

Hot and Cold

The ice cold winds of the arctic were blocked by large trees decorated with glowing Christmas bulbs the size of Kisa's head. Long cobblestone pathways were lined with 19th century lamps lit with magic rather than oil. They seemed to brighten as the trio walked beneath them, and Kisa stopped to ponder the swirling lights.

"Faerie magic," Holly explained. "Similar to the Northern Lights."

"I thought those had something to do with the Earth's magnetic field." Kisa wasn't sure how she knew this, but it sounded correct.

Holly nodded. "We're both right. There's the Northern Lights proper, and also some other stuff. Some indigenous people believe that their ancestors are up there, watching them from up above."

"Is that true?" Kisa asked.

Holly shrugged. "I couldn't say. There's a lot in this world that's a mystery, and I kind of like the magic that comes with not knowing."

Kisa nodded, then walked away. She didn't agree with Holly. Her early life was largely gone, eaten away by an enchanted collar. Complex emotions surrounded the magical object that had stolen her identity, yet given her a future where she thrived. She didn't feel the need to start trouble with the elf over her ideology, because Kisa wasn't entirely certain of her own.

Closing her eyes briefly, Kisa pictured her faceless grandmother. Knowing nothing else about the woman, it was at least nice to know that someone had once loved her. Maybe even now there was someone out in the world who sometimes wondered whatever happened to that little girl.

"Charged particles," Tink added, the Northern Lights reflected in the lenses of her goggles. "Maybe ghosts? Lots of magic."

"That's right, I almost forgot. The spell that lets Santa travel the world in a single night is wrapped up in those lights." Holly pointed. "If you watch, you can sometimes see where it looks like Christmas ribbons."

Kisa saw what Holly was pointing at, but was dubious. For all she knew, the Northern Lights just appeared that way and Holly was grasping for straws.

They walked down a wide cobblestone path, huddled close together as the storm reduced visibility. Pausing at an abandoned hot cocoa stand, Holly took a

moment to get reoriented. The roads were starting to ice over, and the village around them was eerie. Only a few lights had been left on in the decorated buildings, but it was sporadic. The whole place looked like a Christmas-themed ghost town with gingerbread buildings and candy cane fencing. There wasn't a tree in sight that hadn't been adorned with garland or ornaments. She realized while they were waiting that the cobblestones beneath their feet were shaped like Christmas cookies.

Tink was busy trying to steal another cookie from Holly's pouch when Kisa felt a sudden chill run through her whole body. Her tail poofed out in fright as she grabbed Holly and Tink by the hand and pulled them away from the cocoa stand.

"What are you—" Holly said, but the cart behind them was suddenly surrounded by thick icicles that slammed into the ground from up above, creating an icy prison.

"Got you!" shouted Jack from down the road, unaware that they had already escaped.

"Stay low," Kisa warned, pulling them behind a cluster of trees until the chill dissipated. It would only be moments before Jack discovered they were on the run, and the snowy ground meant they were leaving tracks.

The weather intensified, snowflakes now turning to sleet and stinging her skin like frozen bees.

"She's going to catch us," Holly whimpered, clutching her hat against her head.

"She?" Thinking back to their previous encounter, Kisa could see it, not that it mattered. Her top priority right now was avoiding becoming a cat-sicle.

Kisa let her gut lead them further away. They ran along fences and down alleys, just missing capture more than once. A wall of ice nearly trapped them on the street, but a narrow space between buildings let them vanish off the main road. They squeezed between the two buildings, their petite frames just small enough to allow passage, then ran back along the buildings they had just passed. Kisa's whole body tensed up as the path in front of them erupted with ice.

"That was a waste of time." Jack dropped down from above, eyes glittering in the lamp light as she held her hands out. Swords made of ice circled her as she floated just an inch off the ground.

Off to the side, Tink started scooping snow into her hands.

“Please don’t hurt us,” Holly begged, putting herself between Kisa and Jack. “We don’t want any trouble.”

“I would worry far more about what *he* has planned for you.” Jack tilted her head back to look down her nose at the trio. “A lot of work has gone into our plans here, and—”

A snowball exploded on Jack’s shoulder, leaving behind a smudge of white on her fancy lapels. Chuckling, she brushed the snow off of her shoulder and looked at Tink, who had thrown it.

“A snowball fight? Please. I invented that.”

Undeterred, Tink wound up her whole body and hurled a second snowball, her tail snapping behind her like a whip. Jack waved a hand dismissively, causing the snow to explode harmlessly into a cloud of fluff.

Though the snow was gone, the stone Tink had packed inside the snowball continued forward, smashing into Jack’s nose. She let out a grunt, then fell backward onto her ass while clutching her face. Purple blood leaked out from between her hands, and she stared at them in shock.

“Tink invent fighting dirty.” The goblin stuck out her tongue and flipped Jack the bird.

Seeing a chance to escape, Kisa grabbed Holly and ran. Tink was right behind them, and they turned a corner just as the ice and snow behind them erupted.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Kisa saw an open doorway and pulled the others into it. The door was locked, but Tink was already using a tool that looked like a pocket knife to jiggle the lock.

“HOW DARE YOU!” Jack’s voice rose above the din of the storm, and Kisa felt the chill spread throughout her body. Tink opened the door and the three of them moved inside, then locked the door behind them. They were in some sort of storage area with giant bags of flour.

They left the storage room behind and moved through the building. The storm outside escalated, and Kisa heard Jack’s howls of rage as if they were the wind itself.

“Oh, she’s big mad,” Holly whispered.

“Yeah, well that storm of hers should have buried our footprints.” Kisa found a windowless room full of boxes. When she went inside, the chill in her body dissipated, her danger sense no longer ringing alarms. “Here should be safe.”

“For now.” Holly moved over to the corner and knelt down. “But I think it’s going to be hard to move around out there until that storm dissipates. And the cold is only going to get worse.”

“Still plenty time before freeze to death.” Tink smiled. “Maybe eat more cookies until then.”

“Why are you so hungry?” Kisa shook her head. “You need to eat more protein, or something. All these carbs are bad for you.”

“Maybe kitty cat needs eat Tink’s ass.” Tink blew a raspberry. Holly held her stomach and groaned.

“What we need to do is figure out—” Kisa felt a familiar tugging sensation in her body. It was Mike, and he was relatively nearby. “Is there a heating vent in here?”

“I don’t think so,” Holly replied. “Not in this room, anyway.”

“Then I think Mike is out of the ducts.” Kisa moved toward the far wall and pressed her forehead against it. Closing her eyes, she tried to reach across the distance and make contact with him. It took a couple of minutes for her heart to stop racing, and her senses to expand outward. She could sense him much better now, could feel the aches and pains in his body. Had he been in a fight? It was hard to tell, but he was in good spirits.

Still, she couldn’t quite make that final connection. He was distracted, but happy. She rolled her eyes as she opened them, wondering who he was fucking this time.

“Husband safe?” Tink asked.

“Yeah, he’s safe.” Kisa slid down the wall. “We need to stay here for a bit anyway until Frosty the snowbitch wanders off...sorry, Holly.”

Holly waved off the apology, her features pale. “It’s fine, I’ve come to expect potty language from both of you. We’re in the bakery, so there are some tunnels

that go through the village. If we use those, we may be able to move toward Mike while escaping Jack.”

“Tink tired of snow.” The goblin pulled some tools from her belt and was wiping them dry with a towel. “Everything wet and dumb.”

“Then it’s settled. You get us to those tunnels, and I’ll point the way back to Mike.” Satisfied with their plan, Kisa stood and brushed the snow out of her fur. “I don’t see any reason to wait. Lead the way.”

