

Last Christmas

The Ghost of Last Christmas didn't waste time with words. Instead, it extended a hand for Mike to take, which he did. The others grabbed onto his free hand, and a dark mist filled the room. Though it looked sinister, Mike didn't feel like the spirit's intentions were malicious. In fact, he realized he could see what the spirit was made of now. It was similar to Freyja's soul, except the threads of Christmas Past were made up of tiny little gears that shifted in sync with each other.

The cabin vanished, and Mike found himself standing in Santa's special workshop. The fat bastard himself was contemplating a large gift with the letter M on it that had been installed into a vise for Mike to find later.

"I believe that's everything," he said out loud, then turned his attention toward Mike. "For next Christmas, anyway."

"What the fudge?" Mike licked at his lips and rolled his eyes. "Okay, sorry. Can he even hear us?"

"These are the shadows of the past," the spirit began.

"Yeah, yeah. They can't hear us or whatever." He dismissed the spirit and put his hands on his waist. "So now I get a pre-recorded message from the past. I'm over these time travel shenanigans. At least the Santa at the mall talks to you in real-time."

Yuki moved to stand next to him, then dug her nails into his side.

"Ow, what the heck?" he grouched. Yuki tilted her head toward Holly. The elf was sitting cross-legged on the floor, her chin in her hands and a huge smile on her face.

"It's been a very busy week," Santa began while pulling over a rocking chair. When he sat in it, the wood creaked but held his weight. An elf came in through the door of the workshop with a large plate of cookies and a carafe of milk.

"Thank you, Lester." Santa patted the elf on the head. "This is exactly what I needed."

The elf beamed, then walked away.

"That was Lester," Santa said once the elf was gone. "If everything I've learned is true, this will be his last Christmas. Sometime after I go missing next

year, one of the giants will eat him.” He shook his head and wiped a tear from his eyes. “Poor Lester.”

“What the farts?” Mike stared in disbelief. “The elves are getting eaten? Why isn’t he doing anything?”

“That he knows the future with such certainty,” Yuki muttered. “He really did know what was coming.”

“Indeed,” Santa replied. He turned his attention to Holly. “I am so sorry about everything you’ve gone through, but I’m afraid there’s more to come. Your faith in me is a blessing, but I do not deserve it.”

Holly sighed. “Santa,” she whispered, a dreamy look on her face. “You can rely on me.”

Santa nodded, then turned his attention in Freyja’s direction. “As for you, old friend, I am sorry for your ordeals as well. You should know that all of it was necessary to get you into your current state.”

The goddess snorted. “More like you’re lucky we got this far,” she muttered.

The big man sighed, then put the plate on his belly and the carafe of milk on a nearby bench. He held up one of the cookies and chuckled.

“In fact, this is partially your fault.” Santa glanced over the top of his glasses at the goddess, his lips momentarily stretching into a frown.

“Excuse me?” Freyja stepped forward, but Mike grabbed her by the wrist. A chill ran up to his elbow, but he shrugged it off. Apparently touching her when they weren’t naked and fudging was much safer.

“These are just shadows of what have been,” he said in his best spooky spirit voice.

“There are two fundamental truths about this place, my dear Freyja. Although this is home to perhaps the most powerful magic on Earth, it’s been confined to revolve around a single, temporal point—Christmas Day.” Santa smiled and took a bite of the cookie. When it crumbled onto his beard, Mike could see some of the hairs twitch and reach for the crumbs.

“In this way, I am both its lord and its servant. I can perform a great many miracles, but only if it furthers the cause of Christmas. You see, when you came to

me, the only reason I was able to save your life in the first place was because it was part of a chain of events that could lead to the survival of Christmas itself.”

“Right, but I’m the reason Christmas is in danger in the first place. So why not just speak up and tell me you know I’ve been talking to the Krampus?”

“Mmm, so good!” Santa devoured the rest of the cookie. “I really do love cookies, especially when they’re baked by the missus. Come. Walk with me.”

He picked up the plate of cookies along with the carafe and led them out of the workshop. They hovered behind as he walked. His home was flooded with dozens of elves dancing around and partying.

“I just got back from deliveries this morning,” Santa explained. “You can see that everyone is in a pretty good mood. In fact, this was a really good Christmas.”

“Who are you talking to, Santa?” An elf with long pigtails stopped him in the hallway.

“Some friends of mine that you can’t see, Adora. Will you take some of these to Mrs. Claus?” He grabbed a handful of cookies and gave them to the elf. “She’s still in bed recuperating from earlier and could use something to eat.”

Adora looked pleased to be given a task from Santa, and ran off.

“Even now, I can feel the magical barrier protecting the North Pole weakening. Whoever is looking for the Caretaker is taking the nuclear approach.” Santa tsked to himself as he led them down the stairs. “Those are events I have not been privy to, and would love to hear the story someday.”

Santa led them to the basement door. He stopped on occasion to celebrate with his elves, laughing and hugging them. Once across the room, he slid through the door and locked it behind him. They were now alone, the sounds of the party muffled by the thick door and stone walls.

“Anyway, my dear Freyja, the means of your resurrection were all related to saving the future of Christmas. When I made you into Jack, it wasn’t just to hide you from the Others. That’s what I call them, anyway. I think it’s far more accurate than the Ancient Ones, or even the elder gods. After all, they live outside of time and space. Who’s to say how old or young they really are?”

He chuckled at this as he led them down the stairs. “My dear friend, if you could speed things along?”

Mike wasn't sure who Santa was talking to until there was a sudden blur of motion. Santa went into fast-forward, traveling down the winding stairs in a matter of seconds. They were outside the chamber with the North Pole inside when he slowed to normal speed.

"Ah, here we are." He opened the doors, then moved inside. The North Pole was glittering with light, sparks swirling beneath the surface as if it had captured a tornado. "This is a new room to most of you. Welcome to the North Pole!"

Holly gasped in awe, but the others said nothing. Yuki looked at Mike, who shrugged.

"I've been here before, will tell you later." He was more than a little surprised that Santa was revealing all of this.

"The source of all my magic," Santa explained, then set his carafe and cookies down on a table. There was a clean mug waiting for him, and he poured some frosty milk into it. "As well as my curse."

From behind the North Pole, a figure emerged. It was the ghost of Christmas Future, hovering just over the floor.

"The spirits are a manifestation of the entity living within the North Pole," Santa explained, waving the spirit over. "As well as an extension of my own unique genealogy. You see, Future can only see what is coming, but cannot remember what has been. Every possible outcome filters through this poor creature, and it is their job to pass on to me any events of note. Freyja is one of those events. When I pulled her from those dark Atlantic waters, it was because Future led me there to retrieve her."

