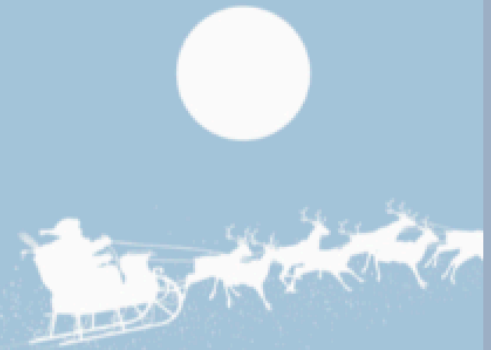


BELLS

from Manger to Reindeer



'Bells: From Manger to Reindeer'

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‘Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.’ Isaiah 7:14

‘You better watch out, you better not cry, better not pout, I’m telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town.’ John Frederick Coots and Haven Gillespie

Storytime Prologue

Children’s eyes. No. *Elf* eyes. *Elfling* eyes.

Some silver. Some emerald. Some amber. Some wine.

All *very* attentive, sitting in a close clutch of nine, and about that age, too. Although elves live much, much longer than humans, so they might be many times older than this. But it’s safe to say that they’re still young enough to love having stories read to them; throughout the tale, stares froze as many times as pointy ears had twitched.

“...and because of this, the world was renewed, it kept spinning as before...” Their shining faces gaze up at the kindly woman seated on a bench. Tall, even when seated, she wears a diaphanous white dress, embroidery and lace its themes, her lower legs tanned to her natural olive complexion...and she’s barefooted. Her toenails are painted a deep blue, stardust accenting each one.

“...and all lived happily ever after.” She smiles down on her audience, who now cheer and clap...as well as issue the distinctive elfling *chirp* only heard when a tiny one’s inner song of elf jollity insists on being shared with everyone.

“Read us another!”

“Or two!”

“Or seven!”

And then it's all cheering and chirping again.

“What would you like to hear next?” the woman asks. She receives a seemingly endless stream of favourite story titles, some from picture books, some from tomes as thick as cookbooks, some parts of multi-novel series, some comprised of hardly more than the front and back of a restaurant menu. “Would you like *me* to choose? Or would you like to take a vote?”

This last option brings on another rousing outburst; there's something in the communal nature of elves that has them simply *adoring* voting. In fact, elves would vote on everything, if they could.

“Please tell us the story of how you and Santa came to be Mr. and Mrs. Claus.”

Her listening-mates all turn to this girl-elf. Squinting their disapproval, blinking their confusion and everything in between. “Don't be such a *dwarf*, Luna!” one says, following up with might be described as a grunty-groan. Maybe better described as a anti-chirp. “That's just plain-“

“Language, please,” Mrs. Claus says. Softly. Primly. But firmly.

“They've *always* been Santa and Mrs. Claus!” someone insists.

“Since...since *forever!*”

All the elves...save Luna...look to the woman for confirmation.

But Mrs. Claus and Luna are already regarding each other with gentle eye-smiles. They hold them as long as you might the bestest of hugs. “It is true,” Mrs. Claus finally tells them. “My name was not always what it is now.”

The reaction she receives is the same one given her so many times over the so many years she's been reading so many stories to so many elflings: a communal gasp...and then dead silence. (And some twitching-of-ears. Naturally.)

“And Santa was not *always* his name. Although,” she adds conspiratorially, leaning forward just a bit, shrinking down over her knees to them at the same time, “Claus has *always* been his name.”

In the dictionary, next to the phrase ‘a gaggle of confused elflings’ (or whatever the collective noun is for a gathering of small elvish folk) is an image of the assortment of faces Mrs. Claus now sees. She smiles at how truly adorable these young ones can be in their innocence. And then they all turn to Luna, acknowledging in their wonder that she wasn’t just being a dwarf after all.

“And what do we have *here?!?*” The booming voice, heavy with mirth and seasoned with music arrives well before the man. He’s a giant. Maybe six and a half feet tall, and broad as a door. An especially broad one. Long white hair, long white beard. Both festooned with braids. Braids accented by misshaped beads, bored-out pebbles and slim metal bands bound by gold cord just a touch thicker than thread. Rosy cheeks. Eyes a-tinkling. And mouth always on the verge of a smile. (At the very least, a grin.) He stands before them now, right next to Mrs. Claus, reaching out to her shoulder, pausing there with gentle pressure, as if his hand was made to do this, and this alone.