They moved cautiously out into the hallway, then walked down to a pair of double doors that opened into a large industrial kitchen. Giant bronze ovens surrounded them, and the air was rich with the smell of baked bread and cookies. Kisa had to keep Tink moving, as the goblin kept stopping to pick up baked goods that had been left behind.

“You’re seriously not that hungry,” she told Tink, pushing her from behind.

“Tink always hungry,” Tink declared, stuffing her pockets with undecorated gingerbread men. “Maybe no share, now.”

Kisa grinned, a handful of gingerbread men already tucked away in her own pockets. If these tasted half as good as the ones Holly had, she was going to need her own stash.

“So they bake all the cookies here?” Kisa looked around at the large room, noticing a shelf with a bunch of elf-sized chef hats.

“No. This is one of the side bakeries. You should see the main bakery, it looks like a giant cake from the inside! Each level makes a different kind of treat, and…” Holly’s exuberance faded. “Actually, it doesn’t matter. Until we get Santa back, it isn’t worth seeing.”

Kisa looked at Tink, who just shrugged. They continued through the bakery in silence, the howling wind outside making the whole building creak. They walked through four different rooms with ovens, eventually moving down a service tunnel that terminated in a big metal door embossed with a large cookie.

“Looks a bit extreme,” Kisa noted as they approached.

“All of the buildings have these. It’s to keep the air flowing properly in each building. Here, look.” Holly pushed the heavy door open to reveal a short tunnel that had gone dark. Kisa turned on her flashlight to reveal another door at the end of the hallway. “We let one door close before we open the next one, like an

airlock. Otherwise, you can cause doors to slam in another building, or similar problems. We actually used that trick once to blow a bad smell out of the main bakery—someone burned a giant batch of cookies.”

“How did that happen?” Kisa asked.

Holly gave Tink a dirty look. “Let’s just say that there were bigger problems that night, and the cookies got neglected.”

Kisa was about to ask for details when she heard something crash behind them in the building they had just left. They all paused and stared at the door they had just come through.

“That doesn’t lock, does it?” she whispered.

Holly shook her head. “We’re inside the village, we’ve never had to worry about—”

There was another crash, followed by a guttural growl. It sounded like baking racks were being tossed around. Kisa felt that ominous fluttering in her belly as the growling intensified, and she pulled the others toward the tunnel door.

“We need to leave,” she told them, pulling the door open. “Right now.”

Holly stared at the bakery door as if hypnotized. Tink grabbed the elf by the shoulders and dragged her through the door. Kisa followed them through, making sure the door didn’t bang shut. The long hallways were clean, and some distant lights were still on, but they were flickering.

“That’s creepy and I hate it.” Kisa’s tail flicked as she pointed generally to the right. “Mike is that way.”

“Hmm.” Holly started walking down the hall, stroking her chin thoughtfully. “That would put him much closer to the Workshop than I’d like. I really hope he didn’t reappear there, because that’s ground zero for trouble right now. Would far prefer if he showed up in the dorms, or even the stables.”

“Stables?”

“Yeah. For the reindeer.” Holly held her hands up over her ears, as if they were antlers.

“Unless the Krampus got to them.” Kisa frowned. “He’s rounding up all the elves, but would he have any use for the reindeer? And other than erasing Santa, what’s his deal anyway?”

Holly shrugged and kept walking. The trio wandered the tunnels for well over an hour, pausing every so often to have Kisa check Mike’s location. They were getting closer, which meant Mike was stationary. They took a break in an attempt for Kisa to reach out to him, but his mind was abuzz with activity. Frustrated, she was forced to give up.

The giant metal doors they saw all had different symbols on them. One had a sleigh, another bore a wreath. Kisa saw one that looked like a reindeer, only something seemed odd about the engraving. The symbols of Christmas often repeated and blurred together as the trio wandered the dark tunnels beneath the North Pole. The lack of decor in the tunnels proper made it difficult to tell how far they’d traveled or even where they were.

“Wait.” Kisa held up her hand and closed her eyes. “We’re moving away from him now. He’s...that way.” She pointed off to her left and slightly up.

“Let’s go back a door,” Holly said. “Does he feel nearby?”

“I think so. Hard to say.”

“About fucking time,” Tink grumbled. “Feet hurt.”

Holly groaned and turned away from the two of them, mumbling to herself about Tink’s naughtiness.

“With any luck, you can take a nap or something. I can tell you’re hungover.” Kisa wrapped her arm around the goblin’s waist and gave her a squeeze.

“Tink no get hungover. Just extra...grumpy.” She bared her teeth in a false smile and moved in step behind Holly. They came to a door engraved with interlocking baked goods, like muffins and cookies.

“Guess you guys are gonna see that big cake after all.” Holly pushed open the door and was shoved forward by a gust of wind that blew through the tunnel. Kisa and Tink followed behind her, then pushed the door shut.

“I thought it wasn’t supposed to—” Kisa stared at the entry door on the other side of the room. It had been ripped free of its hinges and tossed aside. A cold tingle formed in her gut as she turned to face the door they had closed. There

hadn't been an air current in the tunnels earlier, which meant that somewhere, another set of double doors was open.

Holly pointed at the discarded door. There were claw marks in the metal. "The Krampus," she whispered, her eyes wide.

"So he pulled that door down and—"

"Shh!" Tink put her ear against the door to the tunnel and scowled. "Tink hear stupid demon fuck yelling."

"Tink!" Holly's protest was barely a squeak.

"We go now." Tink pulled free the hammer from her belt along with a screwdriver. "Krampus use tunnels, follow wind flow, find pretty elf."

"But he has to be miles away!" Kisa ran up the ramp with Holly in tow as Tink walked into a corridor surrounded by shredded bags of flour.

"He's fast," Holly said. "He was distracted with Alabaster last time, but he's on his way. You can count on it."

"Shi...ush." Kisa corrected herself, stretching the word abnormally long. They ran along the corridor, past tiny forklifts and wheeled trolleys. After a set of double doors with star-shaped windows, they were in a curved hallway with an incline.

"This is the outside of the cake," Holly said. "We have to go up just a bit, and then around."

"Whatever you say, cake lady." Kisa looked back down the hall, half expecting to hear clawed feet scratching the floor.

The main bakery smelled musty, as if someone had spilled bad flour. Holly continued leading the way, her features pinched as they moved through the building. Every fifty feet or so, another set of double doors with a different shape cut in the window greeted them, all of them damaged in some way.

"It's almost like he broke them just because," Kisa muttered, staring at a set of doors. "He must really hate it here."

Holly nodded. "In the beginning, he and Santa were supposed to be a team. I don't know what happened, but this place became everything the Krampus hated. He—" She paused, then sniffed the air. "Do you smell that?"

Kisa sniffed, catching the faint tickle of gingerbread. "It's probably just the cookies we took," she admitted.

"No, these smell fresh. But if the ovens had been abandoned, they would have burned by now." The elf turned on her heels and sprinted up the hall. "Maybe some of the other elves are still around!"

"Ugh, Tink gonna barf." The goblin was dragging behind now, doing her best to keep up. Kisa did her best to keep Holly in her sights without leaving Tink behind, but eventually the elf disappeared around a corner.

"Shit!" Kisa turned around, her hands on her hips. "Why are you so tired all of the sudden?"

"Too many cookies." Tink grinned weakly.

"Have you been fucking eating those this entire time?"

"Yup!" Tink gagged, made a face, then stuck out her tongue. "Maybe eat some of them twice."

"Gross!" She grabbed Tink's hand and pulled her forward. "We need to find Holly, so c'mon!"

