearm. “Okay, now that’s funny.” He wiggled his arm and then flicked the head of the cock. Phantom pain jumped up his arm and he cried out.

“Ah, yes. The other secret feature.” Holly grabbed the base of the dildo and gave it a couple of pumps. Mike gasped as penile pleasure flooded up his arm. “When you connect it to your body, you feel it as if it’s your own.”

“I’d ask why, but that’s kind of a stupid question.”

Holly giggled. “We’ve had a bit of a sexual renaissance up here since your last visit. However, the elves involved skew very heavily toward the female demographic. For every male who pursues sexual intimacy, there are roughly thirteen females who want the same.”

“Lucky guys,” said Mike.

“We’re wearing them out.” Holly laughed as she continued to jerk off his arm dick. Other than the weird positioning, he couldn’t tell that the sensations were unnatural. “So you can imagine there’s some pent-up frustration.”

“Not to be that guy, but I can’t imagine that all the elves want something this...big.”

A manic grin crossed Holly’s face. “We’ve got smaller ones that are more proportional to elves,” she said. “But there’s a niche group of us who are into...expanding our horizons.”

“Have you guys been talking to Beth?”

“Oh, she’s legendary in our circles.” Holly stopped jerking his arm-dick and undid the buttons on the back of her skirt. She slowly stripped off her clothes, revealing lingerie underneath that was little more than a Christmas ribbon that had been intricately wrapped around her body. It terminated in a bow just above her belly. “So I was wondering if you could help me out with something.”

“You’ve got my attention.”

“I need to get you nice and hard,” she said, grabbing his arm-cock and licking it. “So that I can take a mold of your dick. I would like to properly copy it.”

“I’m...uh...not opposed.” Mike pondered his options. “For a fee, of course.”

“A fee?” Holly pouted, then put the sparkly arm-dick between her tits and squeezed them together. “You can’t just help a girl out?”

“If the others learn that there are magical copies of my dick and I didn’t put in an order for some of their own, they’re going to be pretty pissed.”

“Oh!” Holly shivered. “Swear at me again.”

“I’m not sure I can,” said Mike. “That one was a freebie. I’d hate to give up a bargaining chip.”

“Oh, fudge it.” Holly put her mouth on the tip of the magical arm-dong. She sucked it in, causing Mike to inhale sharply. His actual cock was pressed so tightly against his pants that it was almost painful. After fellating the cock for a moment, she spat it out and grinned. “I suppose we can probably come to an agreement.”

Mike undid the front of his pants. Holly continued licking the arm-cock while she stroked his actual cock. The conflicting sensations were overwhelming, and his magic roared to life.

The elf sucked the arm-cock into her mouth, then walked backward in an effort to guide Mike. He followed, and she fumbled with a drawer latch before pulling it open. Releasing him, she knelt to pick up a long, empty tube which she placed on the workshop bench. Two containers of liquid followed, and she looked over her shoulder and wiggled her butt at him.

“I only need a minute to set this up,” she said. “The mold takes ten minutes to set properly, so I’ll use the fake one on your arm to keep you hard.”

“Uh huh.” Mike was already looking at the dildos she had set aside. He sent out streamers of magic, which slowly moved the dildos in his direction. How many of them could he feel at the same time? He reached around Holly’s body to play with her breasts, and the elf squirmed in his arms.

“Oh, sprinkles, that’s so distracting!” She laughed. “Keep doing it!”

Mike slid his hand beneath the ribbons, then had a better idea. He dropped his hand down to the bow on her stomach and pulled the loose strands of ribbon. The bow undid itself, and the ribbon wrapped around her body fell to the floor. Mike continued teasing her breasts while also rubbing the magical cock against it.

By the time Holly turned around, her features were flushed with arousal. She had mixed the two liquids together and poured them into the tube. “Once I put this on you, it can’t come off until the foam sets,” she said. “We need you nice and hard the whole time.”

Mike stepped back and watched as Holly shoved his cock into the tube. A pink polymer foam oozed out of the top that warmed up as it expanded, accompanied by a pleasant tingling that faded. In fact, if he hadn’t gotten the chance to put his dick in so many interesting places already, the experience itself would be far more memorable.