"Okay, maybe Future isn't a total dick," Mike grumbled to nobody in particular.

"She has been hidden all this time in the guise of Jack Frost in order to keep her safe until the time is right for the gods of old to return." Santa reached over his bench and opened a drawer. He pulled out a chessboard and set it nearby. "I assume you're familiar with the analogy I'm about to make, Caretaker."

Mike nodded, his eyes now on the board. Santa pulled a wooden figure from his pocket and set it down near the middle. It was Jack Frost, meticulously carved. "You see, I was warned of a potential future that would rely on me having certain pieces in position. So here we have Freyja in the form of Jack Frost. But there are more pieces, aren't there?"

Santa took a minute to pull more figures from his pockets. Mike watched as one side of the board filled up with the Krampus, Grýla and her brood, a giant cat, and what looked like another giant.

“From where you sit, you may think it would have been easier to sweep the pieces away before the game even began, but it isn’t that simple.” Santa winked at Mike, then touched the side of his nose. For just a moment, the room was gone, and Mike realized he was standing on a giant game board. All around him, blurred figures with boards of their own shifted pieces he couldn’t see. In the few moments he was there, he watched one figure overtake another, shifting into their space and claiming their pieces.

They were back with Santa now, everyone save Holly muttering.

“There are events neither of us are privy to. This whole time, you’ve been under the impression that the Christmas I need you to save is this one, but you are incorrect. Certain events must occur today to prevent a disaster that will end Christmas many years from now. I cannot tell you much, but I think you know that one of the things which had to occur was Freyja’s return by your hand.”

Understanding bloomed in Mike’s mind. Yes, Santa had known everything that was about to occur, but there was a greater purpose for it. It wasn’t just some machiavellian effort to piss him off, but something bigger than that.

Santa leaned back and sighed. “Future can only tell me so much, you know. In fact, Freyja’s arrival was the first time the spirit mentioned this event to me. Since it will be the end of Christmas, you would think I have some power over it, but that’s just a side effect. I needed to alter the events of your present to stack the odds that you will succeed in...whatever it is you’re supposed to be a part of.”

“Damn.” Mike shook his head and looked at Yuki. “I hate the idea of being manipulated like this, but what else was he supposed to do?”

“I like to think he had better options.” Freyja crossed her arms. “But what now? Can he just tell us what happens next?”

“Doubt it,” Mike said. “Unless telling it guarantees the outcome, he’ll keep his secrets.”

“Annoying.” Yuki moved her fingers through his and squeezed until their palms met. “We’ll figure it out together.”

Santa waited a few more moments before pulling more pieces out of his pockets. Tink, Kisa, and Yuki went onto the empty side of the board, followed by

Death, Lily, and Cerberus. Mike couldn't help but notice they were all wearing Santa hats.

"Do you know what I find interesting and frustrating all at the same time?" Santa drank some milk and then cleared his throat. "You have to remember, Future only sees the possibilities, no matter how small they are. When they speak, it is rare and I make sure to listen." When Santa looked up at Mike, the world dimmed. Yuki and the others faded away, leaving Mike alone with Santa. "Some years ago, a wonderful young lady did me a huge favor and asked for a very special Christmas wish in return. In granting that wish, I accidentally changed the fate of the world."

Mike looked around the room. "Where are the others?"

"This message is for you and you alone," Santa replied. "You'll understand why very soon."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Okay, big guy, I guess I'll bite. Not that you can hear me bitching. Or maybe you can, because Christmas Future is feeding you these lines like candy and you're essentially reading off a script. So you granted a Christmas wish that changed the world. Please continue."

Santa nodded. "My magic is very powerful when it comes to granting Christmas wishes. The same magic that can stop the world until I deliver my gifts or even create pockets of time so I can visit children can easily undo the best laid plans of even the gods themselves. Now her gift was complicated, and I couldn't just magically create the thing she asked for, nor find it in a store. She wanted someone to love her as she was.

"But when she made that wish, I butted up against a powerful geas and her circumstances. Despite what the movies would have you believe, I can't just snap my fingers and bring it all together. And I don't foresee all of it either. I am often a slave to the magic, and don't immediately understand how my actions go about granting such a wish. One time I hid a man's shoes. No idea why, but the magic demanded it. He missed the bus for work and stopped inside a nearby coffee shop to beg for a ride. A young woman was headed in the same direction for a doctor's appointment and was feeling generous enough to give him one.

"She was a couple minutes late for her appointment. While signing in, she had a question for the receptionist. A man across town was trying to call in and had to wait a few minutes before being helped. This meant he didn't walk his dog at his usual time, and he ran into an old friend. I think you can see where this is

going, but it's not that simple. Ripples don't travel out in a straight line, Caretaker. They make circles. The man who got the ride was feeling extra generous and dropped his spare bus fare in a street performer's hat. The doctor was pressed for time at the woman's appointment and forgot to ask her an important question. All of these things created a circle of impossible events that eventually led to a young girl's mother coming home from her deployment in time for Christmas."

Mike crossed his arms. "So a Christmas butterfly effect. You toppled a ton of dominos to make something unexpected happen. It makes sense. By doing these little things, you're still hiding in plain sight."

Santa nodded. "You've experienced several of these already. The gifts I've left for you, the minor coincidences. Each one is a planned ripple to keep you on your ordained path."

"Yeah, and I hate it. I don't like the idea that everything I do is at your whim." Mike waved his hand around him. "Have I had any choices of my own since coming to the North Pole? Or am I just a sexy Rube Goldberg device that you've set off in your home in the hopes that I beat up the Krampus and don't fudge your wife?"

"The debate about free will and predetermined events is an old one that we have no time for, Caretaker." Santa didn't seem bothered by Mike's outburst, probably because he wasn't there in real time. "You have to understand that you've been part of the game longer than you think."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"The moment I pulled you from that burning car, I set off a chain of events that nearly drove Future to madness." Santa produced a wooden Mike figurine and set it on the chessboard, right in the middle. It sent out a cascade of sparkling lights that crawled across all of the pieces

"Wait, what?" Mike was breathing hard now, and he looked around for the others. Was this a joke? "It wasn't even Christmas, there's no way you were involved in that!"

"My powers can exist outside of Christmas, Caretaker, as long as they serve to prolong belief. It was a simple feat to appear as an ordinary man and pull you from the wreckage of that vehicle. What I couldn't know at the time was the profound effect this would have on everything."