Tink flipped some lenses on her goggles. "Left ahead," she said, upon seeing the length of the next corridor. Kisa and Tink followed whatever trail the goblin was tracking until they came to a golden door with light shining from underneath. They pushed it open cautiously, then slid inside.

It was a giant assembly line. Belts carried gingerbread men with horns through a giant room, stopping at small stations where small packs of elves decorated them. The elves had gray skin and egg white eyes, as if the color had been bleached out of them. Even their outfits were drab and faded.

Holly was kneeling on the floor just in front of them, her face buried in her hands as she sobbed.

Kisa didn't even have to ask what was going on. The few elves that looked up to see the newcomers stared at them with disinterest, their bodies going through the motion of decorating the cookies. The baking ovens up above flooded the room with enough heat that Kisa wanted to take off her vest.

"We'll never free them if we don't keep going," she told Holly. "So let's go."

“Some of them are my friends,” Holly whispered between sobs. “What if they’re broken forever?”

“Then we’ll see how many pieces we can put back in the puzzle. Trust me, being broken doesn’t mean your life is over.” She pulled Holly to her feet just as Tink made a horrible noise behind them. Kisa looked back to see that the goblin had puked up at least a pound of cookies. The goblin followed up this feat with a round of swear words and spitting.

“That’s disgusting,” Kisa said, but noticed that the elves had all stopped, their eyes now on Tink. Their features twisted and distorted as they pondered the goblin, anger flitting across their features.

“Oh, sprinkles,” Holly whispered. “I think they recognize Tink.”

“I’m guessing that’s not a good thing,” Kisa whispered back, then covered her ears when the elves all pointed at Tink with clawed hands. They made an eerie hissing sound as they moved toward the trio, climbing over their workstations.

“Not today,” Kisa declared, then ran toward the goblin with Holly in tow. Looking for an escape route, she spotted a nearby conveyer belt that went through an opening on the other side of the room. “There! Now!”

Holly leapt onto the belt as Kisa gave Tink a boost. She was able to pull herself up just as a pair of elves closed in on her. Instead of climbing the belt, the elves ran beneath it.

“Stupid elves,” Tink muttered, then picked up one of the gingerbread devils. She bit its head off and stuck out her tongue. “Dumb fuck cookie taste like ass.”

“Stop eating cookies!” Kisa slapped the remaining gingerbread devil out of Tink’s hands as they passed into a dark tunnel. On the other side, the belt dumped into a large silver funnel, and they all fell off the belt to spin around the edges of the funnel like a giant slide.

“Where are we?” Kisa demanded.

“Rejects!” Holly yelled from the other side of the funnel. They spiraled around for several seconds before falling through the hole in the bottom. Crashing onto a mountain of broken cookies, Kisa tumbled down the side and smacked her elbow on the concrete floor beneath.

“Ow, dammit!” She winced, then stood. The room’s solitary light was from the funnel above, and the room was rich with the smell of gingerbread. She

walked around to the other side of the cookie pile. "Tink? Holly? Where are you at?"

Holly and Tink were helping each other up, brushing crumbs off of themselves. Tink had lost her screwdriver, but her hammer was still clutched tightly in one hand. A gingerbread devil had gotten caught in the claw, and she broke it apart to clear the hammer.

"Usually there's a big bag and a cart here," Holly explained, adjusting her hat and then brushing off her knees. "Reindeer get to eat the cookie rejects. We add it to their feed."

"Sounds healthy." Kisa saw that a rail system had been built into the floor under the cookie pile, and it went through a tunnel on the other side of the wall. "Does that mean the stables are that way?"

Holly nodded. A hideous screech came from the funnel above. It was like nails down a chalkboard, causing Kisa's fur to stand on end. She could almost hear a singsong voice inside the cacophonous roar, and clutched Tink's arm.

"That's him," Holly whispered. "He's in the building."

"He found us just from air currents?" Kisa looked at Tink.

"Tink think so. Demon tricky, very mad at pretty elf." She looked at the tunnel, then at a door on the far wall. "Broken elves tell demon where to find Tink, need special trick, buy time."

The goblin rummaged around in her pockets and pulled out some of the gingerbread men she had taken earlier. She ran over toward the door and broke them apart, laying them on the ground in plain sight. It was readily apparent that these were different from the gingerbread demons scattered around the room, and the goblin opened the door and stepped into the hall.

Kisa heard the goblin make herself puke on the other side. Frowning, she watched Tink come back through the door and walk around the perimeter of the room.

"Demon think Tink sick from running, waste time, check hallway first. We run now." Tink wiped her mouth and then bolted down the railway tunnel. "Feel much lighter now," she said as she disappeared into the darkness.

"Let's go." Kisa grabbed Holly's hand and they ran into the darkness. The rail system had been embedded into the floor, so she didn't have to worry about

tripping. Unlike the previous tunnel, this one wasn't lit, which meant the sole illumination was from the rejects room behind them.

They had gone down the tunnel a couple hundred feet when a shadow blocked the light. Kisa looked back in time to see an amorphous shadow on top of the cookie pile. The figure was hunched over, emitting tiny motes of darkness that made the dim light even harder to detect.

The figure vanished, and the sound of doors being torn from their hinges flooded the tunnel. Tink's distraction had worked, but how much time would it actually buy them?

Kisa turned her attention to the darkness ahead. Her eyes allowed her to see better than most, but they still required some light source. A dark shape appeared in the gloom, and Tink was sitting on top of it.

"Hurry," she whispered, then helped Kisa and Holly up. It was a minecart with a set of levers on the side, and there was a partially full bag of cookies inside.

"Tink, these things only work if you push them," Kisa replied. "Unless you think you can push us faster than we run, we should just go on foot."

"Rails smooth, floor flat. No friction, good cart. Save energy, make boost." Tink hopped out of the cart and started pushing, grunting as the cart picked up speed. The cart rolled quietly on the rails as Tink continued pushing until she jumped in with them.

"Now what?" Kisa asked.

Tink grabbed the bag in the cart and struggled to lift it. "Help Tink throw out."

It took all three of them to lift the bag and dump it out the back. Cookies scattered on the floor, leaving crumbly gingerbread devils everywhere. The reject room vanished from sight as they went around a corner, and Kisa found herself lost in the darkness.

Kisa turned on her flashlight to see Tink using her tools to remove one of the levers from the cart. She rotated it so that the rubber grip was on the bottom, then leaned over the side of the cart and used the lever as a makeshift pole to push them even faster.

"Turn off light," Tink whispered. "Tink see plenty."

Kisa obeyed, then leaned back against the wall of the cart. The wheels beneath them were silent, and she lost track of time. Occasional shrieks traveled down the tunnel, the Krampus clearly enraged that he couldn't find them. It was only a matter of time before he noticed their tunnel, and Kisa hoped to be long gone by then.

An orb of light appeared ahead, then widened to reveal a room full of barrels. The cart came to a stop when Tink pulled on the brake, and the three of them got off.

"What's in the barrels?" asked Kisa.

"Whiskey. For the reindeer." Holly patted one of the barrels. "They don't get drunk off of it, if that's what you're wondering. It's kind of like their version of rocket fuel."

Tink giggled. "Reindeer make big farts, go super sonic."

"We need to be quiet," Holly said, lowering her voice. "The reindeer aren't skittish or anything, but they can be temperamental. They're super smart, but likely know something is wrong. Don't get on their bad side."

"We'll be good." Kisa smacked Tink's hand away from the spigot of a nearby whiskey barrel. "Promise."