“We have some gobsmacked elflings, my dear,” Mrs. Claus replies with a giggle, placing her own hand atop his. He loves this about her. That she still possesses the best of her girlhood, that there are a kajillion variations on in her laughter repertoire. (Each one capable of bringing on something similar from himself. As if he needed any help.) “Some elflings very much interested in learning about how everything started.”

Santa has brought with him a large silver tray. On it, heaps of biscuits, the sort he makes himself, that he’s made for almost two millennia. They’re *pics*, to be precise, *picau ar y maen*. Not cookies, not quite scones, they’re simple things featuring currants inside and sprinkled sugar outside. With them, a large jug of milk and enough mugs for each of the *littles* in attendance. Mrs. Claus lifts up the jug even as Santa holds out the tray to the elflings. Minding their manners as they’ve been well taught, each one take a pic and a mug and waits for Mrs. Claus to fill it with milk.

“Ah,” Santa says in the middle of all this. “I’m going to assume you’re not referring to ‘the big bang’, or Cheonjiwang Bonpuri, or Jamshid, or Coatlicue, or Diné Bahane, or Hiranyagarbha...or even *Unkulunkulu*...”

The elflings laugh at his buffoonish face as he says this last one. (And chirp. Naturally.)

Santa sits down, giving Mrs. Claus a tiny hip-check as part of his arrival. “No, I suspect that you want to hear how my beloved *Androula*...” He kisses her now, right on her temple. “...and I came to be...*us*.”

The elflings are both soothed and thrilled by the sight of the Clauses in this moment. They've always loved the inner glow they radiate, how they *shine*. But now, they watch them with an additional dollop of wonder, seeing them differently for the first time.

"Please," Luna says, biting into her nibbly treat.

"It is a *long* story," Santa says, as if warning them.

"North Pole nights were *made* for long stories," Mrs. Claus suggests. "My dear *Claudius*." She says this with a tiny hip-check of her own.

"Very well," Santa says. "If you're all comfy...we'll begin."

Chapter One: Claus The Youngest

Remote Norwegian Lake, 24 BCE

Once upon a time, in a land now called Norway, not *that* far from us, but many, many years ago, there was a lad named Claus. He was of few years, but not so few that he couldn't help his uncle hunt for big game for the people in their village. Which is why as our tale begins, he was sitting at the tip of a lake with him, resting against a low wall of rocks that had been built over many hunting excursions through the generations. They were eating dinner, their fire crackling and spitting. Claus stared at their kill, a big reindeer hanging on a low branch on a nearby tree. As he did, a song filled his head. It was a playful tune, happy-noted and lively, a song his mother sang to him when he was younger. She still sang it to him, and though he was self-conscious about her doing so when he wasn't *that* far from becoming a man, when she did, his body tingled from his toes to the tip of his head.

"You like them."

Claus nodded at his uncle's declaration. "It's good to have. For everyone. Several feasts, to be sure."

"I was not referring to you liking their meat. You like *them*."

"I-"

"You would have one as a *pet*," his uncle suggested.

"No!"

"Yes!" his uncle laughed.

"They're beautiful. I..." Claus receded into silence.

"Speak! I am your uncle, not your father. Speak plainly. Speak from your heart."

Claus took a deep breath. "I would like to ride one."

This time, his uncle was not laughing. "You wish is to ride one-"

"I didn't say I *wished*-"

"-and that the glorious beast could fly, and you could ride him across the sky. Pleasing the night and its children, the stars." His uncle paused, fully aware of Claus's feelings. There was a deep bond, the kind that shapes someone of such few years. He was the boy's friend, advisor, supporter and confidant. The father he no longer had. And Claus was the son he never had. "Show me the whittling you have been working on."

Claus reached into his pocket and pulled out a partially carved wooden reindeer. His uncle examined it carefully.