“That...it doesn’t make sense, I...” Mike spluttered, at a complete loss for words.

“You were never supposed to be the Caretaker, Mike Radley.” Santa tilted his head forward and looked over the top of his glasses. “I can’t always predict how the magic operates. All I knew was that I needed to save this young man before he burned up like a candle, to grant a Christmas wish for someone else. In doing so, the geas chose you over the woman slated to inherit your home.”

“Who was supposed to inherit my home?” he asked, his voice little more than a fearful whisper.

Santa shook his head. “It no longer matters. The home is yours. But the sudden shift in fate caused ripples. The Krampus is just one of these ripples, manifesting in the flesh. The dominos are falling, and whether they lead to destruction or salvation is still unknown. You have become the catalyst for many things, Mike Radley, and you need to understand that trouble will come for you no matter where you go.”

“I just want to be left alone,” Mike said. “I don’t see why I keep getting pulled into crud like this.”

“That’s what happens when you’re a player in the Great Game, especially when you’ve made as much progress as you have. A target has been painted on your back, and you must be ready to protect those you love lest you lose them. These are heavy truths I have burdened you with, but you needed to hear them.” Santa sat up in his chair, and the room brightened again. The others reappeared, their attention still on Santa. “So now that you understand why I have stacked events in our favor, I have one more confession to make. Holly?”

“Santa?” The elf moved forward enough that she accidentally passed through Santa’s large belly. Mike was a little disappointed that it didn’t at least get a token reaction from the big man.

“There’s a certain secret I must share with you, one that very few know.” He knelt down so the two were eye to eye. “You’ve been aware for the longest time that I was once a normal man who became more. I am a human soul that has merged with the eldritch entity sworn to protect this place.”

Holly nodded.

“And I wish I could have told you earlier, but you wouldn’t have understood. You’ve always been different than the others, but you couldn’t have known how

free you truly were. The original elves, like Alabaster, were not slaves to the magic like the newer generations. When Mrs. Claus and I made you, it was an attempt to lift those shackles, to create an elf capable of defining themselves outside of Christmas. It's why you were on the special team, sent out to observe humans. It was to help you understand them, and maybe come to terms with all the new feelings you would eventually experience.

"But due to recent events, you have a tiny piece of a human soul inside of you. Even now, you can feel those remaining shackles fading away. It's a degree of freedom I could never have granted you myself."

Holly's face turned beet red and she threw a glance at Mike. He nodded in agreement, letting her know that Santa spoke the truth.

"I was once a man. And men are capable of becoming monsters. I am not a being who walks solely in the light, and when it became necessary, I became the monster needed to save this beautiful land."

Santa took a deep breath, and then closed his eyes. When he opened them, they blazed with red light.

"I am the Krampus, Holly. I am an amalgam of both the dark and the light, a being capable of good and evil. Unlike most, I cannot choose one or the other at a whim. When I am Santa, I am only the good parts of me. But when I'm the Krampus?" He shivered, then looked at the others. All but Mike stared at him in shock. "I have no control. I am him, and partake in his deeds while I weep from the inside."

"No." Holly's voice was little more than a whimper. "That can't be true."

"It is, my child." Santa smiled weakly. "I wish I could have told you in person, but the Krampus knows all that I do. When this Christmas Day is over, I intend to imprison the Ghost of Christmas Present to keep Krampus from gaining access to this conversation later when they become a ghost of the past. I wrote vague notes for myself to avoid the gifts I've left for you. Tomorrow, I will eat one of Mrs. Claus' special cookies to erase all knowledge of these events and this conversation, for whatever happens to one of us must happen to both."

Holly said nothing. She buried her face in her arm and sobbed.

"She will need you," Santa said, looking vaguely in all of their directions. "For the road ahead is tough, and she will struggle to walk it. Even now, Future is

uncertain that my efforts will bear fruit, but I have to try.” He stood, suddenly weary. “And Freyja?”

“Santa.” The goddess’ lips were thin on her face.

“I’m happy that you’re back.” He bowed to her in deference as the scene turned to smoke and faded away. They had returned to the cabin, the Ghost of Last Christmas standing in the center of the room.

Nobody spoke for several minutes, the room quiet except for an occasional squeak from Holly. Mike knelt by her side, but she turned away from him.

“So what now?” Yuki looked at Freyja, then the spirit. “Santa’s been pulling strings this whole time, so why fight it? Everything we’ve done has led to this moment and...” she shrugged, and then put a hand to her stomach and winced. “Shit, cramp.”

“Language,” Holly whispered.

“If you wish to know more, I’m afraid that I have no knowledge about what is yet to come.” The spirit shook its head. “But I was told that I would not be merged with my siblings so that the Krampus could not command me. I am free of his influence, but only because I am following Santa’s orders. Should I meet the Krampus, I will be obedient to his whims.”

“Maybe you should fuck this one, too,” Freyja muttered.

“Christmas Present was a fluke,” Mike said. *A hot, sexy fluke*, he admitted mentally.

Holly stood and walked out the front door of the cabin, leaving them behind. Yuki raised an eyebrow at Mike. He nodded and went after the elf. She was sitting on the steps of the cabin, her feet buried in the snow.

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

“I don’t know.” She kicked at a clump of snow. “What I just learned, I...it’s like there’s a storm inside of me, and I can’t control it. All my thoughts are just spinning around, and when I try to examine them, they...” she gestured helplessly and pulled her knees to her chest before burying her face in them. “I don’t know what to do,” she groaned.

“It’s hard.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “You don’t know this, but my childhood was pretty messed up. My mom was...kind of like the Krampus. She

would say and do terrible things. Even after she was gone, all I could do was hate her for the things she did.

“However, the Ghost of Christmas Past, not the one in there, the main one, or whatever, they showed me a memory from when I was very little. It was before my dad died. My mom was...normal. Happy, even. She was reading me a book, acting like a mom should. During this trip down memory lane, I learned something about her that changes how I see her now.”

Holly tilted her head so that she was looking at him.

“Before my dad died, my mom was taking medication to help with her mental state. You see, that Krampus thing that lived inside her, it came out when she no longer had my dad around to keep her on her meds. Learning that this ugly person used to be so nice, well...it was hard. Humans are complicated. The worst of us are capable of acts of kindness, and the best of us will sometimes fall from grace. There’s no rhyme or reason to it. Santa used to be human, just like me.”

She shrugged, and resumed looking at the ground. “I was created to look up to him,” she said. “He’s a huge part of me, and everything I’ve done has been for him.”