Once he had bottomed out in the mold, Holly undid some straps that he hadn’t seen on the tube and secured them around his waist.

“There we go,” she said. “Now you’ll have your hands free for me.”

“Among other things.” Mike picked Holly up and set her on the workbench. She spread her legs, revealing a pubic Christmas tree made out of glitter right above her pussy. “Hey, look, there is something under the tree for me this year!”

“I love your corny jokes,” she said, then disconnected the cock from his arm. Mike bent down to feast on her snatch, and Holly shoved the collar of his shirt down to reveal the skin between his shoulder blades. She connected the magical dildo to him, and he felt a jolt of electricity go through his body followed by the sensation of her fingers around his back-dick.

He nibbled at the skin around her labia, slowly working his way toward her clitoris. She tasted like peppermint cream, her thighs already slick with arousal.

“Mmm, yes!” Holly wrapped her thighs around his head. “I’ve been a good girl all year, Caretaker!”

“Are you sure?” Mike stopped licking for a moment. “Because I’ve heard that bad girls have more fun.”

“That’s why I’ve been so good.” Holly was using both hands on the magical dildo now. “Because now it’s time to be naughty! Mike, can you do something naughty for me?”

“Uh...yeah?” Mike wondered if Holly had seen the dildo hovering toward him from across the room.

“Will you say bad words?” Holly squeezed her legs tight. “Say them inside of me.”

Mike laughed, then buried his face in her snatch. He used his tongue to part her sweet, candied folds, then spread them wide with his mouth.

“Ass.”

Holly spasmed, and he felt a rush of fluid flow around his mouth. Grinning in spite of himself, he continued feasting, rubbing his tongue all across her clit before using his fingers to open her up again.

“Bitch.”

The elf started vibrating, and she lost control of her hands on his back-cock. She ended up grabbing his hair and pulling, which sent a hot wave of pain along his scalp. Undeterred, Mike tilted Holly back, moving slowly to avoid dislodging the cockmold strapped to his body. The elf cooed in delight, unaware that Mike

now had a second magical dildo in his hand. He moved it back and forth between his hands, then finally figured out he could secure it to his palm.

“More,” Holly begged. “More!”

Mike opened his mouth wide, dipping his tongue deep inside her body. His magic slid into her, causing her whole body to stiffen up.

“**FUCK,**” he said, sending a wave of energy through her. Holly cried out and arched her back, spraying him with peppermint-flavored secretions. He lapped them up, then moved his hand onto the workbench, knowing that the cock would be waiting for her when she lowered her body. Using his other hand, he scooped up her cum and lubed the head of the cock, which was a bit disorienting. He could feel both dildos and his own cock, which had grown warm from whatever chemical reaction the foam was undergoing.

Holly was so busy wiggling around and coming on his face that when she finally descended, Mike missed her labia. Instead, the tip of the cock slid against Holly’s buttocks, and she froze in place, her eyes bugging out of her head.

“Shit, sorry!” Mike tried to move the hand-cock, but Holly snaked a hand beneath her and clamped onto his wrist.

“Don’t. You. Dare.” She wiggled her hips back and forth, the tip of the dildo slowly pushing her open. Groaning, she reached over her head and started pulling drawers out of the workbench. Tools and notebooks scattered everywhere, but she eventually got her hands on a spray can. She handed it to Mike, who took it with confusion.

“You have fairy spray?” He couldn’t believe his eyes. On the can was a picture of Cerulea giving him a thumbs up.

“Tink helped design this place, remember?” Holly’s eyes sparkled. “Now are you gonna keep talking, or are you gonna fuck me in the ass?” Her whole body flushed at the swear.

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” Mike applied the lube to the hand-cock and then groaned with pleasure as Holly sank down on it. It was only about an inch in when she grabbed him by the hair and pulled his mouth down onto her pussy once more.

“Don’t you dare stop eating me, Caretaker!” Holly cried out again, her hips wiggling as the dildo sank deeper into her ass. Mike continued devouring the elf’s

sweet labia, paying particular attention to her clitoris. The sensations running through his body were blissfully confusing, and he made a note to himself that he was going to have to hide some of these away for when he wanted to use them with someone else.