They walked through the giant wooden building, and Kisa noticed right away that something was different. It looked like any other barn she had ever been in, but it was missing the smell of animals. There was no musky scent, nor the foul odor of feces. Instead she smelled hay, candy canes, and something that reminded her of the ozone after a storm.

The stall doors were much taller than Kisa, and she heard shifting inside the stall. The wooden frame was ornate and lined in silver and gold, and the name **Prancer** was embossed in a plaque with glittering rubies.

Determined to see a reindeer, she let the others walk ahead and allowed herself to fade into the background. It was easy enough to hop up onto a nearby bale of hay and then scramble to the stall door.

There were a lot of things she expected, but the misty creature sitting in the back of the stall was not one of them. It had the shape of a reindeer, that much was true, but it was almost like her brain couldn't process what she was looking at. The antlers seemed to shift and distort whenever she wasn't looking directly at them, and the animal itself looked as though it was made of a sparkling fog. Black

streaks ran through the creature, and one of its eyes was a terrible crimson that gazed directly into Kisa's soul.

The reindeer charged. Kisa fell backwards off the stall door, flipping over to land on her feet. The door shuddered from the impact, and the creature made a hissing sound that reminded Kisa of a bag of snakes. Black mist curled through the gaps of the door with tendrils that twisted around and tried to grab Kisa's feet.

"What the hell?" Kisa scrambled backwards as Holly and Tink ran over. Holly stopped further away than Tink, her mouth agape at the dark fog as it withdrew through the doorway.

"Prancer?" Holly's voice trembled. The reindeer's massive head appeared over the stall door, and it turned to face the elf. Inky, twisted lines ran down her muzzle, dripping onto the wood and evaporating into smoke.

"He's corrupted them, too." Kisa stood and moved along the opposite wall. The next stall down belonged to **Dasher**, who had already stuck her head out to see what was happening. Though Dasher's eyes were still brown, those powerful dark lines coiled around them as if to strangle the kindness away.

The stable was huge, and the stalls alternated. One by one, massive reindeer heads looked out of their stalls to see what was causing the commotion. Comet looked at them with crimson eyes that had shrunken down to little more than ominous dots, and Blitzen's head had a split down the middle, making it look more like an alien than a reindeer.

They moved cautiously around the stalls, shifting back and forth to stay away from the dark mist that formed into hands and reached for them. It wasn't until they were near the end of the stable that Kisa realized one reindeer hadn't come to check on them.

The nameplate on the door was **Dancer**.

"C'mon, we're almost out." Holly grabbed Kisa's hand, but Kisa yanked it away. Curiosity had struck her hard. Maybe it was the reindeer's name, or the fact that she didn't hear hissing coming from inside its stall, but if she walked away without knowing the poor beast's fate, it was going to bother her all night.

With a twist, she dodged around Holly and climbed a pair of whiskey barrels that allowed her to jump onto the stall door. From her new perch, she saw that Dancer had backed into the corner of her stall, her misty nostrils flared wide at Kisa's appearance. The glitter inside her body looked more like stars, and Kisa

couldn't help but think that she was seeing a force of nature rather than an animal.

"Hey." She held out her hand, and Dancer snorted.

"Get down!" Holly jumped, trying to grab Kisa's tail.

"I think this one is okay." Kisa looked over her shoulder at Tink and Holly. "We should let her out before she becomes corrupted."

Holly looked dubious, but Tink nodded her approval before examining the spigot on the whiskey barrel.

"C'mere, girl." Kisa pulled the gingerbread cookies out of her pocket. Most of them were broken, probably from her fall. She picked one out that was intact and turned it so Dancer could see. "Are you hungry? I'm afraid this is all I have."

Holly grunted as she climbed on top of the barrels, then pulled herself onto the stall door by hanging on her belly. Upon seeing the elf, Dancer's features relaxed, and she dipped her head.

"Oh, thank Santa, she's safe." Holly's legs dangled beneath her. "There's a lock on this side we can undo, but I don't know if she'll leave the others behind."

"It should be her choice to make." Kisa stuck her hand out further, and Dancer approached. The reindeer sniffed the treat, then used her tongue to snatch it from Kisa's fingers. She snorted, then moved closer to Kisa's other hand, which contained cookie fragments.

"Here, have all of them." Kisa watched in awe as the creature licked the crumbs from her hand, then hesitantly placed her free hand on Dancer's forehead. Her whole body tingled on contact, and she felt her fur stick up.

"I think she likes you." Holly dropped down, then slapped Tink away from the whiskey barrel. Tink couldn't even protest, her mouth full of booze. "Don't swallow that, it'll mess you up!"

Tink gulped down her mouthful and made a face. "Husband likes it when Tink swallows."

Kisa laughed at the horrified expression on Holly's face, then turned toward the reindeer. "We're going to let you out, just give us a minute."

Dancer nodded, and Kisa hopped down. She looked to the side of the stall door and saw that a silver padlock in the shape of a heart held the whole thing shut.

“Tink.” She smacked the goblin’s arm to get her attention. “Get that open.”

Tink blew a raspberry, then pulled some tools from her pocket. The goggles lenses clicked rapidly as she examined the lock, then stuck her lockpick tool inside. The padlock heated up in her hands, and she growled before pulling her hands away.

“Anti-theft system eat Tink’s ass,” she declared, then spit on her hands and resumed working. Holly shook her head in disgust, then moved away from them.

“Who would steal a reindeer?” asked Kisa.

“Nobody. Without these locks, they would let themselves out. Other than a few elves they particularly like, the only person they obey without question is Santa,” Holly replied. “Remember how I said they can be temperamental? Unless Santa himself goes out and finds them, it can take a whole team weeks just to coax one back, and they can cause quite the mess. Some of them escape a couple times a year, nobody knows how. The human world usually spots them as meteors or shooting stars, but they can fly high enough that they get mistaken for satellites. They’ve been shot at a couple of times by the military, they really don’t like that.”

Tink mumbled as she worked the lock, then swore before yanking her hands away. Frustrated, she pulled a pair of pliers from her belt and held the lock with them. It took her a few attempts and a lot of swearing, all while Holly plugged her ears and loudly hummed a Christmas tune. The lock stopped glowing once it opened, and Tink undid the latch on the stall.

When Dancer stepped out, a silvery mist emanated from her body. It swirled delicately around Kisa, and the reindeer bent her leg and bowed.

“Oh, wow,” Holly whispered. “She’s accepted you.”

Kisa didn’t know what that meant, but a thrill went through her when she put her hand on Dancer’s muzzle. The two of them locked eyes, and she felt a profound sense of gratitude flood through her body.

Then ice water flooded her insides, making her whole body go numb.

The other reindeer let out a hideous noise, and the cart from the tunnel crashed through the stables, sliding to a halt in front of Dasher's stall door. Dancer bolted out of the exit, leaving a glittery trail of hoofprints behind on the ground.

"Oh, fuck." Holly's face had turned completely white, her voice two octaves higher than Kisa had ever heard it.

The Krampus stepped into view, his dark shadow looming large behind him. Even hunched over, he was nearly seven feet tall, his dark visage twisted and gnarled. Angry red eyes were set below the hairiest unibrow Kisa had ever seen, and his horns twisted up from his forehead, ripping holes through what was left of Santa's hat. The demon wore Santa's coat, and shadows dripped from his body as he stared at them with glee.

"Holly." When the Krampus spoke, it felt like poison had been jammed into Kisa's ears. The demon's eyes grew wide as he opened a mouth full of broken teeth. "At last."