“Are you sure?” He put a hand on her knee and squeezed. “Because if I remember right, you’ve been pursuing some things to learn more about yourself. It’s like what that memory was telling you, about how he wanted to make an elf who was truly free. A good parent doesn’t want their kids to worship them. They want their kids to live better lives than they did.”

Holly grunted in agreement, then sniffled and wiped her nose. “But he’s had that monster inside of him all this time,” she muttered. “I just...I don’t know what to think.”

“And that’s okay. Your feelings are valid. Sometimes we just need time and support to process things. But you need to remember there’s a reason for everything he does. He told you the truth because it was important that you heard it from him and nobody else. Santa trusts you, Holly. Despite everything else that’s going on, that has to have some worth.”

She sighed. “It doesn’t make me feel better, but...he was right about the human thing. Ever since we...did the deed, the world feels less confining. When you guys swear, I don’t get dizzy like I used to. I have stray thoughts that aren’t about sex or Christmas. It’s small, but out of character for me.”

“Well, part of your soul is human now.” He chuckled. “And part of mine is elven. That’ll manifest somehow, I’m sure of it.”

“What do you mean?”

He held up a hand and summoned a lightning spider. “This isn’t something I did on my own,” he told her, setting the spider in the snow. “It’s a mark left behind by someone I loved. It’s a thing my magic does.”

Holly stared at the spider, its sparkling exterior reflected in her eyes. “So we left a mark on each other?”

“Yep. You gained something from me, and I gained something from you.”

“Will I stay this way?” She looked away from the spider and gazed into his eyes. “I mean...I’m going to live a lot longer than you, so...”

“I can’t say for certain. But the woman who left this mark on me, she died months ago. My magic still carries that imprint, so it will probably be the same way for you.”

“Good.” She scooted closer to him, put her arm around his waist, and then leaned her head on his arm. “Because maybe it’s confusing, and a little bit scary, but I like how I feel. It’s different, in a good way. It’s like I fit into the whole world a lot better than before.”

He sat with her for a few minutes, his eyes on the Northern Lights as they danced about in the sky. Her sniffing had subsided, and she was motionless at his side.

“Is it okay that I don’t know what to believe anymore?” she asked.

“It is. Doubt is a very human quality.”

“I hate that the one person I believed in is...well, I don’t know how to put it into words.” She sat away from him and looked into his eyes. “It hurts not having anything to believe in. So maybe...maybe I should believe in you instead.”

He smiled at her and shook his head. “You really shouldn’t. Do you know why?”

“I don’t.”

“Because the most important person you should believe in first is yourself.”

Holly looked down at the ground and chewed her lip in thought. "I don't know if I can do that. I'm not even sure who I am, anymore."

"Join the club." He patted her affectionately on the head. "But you don't need to have all the answers to believe. I learned that from you."

She smiled. "You're really good at making me feel better."

"I've had a lot of practice at it." He put his arm around her and hugged her tight. "But you should know that I believe in my friends, and that includes you. Whatever lies ahead, we'll face it together. Agree?"

Holly sighed and leaned her head against him.

"I agree," she replied.

Lily was taking a break with a large mug of cocoa when Christmas Present and Dancer appeared in the sky. The spirit dismounted and hovered across the distance between them before landing pertly in Lily's lap.

"Just taught a little boy how to ride a bike." The spirit grinned, then traced a little heart on Lily's chest. "Feeling pretty good about myself. Any chance that the bone daddy will be away for long?"

The succubus snorted. "Doubt it. He's already been gone an hour, so I expect him back any minute."

The ghost pouted, then shifted off of Lily's lap as the rope ladder dangling over the sleigh's edge became tight. A few moments later, Death's bony visage appeared, with him clutching a candy cane between his teeth.

"Well?" Lily asked.

"It went very well." Death climbed into the sleigh and tucked the candy cane into his robes. "Lucille shall no longer fear the monster beneath her bed."

"Good job." Lily offered Death a high-five, which he accepted. "No problems?"

He shook his head. Lucille was born blind, giving the Reaper a rare opportunity to make a house call. "She felt my beard and my hat, but I told her I was wearing my anti-monster mask and that it would feel scary, so she skipped that part. A child's innocence is rare, and I was grateful she took my word."

Lily chuckled. "So what was keeping her up at night?"

"A monster." Death took the thermos from the console and poured himself a cup.

"An actual monster?" Christmas Present asked.

"Indeed. I beat it with my bat, and when it became incorporeal, I strangled it until it agreed to leave her alone." He sipped at his cocoa, then turned his attention to them. "Afterward, Lucille read me her favorite bedtime story in Braille. She even taught me how to read a couple of the letters, it was so interesting!"

"What the heck was living under that girl's bed?" Lily shook her head. "You know what? Nevermind. Who is next on the list?"

"We have a few options." Death pulled the scroll from his robes and unrolled it. "There's a young woman about a hundred miles north of here that wants to learn how to braid her hair. Apparently her mother passed away two years ago, and her father is bald and there's nobody to teach her."

"I can do that one." Christmas Present took a peek at the scroll then looked at Lily. "Does it feel weird that we're only twenty miles from your house?"

Lily shrugged. It felt like she'd been gone for years. Technically, she'd lived in the sleigh far longer than she had in the Radley home. If not for Mike, she couldn't care less where she was. According to Christmas Present, he was somewhere in the US right now. She had almost teleported to him upon learning this. There was a big difference between seeing him in spirit versus in person, and she missed him. If not for Death's boundless enthusiasm and knowing that they were still accomplishing something, she would have bailed long ago.

"Guess I'll see you when I see you." Christmas Present hovered over to Dancer, and the two of them took off. The spirit looked back and winked, then lifted her robes to reveal her bare ass to Lily before disappearing into a cloud.

"I'm not sure which I enjoy more: seeing her come or seeing her go." Lily smiled at the double entendre, happy to have pulled another one over the helper hat.

"Mmmhmm." Death was staring intensely at the scroll, the lights in his eyes flickering.

"Everything okay?" Lily asked.

Death said nothing. He took the reins, gave them a snap, and Cerberus pulled them to their next destination. Concerned about the Reaper's sudden silence, Lily peered over the side of the sleigh to figure out where they were headed.

The downtown area appeared, then they were zig-zagging between the buildings. She had flown through here more than once. In fact, she and Abella had once had a race to see who got Mike for the evening. To this day, she was certain the gargoyle had cheated, but wasn't certain how.