Reaching over his head, he carefully removed the dildo from between his shoulder blades. It was distracting at this point, wobbling back and forth in the cool air. He set it next to its twin, which was now within reach. When the time was right, he intended to strike.

With every additional inch of cock inside of Holly's ass, Mike made sure to mutter something nasty. Holly was swearing along with him, gasping and calling out his name. He pulled his head from between her legs and grinned at her.

"Has it been ten minutes yet?" he asked. Holly's hair was a frazzled mess, and it took her a couple of seconds before her eyes made contact with his.

"I...don't know," she confessed.

"Well, then. Guess we'll just have to keep going to make sure." With that, he picked up one of the remaining dildos and slid it onto his chin. Her eyes went wide as he leaned forward and eased the head of the chin-cock between her labia. The sudden surge of pleasure through his face almost made him dizzy.

I'm fucking an elf with a face-dick, he thought. This was not on my bingo card.

Not only was the sensation incredible, but he was experiencing both her ass and her pussy at the same time. With each movement of his jaw, both cocks got pressed together through the thin membrane that separated the two of them. At any moment, Mike thought he might fall over.

Holly was crying with pleasure, her curses now interspersed with random outbursts of Christmas songs. She was shouting the lyrics to Jinglebells as he continued to double penetrate her with his hand and his face, his actual cock throbbing and begging to be unleashed. Magic leapt from his body and sizzled across the top of the workbench like hot oil in a skillet.

Lost in the sensation of penetration, Mike didn't notice when Holly took his free hand and slapped the third cock into it. Suddenly, his attention was split as she took this third cock into her mouth as deep as she could.

He was in her ass, pussy, and mouth, now. The air shimmered around them as the sparks turned golden and the room filled with the sound of distant music. Holly gagged and choked on the cock in her mouth, the light pink mascara of her eyes running down her cheeks, and yet, she held the cock in place. Her legs wrapped around his head and her whole body tightened up, the golden light now crawling across her skin as if seeking entry.

Holly's first orgasm arrived with the sound of silver bells. The second time she came, the air went still, followed by the bells playing in reverse. Mike lost track of time as the elf came on his face over and over again, forcing him to open his mouth wide just to get enough air into his lungs.

When Holly finally went limp, he pulled the cock out of her throat and detached it. He pulled the chin-cock out next, his breathing ragged as he eased the final cock out of her ass. All his wires had crossed, but something was now crystal clear.

Holly whimpered as Mike detached the extra cocks. After disconnecting the straps, Mike gave the tube on his cock a gentle tug, which caused him to pop free. Motes of light actually tumbled out from inside of the mold, hovering around his erect cock like a tiny star.

The elf held her hands out for him.

“More,” she whispered, her breath ragged. “Give me more.”

Mike was still disoriented from losing three extra cocks all at the same time. He sure hoped Holly would put a warning label on the box or something. Grabbing the elf by the hips, he flipped her onto her stomach and pressed the head of his dick against her pussy. He paused and contemplated the sight for a moment.

In terms of the dildos, he was bigger. But now he almost wondered if he wasn't slightly larger than before. Was it the result of Holly's diminutive frame? Was he just particularly horny right now?

These were all questions for post-nut clarity Mike. He pressed himself forward, groaning as Holly's vaginal walls clenched him tight.

“Oh, sprinkles! Gingerbread and reindeer!” Holly's arms flailed, and she made the mistake of grabbing the handle of a drawer, promptly yanking it out of its slides. Vials of glitter spilled everywhere. Mike sent a few electric spiders

crawling out and away from him in an attempt to shovel it away. “Nutmeg! Mmm...mistletoe!”

His cock sank deep inside her, then came to a halt. There were still several inches left.

“More!” Holly’s nails dug into the wood. “Mike, fuck me!”

He narrowed his eyes. “Not to be the bearer of bad news, but there is a size limitation here.”

Holly let out a guttural growl, and her whole body shimmered. A tingling sensation traveled all along the sensitive skin of Mike’s shaft, and he suddenly felt the pressure at the head of his cock vanish. Puzzled, he pressed himself forward again.

“No fucking way,” he muttered as he sank himself deeper inside of Holly’s pussy. “How?”