"This is good! You are improving all the time! You have a feel for releasing the animal from within the wood. Clearly, you have a wonderful teacher," he added with a poke in the ribs by way of a quick flash of an elbow. A *gently* applied elbow.

“He’s all right,” Claus conceded, poking back. “But he teases me too much sometimes.” He shrugged. “It’s just a carving.”

His uncle gestured to the reindeer. “And *that* is just food. Often things have more than one meaning.”

As if the ‘honesty floodgates’ had been opened, Claus cleared his throat to speak once more. “Uncle, do you hear sounds?”

“What kind of sounds?”

Claus thought hard. “Like water. Over stones. Like songs. *Happy* songs.”

Not quite understanding just why, his uncle regarded him solemnly.

“No!” Claus continued, perking up. “Not water! *Bells!*”

“Bells. Such as your-mother-my-sister wears?”

“Yes! But not-“

“You hear her jewellery? Do you hear them now? The bells?”

Claus was reduced to a half-pout. “No. Not right now. And they’re not hers. These are different.”

His uncle ruffled Claus’s dirty blonde hair. “These are *our* secrets. The bells...and the flying reindeer. I promise I will tell *no one.*” At Claus relaxing, he continued. “If you promise to tell me when you next hear these bells of yours.”

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The fire had died, glowing embers its only remnants. Above, wisps of cloud were scrubbed from the sky by insistent winds. Below, Claus pulled a blanket out of his pack. It was a deep red, perhaps as deep a red possible, just this side of blood.



His uncle smiled. “I remember your-mother-my-sister crafting that for you. When you were a just-born baby.”

“She says it will always keep me warm. Even as I grow. And it has. Always.”

“On the morning you were born,” his uncle told him, “one of your favourite beasts wandered into the village. It strode past everyone and everything and went to where your-mother-my-sister was giving birth to you, collapsed in front of the hut...and was dead before it made the ground shake.”

Claus stared at his blanket.

“In the middle of it all, without even knowing of the animal’s arrival, she cried out that she wanted its hide. Some of us laughed, others simply nodded.” His uncle paused. “Your mother has ‘the touch’.

“She made this out of a reindeer hide? How? I never knew...” Claus turned the blanket over in his hands. “Is that what you mean by ‘the touch’? That she has the ability to fashion-“

His uncle shook his head. “She has ‘the touch’ as well as ‘the sight’. And ‘the knowing’. Maybe that one is the most powerful. These are gifts passed down generation to generation through daughters in our family. From her mother, your grand-mother, and her mother, and her mother too, on and on and on.” Once more, his uncle paused. “Nobody has ever successfully lied to your-mother-my-sister. She always knows the truth. Your mother ruined my childhood!” he laughed. “As for how she managed to turn a hide into a blanket...I cannot explain it. Some things are best left unexplained.” He stared down at the blanket once more. “I also have no idea how she managed to make it a red such as *that*.”

“Mysteries,” Claus murmured. He unfurled the blanket; it unexpectedly covered him, and some of his uncle. Claus shifted closer to him to better share the blanket. They both settled in, and after a quiet interlude of Claus staring up at the Northern Lights, Claus spoke once again. “Uncle, the passing down of- Of these mysteries. My mother’s abilities. I have no sister.”

“No,” his uncle replied, gravity in his voice for any to notice. “No, you do not.”

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Claus's uncle was first to wake up. Checking to confirm the reindeer's carcass was just where it had been the night before, he peered down to find both of them bundled comfortably; Claus's red blanket had 'expanded' in the night to accommodate them.

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The hunting grounds at least a half-day's journey from their village, Claus and his uncle broke camp not long after waking. They had brought with them a thick pole that had been used countless times in the past and the reindeer was hung on it, held in place by leather strips.

Another thing Claus had going for him with his uncle was his height; he was quite tall for a youth his age. Almost the same height as this uncle. No matter that Claus wasn't as strong as he was tall –he *was* extremely gawky, long-limbed and lean- this alone made the task a little easier. To help, his uncle had gutted the reindeer, leaving the offal as a tribute to the appropriate deity.

The going was rough in patches. But his uncle knew all the tricky bits, and provided early warning of obstacles and treacherous sections, the uneven path sometimes a riddle of over-growth. Because their rapport was so strong, even these challenges were well-navigated. They made a good team.