A building festooned in Christmas lights appeared between a church and a telecommunications building. A large tree had been decorated in the courtyard, and the bottom of the building had festive designs painted on all of the windows.

"Death?" Lily was concerned when he landed the sleigh in front of the doors. They hadn't seen the Yule Cat in a long time, so to watch him throw away caution worried her.

The Grim Reaper sat perfectly still for several minutes, his eyes on the automated doors of the Children's Hospital. Lily hopped out of the sleigh and walked around it, scanning the area for any signs of movement.

"Lily." Death's voice was barely a whisper. "I will need your help with this one."

"No poop, you've needed my help with all of them." She threw him some side eye. "You got a kid who wants to eat something other than jello in there?"

Death rolled up the scroll and tucked it into his robes. "We shall both go in," he declared, then got out of the sleigh. Despite being an immortal psychopomp held together by his love of maps and tea, the Reaper moved as if his bones may come apart at any moment. "Cerberus, if you wouldn't mind."

The hellhound grunted and pulled the sleigh into the sky, circling the building twice before disappearing into the clouds above. Death walked up to the sliding doors of the hospital, then squeezed between them.

Lily followed, taking a moment to survey the lobby. Another large tree had been set up inside the lobby with gifts beneath it. She paused to pick one up and was surprised when it had some weight to it.

“Do you think they just put some rocks inside or what?” When Death failed to answer, she looked up to see that he was already entering the stairwell. “Darn it, don’t leave me behind, it will take forever to find you in this place.”

They climbed up to the seventh floor, then stepped out into a foyer decorated with rainbow colors. A golden bell hung on a wall opposite where the receptionist, an older woman in a red Santa hat, sat. There was a plate of cookies sitting on the counter, so Lily took one.

“Peanut butter,” she announced. “A top-tier cookie choice, the best that healthcare can afford.” When she took a bite, she discovered she was wrong. “What the heck is this? It tastes like cardboard that is trying too hard.”

“It’s a hospital,” Death informed her. “Nut-free zone.”

“So then what flavor are these supposed to be? Regret?” Lily tossed the cookie into a nearby bin. “You seem to know your way around here.”

“I do.” Death was already moving down a nearby hallway. “In the first weeks of December, Tink convinced me that the Krampus was real and that I could catch him. Since children were his prey, she suggested I hunt where children congregated. I came here many times in order to hunt for the Krampus and got to know several of the children.”

Lily chuckled. “You probably scared the poop out of them.”

“You’d be surprised, actually.” Death stopped in the hall and turned around to face her. “In fact, almost everyone here can see me. The staff, they’re interesting. More often than not, they have mistaken me for another member of the staff. I suppose it’s because I am a regular occurrence in this building. The parents? Many see me, but pretend that they don’t. I chalk that up to denial, and do not fault them for it.

“But the children? Maybe it’s because they don’t properly understand what I represent, or maybe they do and just want the pain to stop. They not only see me, but have shown me much kindness. I know many of the children here on a first name basis. It’s odd, but I can sense that these kids needed me. They ask me questions about dying that I am unafraid to answer, and we play games with each other while the staff pretends I’m some imaginary friend that the children invented. See?” He pointed to a nearby bulletin board. Lily was surprised to see several drawings of children playing with a skeleton. A bunch of them had been labeled Uncle Bones.

“Uncle Bones, huh?” She walked over to the bulletin board and tapped on a drawing. “And how come you’re naked in each of these pictures?”

“Because when they drew me with my robes, it terrified the parents. The woman in charge of this wing thinks that Uncle Bones is just the skeleton they keep in the supply closet for educational purposes. It certainly makes the parents feel better.” Death resumed walking down the hall, then stopped outside of one of the rooms. “We’re here.”

He pushed the door open, the hallway suddenly filled with the soft beeping of a heart monitor. The room was decorated with hundreds of colored pencil drawings, most of them of other children. Lily paused to appreciate a fairly realistic depiction of one of the doctors. It wasn’t quite photo-quality like some of the stuff Zel could draw, but it was really good.

“Death!” A raspy voice greeted the Reaper, who now sat at the foot of the bed. Lily walked in to see a young woman no older than fifteen crawl across the bed and embrace Death. “What are you doing here so late?”

“I am out running errands for a friend,” he replied, the twin flames of his skull flickering orange. “Speaking of friends, this is my really good friend Lily.”

“Hi!” The girl turned to Lily and gave her a wave. She was missing all of her hair and had dark circles under her eyes that stood out on porcelain skin. When she extended a hand in greeting, Lily noticed that several of her nails were simply gone. Those that remained had been painted with Christmas colors. “My name is Reagan. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Um...yeah.” Lily didn’t know how to reply, she had been caught off guard by the girl’s appearance. “I just found out that Death has been coming here and didn’t know that he was friends with anyone.”

“We love him here.” With Death’s help, Reagan scooted back to the top of her bed. She thanked him and picked up the small sketchpad next to her bed. “It’s always a lot of fun when he visits. This place can be a little...grim.”

“I bet.” Lily sat in a chair by the bed. “So...what are you in for?”

“Stuck a crayon up my nose.” Reagan picked up a pair of colored pencils and mimed shoving a red one up one nostril. “You know how doctors are, so over dramatic.”

Death chuckled, then patted Reagan's knee. "Reagan has an inoperable tumor in her brain."

"It was a restaurant crayon." Reagan's eyes sparkled. "Probably made with lead in China or something. Doctors have been trying to melt it with space lasers."

"Oh, you're fun." Lily smiled. "So this is going to sound strange, but did you write a letter to Santa this year?"

Reagan's eyes widened, and she looked over at Death. "I did! But I never got a chance to send it!" She leaned over the side of her bed and picked up a folder full of artwork. Flipping straight to the back, she pulled out an envelope labeled with the letters SC.

"May I see it?" Death asked.

Reagan faltered, clutching the envelope tightly against her chest. "I'm not so sure about that. Isn't it kind of like keeping a birthday wish secret? If I tell you, it might not come true."

"Ah, but we are Santa's helpers this year." Death pointed to Lily's hat. "So it would make sense that we get to see it."

"You're so cheesy." Reagan looked at the envelope. "I know Santa isn't real. There's no use pretending."

"Wait, you're literally looking at the Grim Reaper himself and you doubt Santa exists?" Lily laughed. "That's too cute."

"I'm not entirely certain he's not just the tumor talking." Reagan tapped one of her temples. "But believing in Death is way easier than Santa. Everybody dies. Santa? He only shows up in shitty movies."