Holly grunted. “A perk of my...new position!” She let out a long moan. “If Santa’s bag can hold so many toys, then why can’t—”

Mike pulled himself out and thrust himself promptly back inside. Holly let out a high-pitched squeak. Realizing that he didn’t have to worry about hurting her, he released his magic, energy flooding his body as he held onto the elf’s hips and rammed into her.

His whole body tingled, and he came to a halt, his gaze catching the stack of dildos nearby. A wicked grin crossed his face.

“Have you been a good girl this year?” he asked, picking up one of the dildos.

“No!” Holly looked back over her shoulder. “I’ve been super naughty!”

“Are you sure?” He held up the dildo where she could see it. “Because I heard that good girls get more toys.”

Understanding bloomed in her eyes, and a single tear rolled down her face. Holly cleared her throat and spoke in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

“I’ve been so good this year,” she said, trying to wiggle herself further onto his cock. “The very best, actually. Please tell me you’ve got something else in your bag for me.”

Mike pulled himself out of her just long enough to attach the dildo directly above his own cock. The sensation of having a double-barreled dick threw him for a moment, but he just rolled with it. He grabbed the can of fairy lube, put a little bit on the head of the dildo, then pressed it up against her labia.

“You let me know if it starts to—”

“SHUT UP AND FUCK ME!” Holly shoved herself backward, but the extra cock sprang free, lying between her buttocks.

“I thought you said you were a good girl.” Mike slapped Holly on the ass, causing her to elicit another squeak. “Now hold very still and I’ll...give you...your...” The sensation of both his cocks rubbing together and being compressed while sliding into a warm elf’s vagina was without parallel. His magic seeped from his skin like water, washing over both of them.

Once he knew that he wasn’t hurting her, Mike took her advice and fucked her. Cries of surprise and delight were squeezed from the elf, and it wasn’t long before she stuck her hand out toward the dildos.

“More,” she whimpered. “Give me more.”

“You may be bigger on the inside, but I can’t fit a third one in there.” From where he stood, Mike could only watch in awe as her labia were stretched thin. Holly’s only response was to reach back and grab her buttocks and pull them apart.

“If you can’t handle it, then just say so,” she whispered.

“Lily is gonna be so mad she missed this,” said Mike as he pulled himself out and attached a third cock to his body. With all the fairy lube, it was tricky, but he managed to slide that one into her ass, all three of his cocks inside of Holly. A nervous tic formed in one of his eyelids as he groaned and buried himself deep inside of her. The pressure on all three of his cocks was immense, and it was now physically and mentally difficult to penetrate Holly with all of them at once.

Mike’s magic roared, fueling his desire as he slowly built speed. Every time he bottomed out inside of Holly, the tender flesh of her ass rippled. She was no longer speaking at this point, and had turned her head sideways. Her eyes were rolled up in her head, and she panted so hard that her tongue was out.

The room was rich with the smell of Christmas and ozone as he fucked her. By the time his orgasm came, all three of his cocks felt impossibly full. He hadn't asked her how they worked during orgasm, but he was about to find out.

Golden light radiated out in a circle when he filled her womb with cum from his actual cock. The light itself collected in the corners of the room, then shot back into him as if pulled by a vacuum. That was when he came with the cock above it, his whole body now shaking as he clutched the elf against his hips.

The process repeated again, but this time, he came inside her ass. The air now glittered with light and magic as his cocks started triggering each other. He had to hold onto the workbench for support as he lost track of his own orgasms. His ears were ringing, and he could hear Holly screaming his name somewhere in the distance. The magic had found her, thus starting the sexual feedback cycle.

At some point, Holly managed to grab the third dildo. She attached it to the palm of her hand and forced it down her own throat.

Mike had no idea how long he became lost in the act. His magic took them both over completely, feeding into their desires. When he regained enough of his senses, he forced the magic back, commanding it to release them. The dark spots in his eyes put there by the flashing motes of lights gradually faded, revealing that Holly was lying in a puddle of her own drool. The elf had gone limp beneath him, a permanent grin etched on her face.

Taking care, Mike groaned and slowly pulled himself out of her. His cocks popped free, and a deluge of cum poured out from Holly's vagina. Mike stared at the waterfall of spooage that flowed out of her, then winced at the pain in his lower back. How long had they been at it?