Kisa caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Glancing over, she saw Tink use a hammer to knock the spigot off of a nearby whiskey barrel, spilling booze all over the floor. While the Krampus and Holly were distracted with each other, Tink cupped a hand to harvest a mouthful of alcohol. Her lips twisted into a grin as she clicked the padlock from the stall shut, then jammed a tiny screwdriver from her belt into it before tossing it into the pool of whiskey.

The padlock was glowing red, causing the whiskey nearby to sizzle. Tink pulled something out of her tool belt and flipped through the lenses of her goggles. She grinned at Kisa, then tilted her head toward the exit.

Holly and the Krampus stared at each other, neither one moving. The Krampus took a step forward, then paused to stroke Prancer's head. He never broke eye contact with the distracted elf, nor did he make a sound as he stepped forward. A thick tail whipped behind him, striking bales of hay so hard that they fell apart.

"I see you brought us some visitors." He chuckled as he approached, then moved on to the next reindeer. "That was very naughty of you."

Kisa grabbed Holly by the shoulder to turn her around, but the Krampus crossed the distance in an eye blink. Long fingers curled around Holly's neck, and he backhanded Kisa so hard that she crashed against the stall door.

Dazed, she sat up just as Tink smashed her hammer into the Krampus' foot. The demon laughed, then picked Tink up with his other hand to examine her. His fingers easily encircled her waist, and she looked like a child in his hand.

"I know you," he said with a grin. "You've been very naughty."

Tink held up a lighter and flicked it. A single flame appeared, tiny and unassuming. She stretched her arm toward the Krampus, then grinned.

"And what are you planning to do with—" the Krampus never finished, as Tink had blown out a spray of whiskey that ignited, scorching the demon's hairy face. He dropped both Tink and Holly and stumbled back through the stable, howling in pain.

Kisa managed to get to her feet in time to pull the elf away from the puddle of booze on the floor. Tink stuck her hands in a hay bale and let out a growl as she threw it onto the whiskey-soaked barn floor.

"Three seconds!" she yelled, then pointed toward the exit.

Kisa ran as fast as she could, pulling Holly behind her. The Krampus stumbled around, wiping at his scorched face as they pushed open an ornate door and stepped out into the cold of the North Pole.

Behind them, there was a loud whoosh as the whiskey ignited. The high-pitched keening of the Krampus was heard moments before the first explosion rocked the stable.

"No, no, no, the reindeer!" Holly tried to turn back, but Tink blocked her way. "This can't be happening!"

"Stupid deer fine," Tink argued, then pushed the elf forward. "Whole stable fireproof. Ugly fucker not."

There was a roar as the large stable doors burst open and the Krampus emerged, his whole body smoldering. He threw himself into a snowdrift, sending up a cloud of steam.

Dancer landed next to them, letting out a loud snort. The reindeer knelt down, allowing Kisa to help Tink and then Holly onto the reindeer's back before jumping up on her own. The reindeer did a quick spin and then leapt into the air, her hoofprints turning into silver snowflakes that hovered behind them.

Looking back, Kisa saw that the Krampus was free of the snow, and now chasing them. As fast as the Krampus was, he couldn't keep up with a reindeer in flight.

"Where do we go now?" Holly shouted over the howling wind, clutching Tink's waist. The goblin had wrapped her arms around Dancer's neck. Kisa was holding onto Holly, but also squeezing her legs to keep from sliding backward.

"I don't know," she replied, the pull in her chest growing stronger. "But we're headed straight toward Mike!"

Yuki lay on top of Mike, one hand behind his head and the other wrapped around his waist while she kissed him. Her fingers were cool to the touch, as if her magic was leaking out of them. The fire was their sole observer, crackling quietly in the hearth as she made little happy sounds in his mouth.

His magic was doing an odd circuit through his body, almost like a self diagnosis. Heat would briefly flood through his arms, then his back, and then move down into his legs. It was like a massage from the inside, but the cost was the phantom meal he had consumed at Christmas Present's table. His stomach made a couple of growling inquires as to the time and location of his next meal, but he politely told it to fuck off.

Yuki was rubbing his stomach now, her chill touch the ice to his inner fire. The magic moved up to greet her, as if knowing it would be inside her soon enough. There was an eagerness he hadn't experienced before, but he couldn't tell if it was Yuki's or his own. His magic liked to mirror the emotions and anticipation of potential partners and it was easy to get caught up.

"Mmm." Yuki broke lip contact and smiled at him. "I like kissing you. It's all tingly."

"I...get that alot." He laughed. "Just a trick I picked up along the way."

"Sex magic will do that. With Emily..." Her face darkened. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't talk about her."

"Why?" He squeezed her waist. "I mean, yeah, talking about exes during intimate moments is usually frowned on, but absolutely nothing about our lives is normal. And I would be an idiot not to realize that this is an act of healing. If something is on your mind, say it."

Yuki paused at this, then closed her eyes. She nodded to herself, then opened them again.

“I was in a relationship with her for a long time. It was semi-open, but mainly she only had sex with Naia. For me, it was all about her, I had no desire for anyone else.”

“And now?” He moved his hand down her waist until he reached the base of her tails. “May I?” He asked.

“Please do.” She grinned as he ran his fingers through her fur. “Before Emily, I had many different lovers, but none of the emotional attachment. Now that my heart has had time to heal, that part of me has awakened once again. I don’t like the idea of being tied so directly to one person in any way.”

“But you’re already tied to me.” He stopped caressing her tail for a moment. “Because of your promise.” She had once sworn to be his weapon and his protector. However, in the event he became evil like Emily, she would also be his killer.

“I see that as a promise to everyone in the house,” she replied. “You just happen to be at the epicenter of that promise.”

“Yuki.” He took a deep breath before proceeding. “Maybe I’ll kick myself later for this, but are you sure we should be doing this? I can feel my magic swirling around inside you, and I worry that maybe you’re extra vulnerable, or that maybe this is a line we shouldn’t cross, I don’t know.”

Yuki paused, a large frown appearing on her face. “Excuse me?”

“If we’re going to be honest and up front with each other, then that’s what you’re going to get from me. The last thing I want to do is hurt you.”

She chewed on her lip for a moment, then scowled. “You once fucked the tree in the backyard to officially launch spring.”

“That tree has a name, and it’s hardly the same thing.”

“Fucked a hellhound to make her your buddy.”

“That was for survival, you were there for that.”

“This isn’t any different. Yeah, the girls and I joke about your low standards when it comes to problem solving—”

“Hey!” Mike tried to pinch her butt in protest, but couldn’t find it fast enough through all the fur of her tails.

“But maybe today’s problem is that I want to feel that connection with someone again, and I want to do it with someone I trust. I watched you walk that line, saw the immense power you could have wielded. Emily had several decades to learn from her mistakes only to fuck everything up in the end. You were essentially handed everything you could have wanted, but turned it away because you knew it was wrong.” She placed her hands on his shoulders. “I want you to help me move on from Emily, to finally climb this wall that has closed me off from the world. This isn’t some magic-crazed whim, I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. You make me feel safe, Caretaker, for the first time in years. I want to feel your magic like the others do, experience that closeness I’ve been desperately craving. I’m over three hundred years old, so stop treating me like a victim and just treat me like everyone else you live with.”

Mike put his hands over hers and squeezed them. “I had to be sure is all. This is a big step, and I wanted to make sure we were taking it together.”

“I swear to the gods that if you keep talking instead of—” Her eyes widened once he released the magic in his hands, letting the sparks climb up her arms to disappear inside her robes. She let out a tiny moan, then shivered in his arms.