"Then why write him a letter?" Lily crossed her arms. "If he doesn't exist, I mean."

"Why do people pray to God when their kids are dying?" Reagan rolled her eyes. "Because they hope someone cares. Me, I'm not so sure the guy is real, and if he is, he doesn't give a fuck. I certainly haven't seen any real miracles around here. When a kid gets better, it's always because of doctors and medicine. Yeah, people will call it a miracle, but it's usually just a matter of statistics. But when that kid dies? It was apparently their time and we just aren't smart enough to know God's plan or some shit. What a fucking double standard."

“Okay, I like this kid.” Lily wasn’t usually comfortable with talk about the G-man, but the kid was making some good points. “So you figured Santa was a better bet than sky daddy. Makes me wonder what you asked for.”

“It’s not important.” Reagan cleared her throat as if to change the subject, but Lily used her tail to snatch it out of her hands. “Holy shit, you have a tail?”

“I’ve got a lot more than that. Would you like a dramatic reveal?” Lily didn’t wait for an answer. She did a little pirouette, her wings unfurling behind her as her Christmas pajamas melted into her usual corset and mini-skirt. She did a dramatic bow, her horns sliding forward through the skin of her skull just beneath her hat. “What do you think?”

“Bitchin’!” Reagan crawled forward in her bed, the wires from her heart monitor catching on Death’s hand. “Can I feel your wings? They’re so pretty!”

“I, uh...” Lily smiled, her cheeks suddenly warm. She almost didn’t notice when Death pulled the envelope out of her tail. “Yeah, sure, kid.” She extended her wings, allowing Reagan to feel them.

“They remind me of my dad’s leather jacket.” Reagan pushed her face into the fold of one wing and inhaled. “Oof, doesn’t smell the same, though.”

“I was forged from hellfire. Your dad’s jacket came from a farting cow.”

“You’re the one that smells like farts,” Reagan grumbled. This elicited a hearty laugh from Death, who had managed to untangle his fingers from her wires. In the process, he unplugged the monitor, causing the eerie whine to fill the room.

“We won’t be needing that,” he declared, flicking the machinery off with a finger.

“So does this mean you can fly?” Reagan let go of Lily’s wing. “Is that a scorpion’s tail? Do you sting people with it?”

“I can. It is. And I have.” Lily sat on the end of the bed. Reagan scooted away from her to make room and picked up her forgotten sketchpad. “I’m a type of demon known as a succubus.”

“Really? Like, the sexy kind?” Reagan picked up one of her pencils, the room now filled with the sounds of graphite on paper. “You eat souls, right?”

“She does.” Death leaned over to see what Reagan was drawing. “It’s quite disturbing.”

“But you seem so nice.” Reagan paused in her scribbles. “I didn’t think a succubus could be nice.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about demons. Are schools finally back to teaching the basics?” Lily asked.

“Nah.” The scribbling resumed. “I’ve got a lot of down time. I used to read a lot, but it makes my head hurt, so now I just stream movies and shit. May have spent a bunch of time contemplating my immortal soul, cause, well…” she gestured at the room around her. “I’ve got a lump of cells the size of an egg in the middle of my brain. You question a lot of things when the end is near.”

“Well, what do you want to know?” Lily sat on the edge of the bed, her tail sliding beneath the bed to tickle Reagan’s foot. The girl laughed, squirming away from her.

“All sorts of things. For instance, since you’re a demon, it means that heaven is real! What’s it like?” Reagan turned her full attention on Lily, hope in her eyes.

“Not something I actually have an answer for. Never been there, cause I’m a demon.” Lily tapped her horns.

“But I thought demons were just fallen angels?”

Lily winced. “Yeah, well I’m…complicated.” She wasn’t about to get into her past with just anyone, much less a teenager.

“Got it. Does that mean you don’t know what God’s like?”

“Reagan.” Death patted the girl’s knee. “I understand why you’re asking, but Lily really isn’t comfortable speaking on all things heavenly. It gives her gas.”

“Oh, right, I’m so sorry!” Reagan blushed as Lily scowled at the Reaper. “I must look like a total bitch right now.”

“It’s fine, I get it.” Lily waved her off. “You just found out that your soul gets to go somewhere after you die. That’s a pretty big deal. Me? I already know that my ultimate destination is a coin flip between Hell or the Void. If I have enough souls under my belt, Hell won’t be so bad. The Void, though? Oblivion at its worst.”

“Oh, I know! Where does Death live? He refuses to tell us where he’s staying, always talks about how he lives with his best friend in a house full of monsters.” Reagan stuck her tongue out at the Reaper. “Bet she’ll tell me.”

“That’s actually true, but I can’t say much about it.” She threw a dirty look at Death. “He probably shouldn’t have told you that much, honestly.”

“It is okay, Lily.” Death held up his hand, then curled his fingers down until only his pinky remained. “For we have entered into a contract of the highest order; the pinky swear.”

“Jiminy Christmas, what am I going to do with you?” Lily sat on the other side of Reagan. “But yeah, an entire family of magical creatures, all under one roof.”

Reagan’s eyes brimmed over with tears, and she wiped them away with her thumbs. “Sorry if I’m a bit emotional. I’ve always wanted to believe in something other than all this, you know?”

“I get it, kid. It’s nice to have something to believe in.” Suddenly conscious of just how tiny the girl was, Lily shrunk herself down to better fit next to Reagan. Movement in the corner of the room revealed Spirit Mike leaning against the wall with a grin on his face. “Or someone.”

And so they talked. Death was quiet, save for a few interruptions. Reagan talked all about her parents, and her baby sister who was going to be eight soon. There was a girl at school that Reagan was super into, but she hadn’t seen her since last spring. Her school was a couple of hours away, which meant she rarely got visitors.

The whole time she spoke, her hands kept moving across the paper. Whenever Lily tried to peek, Reagan would tilt the sketchpad down, a sly grin on her face. “No snooping,” she would declare, occasionally sharpening her pencils. Little colored shavings appeared all over her bed, which Death would meticulously collect and deposit in the nearby trash can.

They were in the middle of talking about Reagan’s favorite show when the girl wrote something with a flourish in one corner. She carefully removed the paper from her sketchpad and handed it over to Lily.

“Do you like it?” she asked, her tired eyes suddenly hopeful.

It was a portrait of the succubus. She was mid-laugh, a hand in front of her mouth and the skin around her eyes crinkled up. The stone necklace Mike had

given her rested on her chest, Lily's hand hovering just above it. Behind her, an aura of light filled the rest of the picture. Even though she had horns in the picture, it was a candid moment, making her look surprisingly human.