Mike almost slipped in his own cum as he backed away from Holly. The elf moaned and pushed herself off the workbench. She did slip, and Mike knelt down to catch her. When she fell into his arms, she planted her lips against his.

"Mmph!" Holly licked his lips when the kiss broke. "Who said players of the game can't get along?"

Mike chuckled, then made a face. "The others are gonna be pissed we were gone so long," he said. "Well, okay, maybe not Death. But Sofia will."

Holly waved a hand dismissively. "I have some control over time and space, as you recently discovered." As if to illustrate her point, she flexed her belly and

pushed even more cum out of herself. "An hour in here is only fifteen minutes out there. We're fine."

"Oh, good." Mike looked down at himself. "I don't suppose we could take a quick shower before meeting up with Santa?"

Holly grinned, then grabbed two of the cocks with her hands. "I've got a shower big enough for both of us." She made a face and winced. "Okay, nevermind. Not about the shower, but, um...doing something naughty in there."

"You okay?"

Holly laughed. "Let's just say I can't keep up with a sex god like you." She popped the two magical dildos free. "I'm just really sore is all. Can't wait to brag about it on the forums. C'mon, let's get cleaned up, and I'll take you to Santa. He's been free for a bit, honestly."

Mike tried not to laugh as Holly did a bow-legged walk toward the stairs, her body leaking the entire way.

Mike and Holly walked into Santa's house. Mrs. Claus met them at the door, her eyes sparkling and her gray curls perfectly coiffed. She held out a tray of cookies.

"We're having dinner soon," she said. "You should stay and have some."

"If it's no trouble," Mike said, grabbing a cookie. "Can I get some of these to go for my kids?"

"Of course! Death should be here soon enough. I sent someone to get him." Mrs. Claus waited as Holly took a cookie that looked like a candy cane. "We're also having someone bring your sad friend here."

"Do you mean Sofia?" Mike hung up his coat.

Mrs. Claus nodded. "The cyclops. Tall, beautiful, drank over ten mugs of cocoa, refused to speak with anyone."

"That's her." Mike sighed, then moved Sofia up his list of priorities. "Where's Santa?"

“Why, I’m right here!” Santa stepped into the room wearing a button-down shirt covered in stitched snowflakes. “It’s so good to see you again!” The big man grabbed Mike by the hand, then pulled him into a bearhug.

For just a moment, Mike was transported back in time. He was a child again, blissfully playing with his toys by the fireplace. Torn wrapping paper had been scattered around the room, and a toy train circled beneath the tree in the corner. It was Christmas day, and he had tucked a candycane into the plastic front-loader he pushed across the floor.

Santa released him, and he was back in the present. That tiny kernel of childhood joy burned in his heart like a coal, warming him from within. Mike rubbed at his eyes and took a step back when the door to Santa’s cabin opened.

“Ho ho ho,” declared Death. “Your number one helper has arrived!” The Grim Reaper was now wearing a red and white scarf wrapped around his cowl. Death walked up to Santa and the two of them exchanged a series of fistbumps and handshakes that ended with the two of them bumping their hips together.

“It’s so good to see you, my friend.” Santa’s eyes twinkled as he turned his attention to Sofia, who ducked her head to come inside. “Ah, you must be Sofia.”

The cyclops stared at Santa, then shut the door behind her. Sofia’s cheeks were bright red from the cold. “We are here to discuss Tink’s health,” she said, getting down to business. “And how to fix it.”

“Ah, I see.” Santa gestured to his living room. “Come, sit. I wish to hear all about Tinker Radley.”

“Hey,” Mike said, nudging Death with his elbow. “Nice scarf.”

“Thank you.” Death’s eye flames burned brightly as he inspected the garment. “It was given to me by a groupie named Belle. She knitted it while I was on stage.”

“Good for you, man.” Mike sat on the couch next to Sofia. Death crammed in next to him, effectively pinning him in the middle. Mrs. Claus brought Santa a cup of hot cocoa, and he settled into a rocking chair built for his massive bulk.

“So what is going on with Tinker Radley?” he asked.