Despite what Yuki had said, there was hesitation in her movements, a cautiousness born from years of heartache. The magic swirling through her body right now was capable of reducing her to a blithering, sexual mess, yet she resisted and took her time. Every touch, every caress became new territory for them to explore. He let her set the pace, keeping his hands on her legs and waist.

He moved his hands inside her robes, feeling the soft fur of her outer thighs. She let out a tiny gasp of delight when he accidentally shocked her, then retaliated by playfully biting his lip.

“It’s surprising how much those shocks can hurt while still feeling good,” she told him, pressing her groin against his. “With you, it’s all about those fireworks, isn’t it?”

“I like to make a good impression.”

“Of course you do.” Yuki sat up and pulled her robe away from her shoulders, allowing it to pool at her waist. Her bare breasts were human, but the

sides of them were streaked with fox fur that gathered beneath her cleavage and continued down her belly. "So what do you say, Caretaker? Impress me."

He went to lean forward, guided by both eagerness and his magic to suck on her breasts, but paused. The nymph magic in his blood would guide him, would tell him exactly what he needed to do to please his lover, but he could tell there was a piece missing. He was having trouble concentrating.

Communication. Naia's voice purred softly inside his head. *She doesn't want you to just know how to please her. She wants to connect on a higher level.*

"So what do you like?" he asked, moving his hands up her sides and allowing his thumbs to trace the curvature of her breasts. She smiled as he did so, closing her eyes and savoring the sensation of his touch.

"My breasts have always been sensitive," she said. "Emily...she loved to lick them. She was always good at it, and even got me off that way a few times. Don't be intimidated though, she cheated. Her magic was way more direct than yours."

"Direct how?" He sat up and played with her breasts, kissing his way along the soft furry parts while toying with her nipples. "I mean, I feel like mine is pretty direct."

"She could do what you do without skin contact. Make you desire her just by being in the same room, all it took was a look or a smell. Your lightning trick is certainly unique but requires build up. She once made me come just by fingering me, and I don't mean for a while. Just slid it in from behind while I was bent over and filling the bath."

"Do you want me to try and hold it back? No magic?"

"Hardly. Ever since I got front row seats to that threesome at the cabin, I've been fantasizing about how it would feel to have your magic inside me." She scooted down his pelvis and helped him into a sitting position, her legs now wrapped around him. "I want to feel it all, Mike. I want you to blow the memory of my last lover straight out of my mind so that my heart can build anew."

"As you wish." He kissed her neck, and she tilted her head back to allow him better access. From there, he moved down to her breasts, sending surges of magic into his hands and storing it like a capacitor. Nibbling his way down to her areola, he sucked it into his mouth. Putting his hands on Yuki's waist, he released the stored magic into her hips.

Yuki gasped, and her nipple stiffened in his mouth as he sucked, pulling blood to the surface.

“Oh, gods, yes, be rough with them!” She clung to his back as he bit down on her tender flesh. She reached down between them and adjusted his erection so that it pressed more directly against her groin, then humped him through her robes. The fabric kept bunching up between them, so she pulled them open so that they pooled around her thighs.

Yuki made small growling noises as she sucked on the side of Mike’s neck, moaning into his flesh every time he bit down on her nipples. The soft silk of her pubes rubbed directly against his cock, her labia parting to embrace his shaft.

The air sizzled as his magic crawled along her flesh, and he heard a loud pop. Puzzled, he leaned back to see that a mist had formed around the two of them. Some of the sparks on Yuki’s body were jumping into the fog and fizzing out of existence.

“What is that?” he swiped at it, but the vapor passed harmlessly between his fingers.

“That’s me,” Yuki said, her voice husky. “Your magic is doing weird things with mine, so I’m freezing water in the air to keep the pressure from building up inside me.” She put a hand on the back of his head and pulled him back into her breasts. “Now don’t stop!”

Smiling, he switched to her other tit, teasing her nipple with his tongue. Magic leapt from his tongue to her nipple, causing her to jump. She shifted her hips, putting extra pressure on his trapped cock.

Yuki pressed her face into his neck and nibbled the sensitive skin, sending shivers down his spine. Sparks flashed in the hovering mist like fireworks, and Yuki let out a growl that became a tiny yip.

“I can’t wait any longer,” she whispered in his ear. “Claim me and make me yours.”

Mike stopped sucking on her breasts and stared into her emerald eyes, his magic making the air buzz as he slid his arms around her waist, pushing her robes away so they wouldn’t interfere. Without breaking eye contact, he grabbed her by the ass and lifted her up and forward, feeling the slick warmth of her eager pussy slide along his length. The head of his cock pressed against her labia, and she let out a sigh.

“Please.” She put her hands on his shoulders and squeezed.

Holding her by the hips, he pulled her down, feeling her tight passage expand as he slid inside her. Yuki gasped and clung to him, her hair covering her face.

He went slow, savoring the growls and small barking sounds she made. He could feel the fur of her body rippling under his hands as if the line between woman and beast was fluctuating. The mist clung to their bodies like a cloak as his magic formed into streamers on his body, sizzling the air. From the outside, the two of them probably looked like a sexual plasma ball.

The little yips and moans turned into growls, and Mike leaned away from Yuki to see that her facial features had elongated slightly, her lip curling away from dangerously sharp canines.

“Don’t you dare stop,” she groaned, her voice husky with desire. Red lines appeared on her face and then popped free as a set of whiskers appeared above her cheeks.

In response, he grabbed her ass and pushed himself into her as far as possible, the head of his cock rubbing along her vaginal wall. The playful nips from earlier didn’t prepare him for how hard she bit his shoulder, but the sensation illicit more pleasure than pain.

Yuki licked his shoulder and then bit him again. He leaned away from her until he was lying on his back while Yuki remained upright.

“Go ahead,” he told her, stroking her thighs. “Cut loose.”

Her emerald eyes flashed as she moaned, her hips now swiveling to a beat he couldn’t hear. She put her hands on his shoulders, and he noticed that her nails had elongated into proper claws as she rode him. The ionized cloud around them zapped her several times, causing her face to turn red as she bit down on her lip and moaned.

Her hips broke their rhythm and she twitched randomly on his cock, her vaginal walls tightening dramatically around his shaft. It felt like a pair of hands squeezing at random, and Yuki let out an eerie cry as the mist surrounded her. Fur sprouted and disappeared all along her torso as she sat up straight and reached for the sky.

Yuki took a deep breath, and the temperature in the room plummeted. Ice formed along the frame of the bed, and the fire in the hearth went out with a puff

of smoke. Mike felt the warmth leached from his body, but his connection with Yuki provided plenty of heat.

Golden light exploded from Yuki's outstretched hands as her tails unfurled dramatically behind her. All three of them writhed as his magic danced around the kitsune, pressing against her like a second skin.

She screamed, an eerie sound that made the hair on his arms stand up. The bed shook as it lifted free of the ground, hovering a foot or so off the floor.

The scream stretched into a protracted moan, her face flushed by the orgasm that ripped through her body. Mike's magic swirled around her like a tiny tornado, sinking deep into her pores. The bed dropped, crashing against the hardwood floor. Yuki fell forward, her lips rough against his as she kissed him. When their tongues touched, her hips jerked suddenly as he felt his magic complete a circuit inside of her.

With some difficulty, he rolled her onto her back. She wrapped her legs around him, their lips never breaking contact. He was only able to make tiny thrusts, but each one elicited a whimpering moan from the kitsune. Grabbing her hands, he pinned them over her head as his body pressed into hers.

Breaking the kiss, he pushed himself up to get a better angle for penetration. Yuki sighed, arching her back as several tiny foxfire flames appeared over the bed.