"I...love it." Lily looked over the top of the drawing to see Reagan's eyes brimming with joy. "Can I have this?"

Reagan nodded, wiping tears from her eyes. "I think it's my best work. What do you think, Death?"

"I will admit I am quite jealous." Death grinned at his friend. "This is very well done."

"Thank you." She balled up her fists and took a deep breath. Her lower lip trembled as she squeezed the blankets on her bed. "I'm ready now."

"Ready for what?" Lily asked, but the moment was quick, like a match catching fire. There was a flash of light, and Death stood over Reagan's bed, his bony fingers clenched together above her body.

"What the fudge? What the fudge?!?" Lily slid backward off the bed, clawing at her hat in horror. Reagan's sparkling eyes had already gone dull, her pupils dilating. "What did you do, Death? What did you do?"

The Reaper turned toward Lily and held up Reagan's soul. It was the brightest golden light that Lily had ever seen, flitting about like a trapped bird in his clutches.

"I knew the moment we arrived," he told her, lowering his hand. "There's a saying mortals enjoy, one about knowing that Death has entered the room. For the first time ever, I was allowed to experience that sensation for myself. I had entered the room, not as myself, but as my job. We are frozen in a single moment, and that moment just so happened to be Reagan's last."

"But why? WHY?!?" Lily almost balled up her drawing in frustration, tears now running down her cheeks. Steam rose from them as her body temperature climbed, hellfire now coursing through her veins. "Why would you do this to me? Why not just come up here, do your darned job, and then go?"

Death hung his head in shame. "I will admit that the deception was not for Reagan's sake, but my own. I am supposed to be impartial, to allow these things to pass as they should, but..." He turned to Reagan's corpse, her cheeks still glistening with moisture. "I needed a friend."

“She was your friend, you nutjob!” Lily picked up the remote to the television and threw it at him. It bounced off his cloak and fell to the floor.

“I meant for after.” Death placed his hand on Reagan’s head. “You see, I spent many hours with this child and got to know her. Though she was destined to die so young, she treated me with genuine kindness. I knew that it would be a struggle to take her.”

“Then why take her at all?”

“The tumor in her head ruptured a nearby vessel. She would live only until the lock was lifted. Even if I could have kept her around, she would be comatose, trapped in a place of eternal darkness until I came to claim her once more. Though I am the final mercy, I...” He removed his hand and contemplated the dead teen’s soul in his other. “I don’t know what happens to any of them, you know? Her parents will mourn her loss, but there is a chance they will see each other again. But what of me? Am I destined to sit and watch as the universe comes to an ultimate end, and then sit alone in a darkness of my own? What of the friends I made along the way?”

“You see, my dear Lily, it has occurred to me that when I say goodbye, it is forever. I was grateful to be here for her final moments, but she will go on in her own way.”

“But why are we even here?” Lily slumped into a nearby chair, clutching Reagan’s drawing to her chest. “She wrote a letter to Santa, what about that? Weren’t we here for this? What’s even the point if you were just going to take her?”

Death pulled the envelope from his robes and held it up as if it was made of glass. He slid his finger beneath the adhesive and ripped it open, pulling out the paper within.

“Dear Santa,” he began, the fire in his eyes dimming. “I know this might sound ridiculous, but there’s something I want for Christmas. I wrote you a lot when I was younger, but I will admit that I’ve stopped believing. Sorry if this hurts you in the polls.

“Anyway, things aren’t looking good for me. The doctors keep saying that every day is a gift, but I know the end is coming. I’m not afraid, not since I met my new friend. He’s a big fan of yours. I hope you...” Death stopped for several

moments, then cleared his non-existent throat. "I hope you get to meet him someday in a non-official capacity."

"Oh, Reagan." Lily shook her head and continued sobbing.

"If I could have one gift this year, it would be that you help my parents and sister once I'm gone. They've lived with me and my broken head for so long now, that maybe they've forgotten how to be happy. I don't know what that would look like on your end, but I feel like someone owes me a miracle. Please help them find happiness again. They deserve it.

"But if you happen to be in a giving mood, there's something I want for myself. When the end comes, I don't want to be alone, but I don't want to do it in front of my family. I kind of want to go out on a high note, if that makes sense. I don't care who you send, it could be an elf, or even a reindeer. When I die, I know I'll already..."

Death went silent, then handed the note to Lily. She took it from him and found the part where he had stopped.

"I know I'll already have one friend there, but wouldn't mind making just one more before I go." She didn't bother reading the rest, it was too hard to see through her tears. It was like she had lost control over her body, her head pounding as if it would burst from within.

Death stood by the hospital window, Reagan's soul in his outstretched palm.

"Goodbye, Reagan." He gave the soul a little flick with his fingers, as if tossing a coin in the air, and it was gone. The room seemed dimmer now, as if the color had been sucked out of it. "May your slumber be restful."

"I hate you," Lily whispered. "I hate you for doing this to me."

"I know." Death moved over to the side of Reagan's bed and took a moment to tuck her in. He reconnected all the wires to her heart monitor, the silence shattered by the eerie tone of Reagan's death.

"Why bother?" Lily asked. "She's not in there, you know."

"You are correct." Death turned to point at the clock. "But you see, it is not technically Christmas Day."

"So?"

“In thirty years, when Reagan’s sister wakes up on Christmas Day, she will never have to think ‘this is the date of my sister’s death.’ When time resumes, I wish for them to find her sometime before midnight.” Death moved toward the doorway, then paused long enough to steal one of the pictures that had been tucked away beneath some of the others. Lily couldn’t be sure, but she was fairly certain the subject of the artwork was wearing a dark robe. “I would like to get some air, if you don’t mind. I’ll be on the roof.”

She watched him go. When she was certain he was far enough away, she moved to sit on the side of Reagan’s bed.

“You okay?” Soul Mike asked from the corner of the room.

“No. Not really.” She knelt down and kissed Reagan’s forehead. “Though I knew you but for a moment, I shall remember you for a lifetime.” It wasn’t hyperbole either, because demons couldn’t lie and she never wanted to forget.

She pulled out the sketch Reagan had given her, torn about whether to take it with her or leave it behind. Her tears splashed on the drawing, and she tucked it away. It was interesting how something so light could feel so heavy in her hands.

By the time she caught up to Death, he was standing on the edge of the roof with his scythe out, leaning on the handle for support. Moving to stand next to him, she handed him Reagan’s letter.