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After four hours of slogging, time taken for reasonable breaks, his uncle uncharacteristically and unexpectedly stopped, almost tripping up Claus. As the boy recovered his balance, his uncle closed his eyes and breathed in deep. His eyes flashed wide. "March!" he yelled, pulling Claus forward. "Now! Hurry!"

"What's wrong?!?" Claus called out. "Uncle! What's wrong?!?"

In short order, after some long stretches of silence other than the grunting and gasping of a strenuous sprint, they reached a clearing. While Claus fought to catch his breath, his uncle stared up at the sky. "Smoke!"

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In the boy's worst nightmares he could never have constructed a sight such as what he witnessed when they crested the final approach to the village. He gazed down on mayhem and destruction everywhere. There was no one about. Just corpses. Butchered bodies, burnt wood, acrid smoke.

Claus was in such shock that he didn't immediately search for his mother. It was the children that had frozen him rigid. Children mercilessly massacred, sliced open. Aside from his father, Claus had never experienced loss before. Here, he'd lost all his childhood friends...and all his memories of them too, it felt. A hot knife may as well have been plunged into his heart, cauterizing it... and yet something else was bubbling up inside him. Perhaps the opposite of this emotional anguish?

His uncles' cries shook him out of his torpor.

Moving in a daze, Claus walked to where the man was hunched over a body, sobbing. Claus's mother. He stood beside him, silent. Processing everything so far out of Claus's reach, all he could do was place his hand on the man's shoulder.

"They took her necklace," his uncle said between sobs. "Her bells."

*Bells.*

Claus fixed his gaze into the distant horizon, staring in the exact opposite direction from the one that had brought them to their village and the carnage. "They're ringing."

It was a few moments before these words registered with his uncle. "You hear them?" he asked, shocked a little that his attention could be drawn away by something...well, something so ridiculous. But his shock drained away, replaced with calm. A calm that flowed through him, somehow easing his pain, as impossible as that notion could have seemed to him in the moment right before his nephew had spoken. "You hear your bells?" His voice was steady, already knowing the answer, truth flowing from his nephew's touch.

"They're ringing."

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His uncle explained why they had to leave. Why they had to move quickly, very quickly, to prepare the bodies, build a few pyres quickly, properly light them, properly quickly...and then leave. "Whoever did this..." Claus listened to the fury in his uncle's voice rise and then, when he looked at Claus, fade as if it had never been there at all. "They may return. It is not safe. We need to *go*."

"Go where, Uncle?"

Taking him by the shoulders, his uncle held him there. It may have seemed to Claus that the man was trying to pour reassurance and strength into him, but in fact it was the reverse. "To wherever you hear your bells ringing truly." He noted the doubt and uncertainty on Claus's face. He also noted...perhaps for the first time, however improbable the idea was...how very much he resembled his mother. In height, to be sure, but also in the way he carried himself, in the strength of his posture...in so many ways. This in itself invigorated the man, re-igniting his internal fire. "Everyone is gone, Claus. We are the last of our village. There is no reason to remain here." And now *he* looked at the horizon. "You were born to be out there."

"Out where?"

"Out there in the world that is not here. Beyond here. Beyond all this."

"How do you know?"

His uncle brought his forehead to Claus's, pressing into it with all the love he possessed, buffing it, his own manly caress. "You have always had that faraway look in your eyes. A *twinkle*. And now, out of this unspeakable tragedy, the freedom for you to discover your true destiny and follow your bells no matter where they may ultimately lead you. *Us*. You and I."

And so once they had hauled out from its hiding place a small boat, after Claus had tucked inside his mother's coat the reindeer carving he'd never get to complete, after they had set alight the pyres, after they'd said their goodbyes to everything each had ever known, a part of the world Claus would not see again for almost two thousand years, they left Norway not in anger, not with revenge poisoning their spirits, none of that; what filled both their sizeable hearts was a tranquil feeling. *Hope*.