"More," she moaned, grinding her pelvis into him. "Fill me up, Caretaker, warm me from the inside!"

Unsure what to say to that, Mike let his body do the talking. He established a slow tempo, delighting in the animal sounds Yuki made when he would thrust suddenly and surprise her. Her tails shifted beneath them, eventually fanning out and making it look like they were lying on a cloak of furs. The air crackled and sizzled with their combined magic as his orgasm built.

Yuki's eyes rolled up in her head when another orgasm tore through her. She yanked her hands free of his, digging her claws into his lower back to keep him deep inside her. The whole room trembled this time, and Mike's body became hot as he passed the point of no return.

When he came, the magic in the room collapsed in on him, causing his entire groin to spasm as he spilled his seed inside of the kitsune. What was usually

a few spurts of cum was instead a steady stream, and he grabbed Yuki by the waist and howled as his orgasm stretched on for what felt like an eternity.

Yuki cried out beneath him, her tails fluttering and changing colors. Her green eyes now glowed with golden energy as she writhed beneath his body. Cum poured out of her, creating a sticky pool beneath her body. Mike lost control as his magic took him over, sending waves of energy through the room. Thin tendrils appeared in his vision, extending from his body to the floor, walls, and ceiling. He could see a strand connecting his chest to Yuki's, a thread that became thicker as he came inside her.

As those tendrils drifted away from him, he had a sudden fear that his magic had escaped him once again. Concentrating on the nearest bundle he could see, he commanded the magic to return to his body. Instead of withdrawing, the tendrils looped around until they vanished inside his body. A surge of energy followed, and he cried out as another orgasm was triggered.

The bed frame cracked beneath them and the mattress dropped. Mike's orgasm triggered again and again, and so he pulled free of Yuki, spraying her and the bed with semen. The visible strands in the room now curled into circles, all of them reattaching to his body at various locations. The magic wasn't dissipating, and all he could do was keep blasting glittery ropes of cum all over the room.

Yuki rolled forward, her cool mouth inhaling the head of his cock as she swallowed as much of his cum as she could. Massive globs of semen escaped her mouth and even came out her nose as the fountain continued. She gagged, spitting him out and coughing spooge all over his crotch.

"Yuki, I...can't...stop..." Mike's eyes fluttered as his consciousness dimmed. Yuki grabbed his scrotum just above his balls, using a tight grip that was almost painful. He felt the magic reluctantly recede as the orgasms finally stopped. When he fell toward the bed, Yuki grabbed his shoulders and guided him away from the edge. The bed was a mess with nowhere dry for them to lie.

Panting for air, he was surprised when Yuki kissed him again, pressing her needy body against his. He could taste a hint of himself on her lips, but didn't think it was intentional.

"Really?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper. His cock twitched uncertainly.

“Not that,” she replied, then snuggled against him. “I’m going to be very sore, thank you very much. I definitely didn’t expect the cum shower. For now, I just want you by my side.”

“You’ve got it.” Relieved, he kissed her tenderly, the groans and aches from before reappearing. She made happy sounds in his arms, pulling herself against him until it felt like they would become a single person.

“WHAT IN CHRISTMAS DID YOU DO TO MY BEDROOM!?!”

Shocked, Mike tried to sit up, but his muscles gave out. All he could do was helplessly roll to one side and fall off the bed, landing in a small puddle of semen-tainted water. In the door stood Mrs. Claus, her eyes wide behind silver-framed glasses as she looked around the room. She held a tray of food, which she set down on the floor.

“Oh, shit, I mean shoot, uh…” Mike tried to stand, but his hand slipped and he fell again. The floor was wet, most likely a result of the freezing mist that Yuki had summoned. Giant globs of cum were distributed through the room as if a bottle of glue had exploded. Using the bed to stand, he realized his cock was still leaking semen, so he tried to cover it with his hands, only to slip again.

“IT’S IN THE TREE!” Horrified, Mrs. Claus ran to the Christmas tree and just stared at a glob of sticky fluid that hung like a crystalline ornament from one of the branches. The glittery substance in the middle shimmered as if excited to see her. “YOU CAME IN MY TREE!”

“Usually he comes deeper in trees,” Yuki whispered so that only he could hear. Mike had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

“I am so, so sorry,” Mike began, but Mrs. Claus waved him off.

“You’ve got so much explaining to do. You young people have no self control!” Groaning in disgust, she moved to a nearby chest carved from walnut and opened it up. She stacked a bunch of towels on a nearby chair, then shut the chest. “At least when Mr. Claus does this, he keeps it all on the bed! Sweet Christmas, I’ve never seen something like this.”

“It just sort of happened,” he continued, but Mrs. Claus ignored him. She moved to a nearby dresser and pulled out a pair of pants.

“We will talk plenty, later. For now, you need to put on some pants and clean up this mess. We’ve got a lot to do if we’re going to fix this Krampus business, and now the two of you owe me. However!” She wagged a finger in his

direction. "If you and your friend don't have this place spotless in the next hour, there will absolutely be no dessert for you!"

"Yes, ma'am," Yuki replied, holding her robes up to cover her cum-stained breasts.

Mrs. Claus made a clicking sound with her tongue, then nodded before storming out. She slammed the door hard enough that it bounced open, which meant she had to shut it again.

"Oh, god." Mike sank to his knees. "I just came all over Santa's bed and pissed off his wife."

"At least it isn't the other way around." Yuki held a straight face for several seconds, then broke. Laughter, pure and uninhibited, bubbled up from deep within as she clutched her belly and fell backward on the bed. It reminded Mike of the jingling of silver bells, and he couldn't help but laugh with her.

The laughter continued for over a minute before Yuki wiped the tears from her eyes and sat up. "C'mon," she told him, holding out a hand. For just a moment, he saw a golden aura surround her fingers, but then it vanished. "Let's get some food to eat and clean this place up. I don't suppose you have semen removal in your bag of tricks?"

"Afraid not. I'm not entirely sure what happened there. Was that an earthquake?"

Yuki blushed. "That was me. I was trying to avoid freezing the room and tapped into a little earth magic. It used to be my specialty, you know." She was already pulling sheets off the bed. "I'll do this if you'll clean the floor. Probably should apologize to the tree while you clean it."

"Agreed." He turned away from her and felt a sudden tug inside his mind. It was Kisa. She was nearby, perhaps even in the same building. Smiling, he began mopping up his mess, pausing only to clean and properly apologize to Mrs. Claus' tree.

The tree accepted.

Jack stood on the roof of the bakery, her gaze on the streets below. The storm had blotted out a large portion of the sky, and the accompanying winds had coated the side of the building in ice. She didn't bother wiping the tears from her

cheeks, as they kept freezing. The cold itself couldn't hurt her, but repeatedly peeling ice off her face would irritate her skin and make her even more miserable.

The Krampus had screamed at her upon learning she had taken matters into her own hands. The demon had finally emerged from the woodshop to discover that she had left her post and was chasing the intruders. There were few things on Earth that terrified her, but feeling that creature's otherworldly wrath simmering beneath the fringes of reality had set her on edge. She had been incapable of responding to his allegations at the sight of those brutal, gnarled teeth just inches from her own face.

He had spent months inside her head, pleading for his freedom. She thought that he was a kindred soul, a misunderstood entity who knew what it was like to be underappreciated and forgotten. Then, there had been kindness in his tone, and a determination that had resonated deep within her.

Now, though, she could see that he was unhinged. The Krampus was smart, but he was cruel. His emotions got the better of him often, and it was only after he had calmed down that he reasoned the elf had escaped through the tunnels under the village.