“I didn’t know if you wanted to keep this,” she told him.

“I would, actually.” He accepted the letter and it vanished into his robes. “I feel an ache inside my body that I am unfamiliar with.”

“That’s called grief.”

“Ah.” He stared out at the lights of the city. “I do not like it.”

“That was a terrible thing you did to me.”

“It was, and I am sorry. Do you have Reagan’s drawing?”

“I do.” She pulled it out. “Why?”

“I think she captured your likeness very well. It was a gift of hers. To see what lies beneath. You may act tough and be rather crude at times, but you are a kind soul.”

“I’m not ready for an emotional circle jerk.”

Death turned to look at her. "What is a circle jerk?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Ugh. It's never tomorrow." Death raised his hand, and the sleigh emerged from the clouds above. It seemed unsteady, as if Cerberus was pulling it through turbulence. Once the hellhound landed, they turned into their human form and put their hands on their hips.

"The sleigh is getting tough to pull," Cerberus said. "It feels much heavier."

"It shouldn't be." Death frowned at the sleigh. "We are still delivering personal visits, the magic should sustain it."

There was a loud pop, and Christmas Present appeared next to them.

"Quick, let me see the list."

"Why are you teleporting here?" Lily asked. "Won't the Krampus figure out where we are?"

"It doesn't matter. This is more important." The spirit took the list from Death and scrolled through a few names. "Hold on, I'll be right back. I need to check on something."

With another pop, she left them behind. Death looked at Lily and shrugged.

"I have a bad feeling about this," she told him.

"As do I." Death moved to sit in the sleigh. "I believe we'll find out why very soon."

Lily didn't join him. Instead, she moved to the edge of the building and pulled out Reagan's drawing. She curled her fingers around the edges, ready to summon a little hellfire and reduce it to ash.

"Are you really sure you want to do that?" Soul Mike asked from the shadows. "Once it's gone, you will never get it back."

She paused, the flames hovering just beneath her fingertips. "Why would I want to keep something that hurts me so bad?"

"It's just a piece of paper, Lily. I think it scares you that she saw through the facade, to the woman underneath the monster. You're worried that it makes you weak, that the pain you feel means that your strength is fading. A weak Lily can't protect her family, now can she?"

“Shut up,” she whispered.

“But you’ve eaten enough therapists to know the truth. Grief and sadness don’t make you weak. You can’t sharpen a sword by only hammering one side of the blade, silly.” He came up from behind and wrapped his arms around her waist. “So don’t burn that, at least not yet. Let Reagan’s last gift to the world survive just a little bit longer.”

She scowled, then relaxed into Mike’s arms. “I hate having you inside my head sometimes,” she told him.

“I know,” he replied. “It really is a pretty picture of you.”

“It is,” she whispered, wiping the new tears off of the paper before they could soak in. She held it against her chest, absorbing it into her body where it would be safe for now. After all, she could always burn it later, right?

There was a burst of light, and fiery sparks showered the rooftop as Christmas Present tumbled from up in the sky. The spirit was covered in scratch marks, and there was blood all over her outfit.

“Holy heck, what happened?” Lily ran to the giant’s side. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not.” Christmas Present’s face was bright red, her eyes brimming with anger. She held something up in her hands and laughed. “For future reference, I can apparently teleport this much of another being.”

It was the head of one of the Yule Lads, his features slack. Christmas Present dropped it onto the roof.

“They’re taking the children,” she said, her gaze on the bloody head as it dissolved into smoke. “The ones we were supposed to visit, and the ones we’ve already been to. It’s how the Krampus is draining the magic away. The gifts are bad enough, but by taking the children, it’s like we’ve done nothing at all!”

“What is he planning to do with them?” Death asked, a dangerous tone in his voice. Whatever warmth the air held flitted away like leaves in a hurricane.

Christmas Present turned toward the Grim Reaper. “With the Yule lads’ involvement, my bet is...he’s going to let Grýla eat them.”

Lily gasped, her wings fluttering behind her in shock.

“I see.” Death turned toward the sleigh. “I did not expect such a development. Every move he has made has served to undo the goodwill we have poured into the world, but this? It is an act of pure evil and I shall not allow it.”

“So what do we do?” Lily asked. “We can’t just go in there guns blazing. One, we don’t have any guns. Two, we don’t know where Grýla is keeping the children. Does anyone here even have a plan?”

“I know someone who is pretty good at it. We need our Caretaker.” Christmas Present looked at Lily. “He and the others have to return to the North Pole right away. I can teleport to him, which will allow the three of you to come around the long way.”

“Fudge no, I’m coming with you.” She tugged at the hat out of habit. “I can teleport directly to him as well. That leaves Death to come the long way with Cerberus and the sleigh.”

“Then it is settled.” Death got into the sleigh and picked up the reins. “My dear ghost, would you kindly inform Dancer of this plan so that she may meet up with us on the way? I would not begrudge a proper guide.”

“You’ve got it. We’ll see you when you get there.” Christmas Present tucked a lock of Lily’s hair behind one of her horns. “See you later, alligator.”

She vanished, leaving the scent of nutmeg in the air. Lily sucked it in through her nostrils, then glanced over at Death.

“See you at the North Pole,” she told him.

“Yes, you will.” He waited for Cerberus to transform back into a hellhound. “And Lily?”

“What?”

“Save some ass for me.” When he turned to face her, the fire in his eyes threatened to escape his sockets. “For I intend to beat much ass this Christmas.”

She nodded, then closed her eyes and took a shortcut through Hell to return to Mike’s side. The fire and brimstone flared hot against her skin, and then she was standing in the ice and snow of...somewhere else. Mike was sitting outside of a cabin next to Holly, and he leapt to his feet in surprise.

“Lily!” He ran for her, and the moment his arms wrapped around her waist, the dam broke. Hot tears ran down her face as he clutched her tightly, her tail

wrapping around his waist. When he finally let go, he used his thumbs to wipe the tears from her eyes.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes,” she whispered. “How long has it been for you?”

“Too long without you. Something happened, didn’t it?”

The succubus nodded. “The Krampus is taking children to give to the giants as food. He’s making some big moves, and we can’t let him get away with it.”

Mike nodded, then looked over at Holly. “It’s time for this player to make some moves of his own. You ready for this?”

“No.” The elf looked at Lily, then back at Mike. Her eyes were red around the edges as if she had been crying recently. “But it’s okay, because we’re all in it together. Right?”

“Right.” Mike looked at Lily. “Now let’s go kick some Krampus ass.”