Mike did his best to explain. Occasionally Death would interject with an anecdote. Sofia sat with her arms crossed, a stern look fixed on her face. As Mike continued talking, the smile on Santa's face gradually faded.

When Mike finished, Santa turned his attention to the crackling fire. He stroked his beard and frowned, the fire's light reflected in his glasses. "And so you've stabilized her condition in the Library?"

"They have," said Sofia. "And it's disrupting my job."

Santa turned his attention to Sofia. "Tinker can be quite the handful."

"Is there anything you can do?" asked Mike. "Or maybe explain how the spell you cast worked?"

Santa shook his head. "Christmas magic is a thing unconstrained by time or logic. All magic has a cost. It is possible that you are simply witnessing the payment after the fact."

"A Christmas wish for children that kills the mother and the child?" Sofia's tone was so bitter that Mike could almost taste it. "That's not magic. That's murder."

"Which leads me to the alternative. I believe that the magic is still in operation." Santa leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his belly. "You see, Tinker Radley's Christmas wish for me was to have a child with Michael and grow their family. There exists every possibility that she will survive past giving birth."

"But for how long?" asked Mike.

Santa shook his head. "I don't know. Temporal magic like this seems wild and unconstrained, but there is always logic to be found in reflection and hindsight. The magic isn't aging Tinker, it is simply peeling away the gifts she has already been given. If Tink were to die after childbirth of old age, it's highly likely it would have happened anyway despite her youthful appearance."

Mike was on his feet before he knew it. The fire in the hearth expanded rapidly, making a roaring sound in the chimney.

"That can't be it," he said. "I refuse to believe it!"

Death put a hand on Mike's wrist. "There's a saying I'm quite fond of, Mike Radley. It's that we shouldn't kill the messenger."

Santa stood and put his hands on Mike's shoulders. "I promise you that the Christmas magic has done nothing more than reveal her unaltered appearance. Your child will come. That was the nature of the wish and it shall not be changed. Death likes to say how our lives are like books, and they sometimes close abruptly. All that is happening now is that you've come to realize that the last page is—"

Mike swung a fist at Santa, and was stopped only by the strong hand that grabbed his wrist. It was Sofia, who casually pulled him back and away.

"Let me go!" he said.

"You're being an ass," she replied. "Just because you don't want to hear the truth doesn't make it less true."

"Mike Radley, you almost punched Santa." Death moved to stand in front of Mike. "I think we all know that is highly unlike you."

"But...he..." Mike gritted his teeth in anger. Santa just shook his head sadly. He didn't seem perturbed by the outburst at all.

"I wish I had an answer for you," he said. "All I can do is explain the nature of the wish and let you know that the magic itself is not harming her. She is reaching the end of her natural lifespan."

"Stop saying that!" Mike tried to wrestle free of the cyclops, but she wrapped both arms around his chest. He felt the anger drain out of him as she held him.

"I don't say it to be cruel. In fact, this is a kindness." Santa gently pushed Death out of the way so that he could stand in front of Mike. "Because now you know that the only way to help her is to prolong her life past its natural end. That is a difficult task, yet not impossible. However, that is not within my power. I have used my magic to extend a life by a few days, or even a month, but that is all I can do."

"What about...what you gave me for Christmas?" Mike was thinking of the drops of eldritch blood Santa had given him. One had gone to the sundial, allowing it to run non-stop. The other two were safely locked away. "Could we use those?"

Santa made a face. "I would highly recommend against doing so," he replied. "That particular reagent is not suited for the living. At best, it would

change who she was, both physically and mentally. At worst?" He raised his eyebrows. "She would become akin to the creatures who live In-Between."

"Damn." Mike relaxed, and Sofia released him. He looked up at Santa. "I'm sorry I tried to hit you."

Santa laughed, his belly jiggling like a bowl-full of jelly. "I know," he replied, then stuck out his hand. "You care very deeply for her. Never be sorry for having a big heart, Michael. It is one of your best attributes."

Mike took a deep breath and shook Santa's hand. "Well...I suppose it's time for us to go. We won't find a solution to our problem here."

"You shall not. But you can't leave quite yet." Santa smiled past them as Mrs. Claus walked into the room with pot holders on her hands.