Chapter Two: The First Travels of Claus

Seventeen years. Two hundred and four months. Eight hundred and eight-four weeks. More than six thousand days, almost a hundred and fifty thousand hours, almost nine *million* minutes. Give or take. During this time, a child could be born, grow up, get married and and produce offspring of their own. Simply put, an entire *generation's* worth of time.

That's how long Claus and his uncle spent on their travels. And the accumulated distance during these 'wandering years'? This is a much more difficult calculation to make. Suffice it to say that it they covered a lot of ground. The place names for most of countries have changed since the time period in which this portion of our story takes place, but the modern list would include Sweden, Denmark, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan,

Ethiopia, Kenya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Greece and Italy. (I can't even imagine how many footsteps –either by them or their horses– this would amount to.)

But Claus did not experience *everything* during this time period with his uncle by his side; two years before our next chapter opens, Claus began walking his path alone.

Chapter Three: An African Visit

Kangaita, Kenya, 10 BCE

In the middle of a stately room –well furnished, but not overdone– a middle-aged, somewhat rotund African man squatted before a table, on which stood several carved wooden animals. The caftan he wore billowed a little as he moved them about, fascinated. His dark skin seemed even darker against the white material, his fingernails practically glowing. “This is something I have never experienced.” The cadence, lilt and intonation of this ruler of great renown’s words were truly melodic.

“The exotic nature of the animals?” a man asked, standing beside him. In his late-20s, he was very tall. And broad. Sporting a rough stubble and long blonde wavy hair. This was an older Claus.

“No!” the Kenyan ruler replied, captivated by the pieces. “The gifts I usually receive as tribute are the stuff of gold, or jewels, or perfumes, rich silks or tapestries. But these...”

“Please accept my apologies,” Claus said quickly, offering up an informal bow. “I did not mean to insult you with my offering.”

His host rose up surprisingly fast; Claus was instantly thinking of men he had trained for battle and the protection of the rich. “Nonsense! These are *magnificent!* My children will be-” He looked to an aide. “Summon my children!”

“My lord?”

The ruler rubbed his hands together. “Tell them I have a surprise for them. Tell them we have a visitor. A curious man by the name of- I’m sorry, I’m pitiful with names...”

“Claus, my lord.”

“Tell them a giant of a man named Claus from somewhere none of us could have imagined existed has brought them gifts.” He winked at Claus. “Astounding playthings suitable for children who have been...very *good* of late.”

The aide departed, leaving two highly spirited men smiling at each other.

“You know your children well, my lord?” Claus asked.

“I have eyes in the back of my head.”

“Naughty or nice,” Claus said with wry smirk. (A gentle one, though. Naturally.)

“What’s that?”

“It sounds like you know when they’ve been either,” Claus explained.

“Or both! And you? Children?”

“No. Not yet.”

“You’re still a young man! There’s plenty of time. But make sure you do have them; you’ll need them to care for you when you’re a doddering old man.” His regard of Claus turned serious. “Although there’s something about you that speaks of-” His voice trailed off a little. “Of never reaching that state.”

“It *is* a dangerous world,” Claus conceded, and in the space of this sentence the seemingly innumerable incidents he’d survived over the years, the instances where he’d been saved by what could only be referred to as a ‘guardian angel’ flashed through his mind... and were gone.

“Danger is not what I was thinking-”

The sounds of three young children interrupted him with a chorus of “Father! Father!” Now one giant smile, teeth dazzling, the man pointed to the gifts on the table with one hand, waving them on with the other. Each of the children –all under the age of ten– went to the one they’re drawn to, as if fated. They were instantly in awe of the pieces.

The ruler was joyous at their reaction...but then looked to Claus, who appeared even happier than them; it distracted him a little. "Children, this is Claus. He comes from the far northern reaches of the world. Where the skies at night move like rainbows in streams." He looked to Claus for confirmation.

"They *dance*. And sing."

Suddenly the young trio found themselves drawn to this mystery white-skinned giant. And the ruler was distracted once more, by what he instantly saw in their eyes: trust.

"But he's not just from the tip of the world! He's also travelled almost as many miles elsewhere as there are stars in the sky."

The children were now spellbound by the man. "Tell us a story! Tell us a story!" they cheered in perfect unison.