Leaving Jack behind, he vanished into a nearby building, giving her instructions to keep watch from above. After a long wait, her walkie had crackled to life, and the Krampus had told her to come here and make herself useful by being his lookout. What he didn't count on was that she would do a thorough sweep of the exterior, easily spotting the altered elves within through the large bay windows. They were twisted things, only vaguely familiar as the joyous creatures they so recently were.

Though she had often felt neglected by the denizens of the North Pole, she had never wished them any harm. The Krampus had declared that times had changed. The true meaning of Christmas would return, a time where the wicked could be properly punished, but she had a hard time seeing it now.

And so she waited and she wept. Maybe the things the Krampus had promised would still come to pass, perhaps she was just seeing a less-than-pleasant transitional phase. Logically, she knew she was in denial, but to admit anything else right now may destroy her.

The monotony was shattered by an explosion of flames. Turning, Jack saw a massive fireball climb into the sky, somewhere over by the stables. Unsure if she

should remain or go see what happened, the decision was made for her when she heard the Krampus shriek out in fury.

She leapt from the roof, allowing the winds to carry her to the stables. The interior of the building was in flames, but they curled around the structure itself, burning the large bales of hay that had been scattered around within. The air stank of whiskey and burnt hair, the smell stinging her nostrils.

“Jack.” A heavy hand clamped down on her shoulder, and she spun around to see the Krampus looming over her. Steam rose from his body as the Krampus sneered at her. “You let them escape.”

“They were here?” She looked around and saw a small collection of footprints in the snow. “I didn’t know.”

“This is your fault, Jack.” His large hand circled her throat and he squeezed. Jack grabbed his fingers and summoned the frost, but knew it was no use. Ice formed over the demon’s knuckles, but it cracked and fell away as he squeezed. He lifted her up high, then pulled her close. His breath was hot and smelled of peppermint. “You have disappointed me.”

She gasped for air and slapped feebly at his hands. The bones in her neck felt like they would pop any moment, and once the lights went out, that would be it for her.

The storm swirled around them, and the Krampus loosened his grip, allowing her to breathe. With a grunt of disgust, he tossed her away, where she tumbled onto the ground.

“Go watch the monitors,” he hissed, turning his attention back to the stables. “If you see anything, tell me right away, or I will powder this village with your bones.”

Jack tried to respond, but her voice allowed her only a harsh squeak.

“Seven will have to do,” he grumbled, scratching his belly with a claw. “And where is my sleigh? Hmmm.” Seeing Jack, he snarled at her. “Go! Now!”

She obeyed, staggering to her feet before letting the wind carry her back to the Workshop. The tears were hot and many as she fled to the safety of the monitor room. In the last few hundred years, she hadn’t suffered so much as a scratch, but the Krampus had ended the streak by nearly taking her life. He was a creature of madness, and she was mad to have ever listened to him.

Sniffing, she sat down in one of the tiny chairs by the monitors and started clicking absently through them. It was hard to concentrate, her mind preoccupied with the Krampus.

Could she flee? She had no doubts that she could lose him in the storm, but he would have eternity to find her should he choose. The giants would probably help him, they had no loyalty to her. And even if he decided to let Jack go, she always ran the risk of running into him.

Frustrated, she clicked through the monitors, uncertain what she was hoping to see. Her neck hurt, and she felt more lost than ever.

But even worse than feeling lost was how alone she was. She thought the Krampus had been her friend, but she knew better now.

“Fuck!” She slammed her hand on the console, accidentally changing the cameras on the screen. Disgruntled, she tried to reacquire the missing channels by clicking through all of them. She couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t remember how the console worked. It was all a blur.

So she clicked through them one at a time, only now noticing that the bakery wasn’t part of any of the cycles. Where else were the cameras down? What were the elves actually doing?

She was clicking through them so fast that her mind didn’t register movement until she was already three channels past. Aghast, she clicked back and sat there, stunned.

The camera was labeled **Claus Residence Master Bedroom**. It viewed the room from above the head of the bed, and Jack was surprised to see that the kitsune from earlier was busy riding the human named Mike. Fascinated, all she could do was stare.

Why in the North Pole would Santa have a camera in his bedroom? Jack’s thoughts milled about uselessly in an effort to ratioanlize what she was seeing. The kitsune’s face was scrunched up in sweet agony as she held her own breasts while bouncing up and down on the biggest cock Jack had ever seen. Her mouth hung open so long that it became dry, but she simply couldn’t look away.

It was an intimate moment, one of thousands she had witnessed on accident. Being invisible to the mortal realm meant that Jack had seen plenty of things that she wasn’t supposed to. Maybe it was as simple as someone sneaking a cigarette, or complex like the time she had stumbled onto a military installation

in northern Russia. Though she had never been much of a voyeur, she couldn't help but watch the people on the screen as they made love to each other.

Her stomach fluttered, and she put her hand on her belly, reminded of her contact with Mike. His voice had made her eager to obey, and she wondered if he had used that same power on the kitsune. If not, then maybe they were a couple, or, at the very least, close friends. When was the last time Jack had a friend, much less a close one?

Or even a lover?

For just a moment, it felt like a stray memory bubbled to the top of her consciousness, eager for her attention. Unable to grab it, she let it sink into the recesses of her mind once more, catching just a glimpse of golden rays.

She knew she should notify the Krampus, should tell him the mortal had survived the vents, but her finger hovered over the button of the walkie talkie. Her skin still burned from where he had choked her, his words still harsh in her ears. He was already angry, but would positively explode if he knew that the human had escaped to Mrs. Claus' home. It was no fault of her own, but would he see it that way?

Her hesitation caused her to stand there and watch, her focus on Mike and the kitsune. In the throes of their passion, they summoned up a maelstrom of sparking lights that danced around the room. She knew the kitsune had ice magic, but this was something else. Through the camera, she couldn't make heads or tails of it, and was surprised when the camera distorted. It was being overloaded by the sheer power in that room, and she wondered which one of them was the culprit.

Curious, she clicked through the rest of the house. Mrs. Claus could be seen baking in her kitchen, and she was speaking with someone invisible to the camera. If there was somebody capable of fighting the Krampus, it was Mrs. Claus, and it was clear that she already had help.

Ice formed around her hands and spread to the rest of the console. If she chose, she could destroy these monitors, could put an end to the Krampus' surveillance. But then what? Change sides, just like that? Or would it be the first step toward oblivion?

Jack wished she had a friend, someone she could talk to. Clicking through the monitors, she saw the Krampus skulking around the outside of Santa's home.

It was clear that he already knew something was going on there, so she clicked the button on her walkie-talkie, hoping to buy herself some good will.

“The human is with Mrs. Claus,” she said. On the camera, she saw the Krampus tilt his head as he heard her, then let out a shriek of rage. He bounded up to Santa’s home and pounded on the front door with a giant fist.

Jack smirked, knowing that even if the door was open, the Krampus wouldn’t go in. There was something about Mrs. Claus that was dangerous to the Krampus, but she didn’t know what. Standing, she clicked through the monitors until she was once again looking at Santa’s mirror.

Santa turned his attention to the camera and waved.

“Shit.” She clicked away from the mirror and bit at her nails. Maybe it would be safer to just let things play out a bit longer before deciding, to weigh her options. Seeing the Krampus succeed meant that he would let her be, and nothing would change. That was far preferable to being killed.

With so many thoughts running through her head, she left the security room behind, frost forming beneath her feet as she hovered down the hallway. Her decisions lately had been terrible, and maybe it was time to check in on an old friend and see what he thought before she committed.

She just hoped she could hear him through his prison of glass.