"Dinner's ready," she declared. "Come. Eat."

Reluctantly, Mike followed the others to Santa's dining room table. Mrs. Claus had prepared a Christmas feast with ham, mashed potatoes, and at least seven side dishes. Death and Santa chatted with each other as they feasted. Mike sat next to Sofia, who picked at her food.

He wasn't in a talking mood. Luckily, nobody seemed inclined to press him on the matter. Almost an hour in, Holly made an appearance. She winked at Mike as she handed Santa a sheet of paper.

"Here are the specs," she said. "Gonna be a lot of happy elves this Christmas."

Santa took a look at the paper and spat out his drink. "Uh...how accurate is this?"

"Very accurate." Holly licked her lips. Mrs. Claus leaned over to study the blueprint, then adjusted her glasses.

"I would like one or two for myself before Christmas," she declared. "Would make that time lock pass a little bit faster while you're gone."

"We're going to need a special division for this one." Santa chuckled, then did something with his hands that made the paper disappear into thin air. He leaned back in his seat and crossed both hands over his belly. "And perhaps ship these out with a special lubricant."

“I know some fairies that can help.” Holly winked at Mike again. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a focus group who is dying to try out the prototype I’m having made.”

“Oh, a focus group!” Death stood from the table. “I’ve always wanted to be part of one of those!”

“Not this one,” Mike said. “You’re not their target audience, buddy. You’d probably struggle to give them, uh, good feedback.”

Death looked back and forth between Holly and Mike, then over at Santa. The big man said nothing, but it was clear that Mrs. Claus was holding back a laugh.

“I see. Well, I do want my contribution to be worthwhile. Maybe next time.”

Holly patted Death on his bony hand as she headed out. “Of course!”

“We should be going as well,” said Mike. He looked over at Sofia, who had gone back to staring out the closest window. “Do you think the Library would help us find what we’re looking for?”

The cyclops sighed and pushed her chair back. “If it doesn’t, I’m sure Eulalie will dig something up for us. She’s...good at that.”

They said their goodbyes and left. The walk back to the Workshop was cold and lonely, despite the presence of the others. When they got to the fireplace, Death activated the magic that would take them home and they stepped through. The three of them arrived in the living room, and Sofia glanced at Mike. She looked as lost as he felt.

“I’ll get started in the Library,” she said, then walked away without another word. Mike watched her go, then saw a flash of light from his office as she activated the book that would take her home. He sighed and looked at Death.

“Do you think it can be done?” he asked. “Can we save Tink?”

Death contemplated him for a minute, then cleared his throat. “I have recently been forced to come to terms with my own unique situation,” he began. “One way or another, I will be forced to say goodbye to all of you. There will be no eternity waiting for me on the other side, no future reunion. This...has been difficult for me to accept.”

“I can’t just accept what’s happening to Tink,” said Mike.

“And I never said that you should.” The Grim Reaper reached into a pocket and pulled out a candy cane, which he handed to Mike. “You see, even though Tinker will continue to exist and wait for you on the other side, that does not mean we should give up on what we hold dear right now. We need to cling to those we hold precious, even in the face of the inevitable.”

Mike took the candy cane. It was as thick as his thumb and wrapped in thin cellophane.

“There will come a day when Tinker Radley will die.” Death pulled another candy cane out of his pocket and unwrapped it. “In fact, there will come a day when all of you die. But if I thought there was even a slight chance I could help any of you stay, even if it was to have just one more day with you, I absolutely would. Do you know why that is?”

“Because you’re our friend.”

Death nodded, then stuck the candy cane in his mouth. “This is my home, and you are my family,” he said, the cane protruding from his jaw. The Grim Reaper paused and pulled the candy out of his mouth. “Damn,” he muttered. “This one is strawberry, not peppermint.”

Mike offered his candy cane back. “You can have mine,” he offered.

“Thank you, Mike Radley.” Death took the offending cane out of his mouth and tossed it to a nearby lamp. Tick Tock opened its mouth and snapped the candy out of the air with a loud crunch. Death studied the new cane and unwrapped it. He stuck it in his mouth. “Much better,” he said.

“Death?”

“Hmm?”

“Thanks.”