"And what payment would you offer for my tale-telling?" Claus asked.

The eldest daughter held out her carving to Claus.

"You're willing to exchange a gift just given you for a collection of untested words?" Claus play-pouted.

"Daughter!" the ruler laughed, bemused by her actions. "Do you value your gift so little?"

"No, father," she replied without hesitation. "I value his story so great."

The group had now settled into a mass of feel-good. "Join us for our evening meal, Claus," the ruler said. "For your saga retold, let the payment be wine for a parched throat, food for an empty belly--"

"And attentive ears for a lonely, wandering soul," Claus added, bowing as before.

As the children cheered, the ruler moved to his aide. "Tell the cook to prepare dinner. With food enough to accommodate a guest." He reconsidered Claus. "Tell her *two* guests."

“Where does your tale begin?” another of the children asked.

“My beginnings are perhaps for another time,” Claus replied, bringing a red sack forward to the table. This was his old blanket. Transformed. He dropped to his knees. It now had a gold twined-rope draw-cord. Undoing it, he reached in and brought out something wrapped in cloth. He uncovered a quite-detailed carving. When he placed it on the table, the children were further mesmerized. Then he retrieved another. And another. Again and again.

When he was done, the ruler’s son, the only boy of the lot, poked his head inside the sack. “Where did you fit it all?!? It’s *magic*, Father!”

“What are these? More carvings?” the ruler laughed. “Are *these* ones for me?”

“Among other occupations I have held,” Claus explained, “I have been a teacher. These assist me in my work. They are the Seven Wonders of The World,” he explained. “And *then* some,” he added, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Now; allow me to tell you about some of the incredible things I’ve been fortunate to see in my wanderings.”

The Statue of Zeus at Olympia. The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. The Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, The Colossus of Rhodes, The Ziggurat of Ur, Stonehenge, Petra, The Library and Lighthouse at Alexandria, The Egyptian Labyrinth at Faiyum, The Great Pyramid of Giza, The Ishtar Gate of Hillah, The Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

For each of these wonders, Claus provided a mini-travelogue, a sight-seeing tour with the best guide imaginable...only he’d brought the sites to *them*. He was on his knees, showing them this, explaining that...when the ruler realized that Claus could probably hold their attention until bedtime, missing their dinner entirely, quite content to go to bed hungry.

What Claus did not offer up was any reference to his uncle. How much joy he’d felt at waking each sunrise, how another day’s worth of adventure lay before them, the comfort of the man’s companionship, his guidance. The difficult aspects of their wanderings, the treacherous paths they walked, the danger they always seemed to find their way through. Or the pain the old man’s death caused him, and certainly no mentioning of the half-carved fish Claus had initially placed inside his uncle’s shirt, only to re-consider and leave another one instead.

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Everyone was seated in a circle at a very big, very low table eating dinner. The children watched Claus go at his food; he'd already had seconds and was navigating his way through *thirds* –which made his host laugh, enjoying the sight clearly as much his guest was enjoying the fare– but his ravenous approach to what was on his plate somehow cheered them all the more. They had never seen a man such as Claus –his colouring alone made him exotic– and most likely had never looked on as *anyone* emptied their plate with as much gusto as he was showcasing. In short order, he'd practically *inhaled* the *ugali*, the *nyama choma*, the *mutura*, the *kachumbari*... But more than this, that he'd had his cup refilled with goat's milk three times. (Keep this in mind for down the road.)

“...and then there's *snow*.” Claus said this with a gentle slam down of his cup onto the table.

“What's *that*?” the youngest daughter asked Claus.

It was clear he'd done this before. “Imagine rain. Now imagine cold. Colder than the coldest night.” He got nothing but stares. “OK; let us suppose that we take your combined ages-”

“Twenty.” The eldest daughter looked to her father and received a crinkly-eyed smile of approval.

“Very well,” Claus said, impressed. “Let us say that your current temperature...how warm it was today...is this amount. If we then take the combined ages of your father and myself-”

“Father is thirty-seven,” the younger daughter said. “How old are you?”

“I am twenty-six,” Claus replied, now looking to her sister. He felt himself encouraging her with his thoughts.

“Sixty-four!” the eldest daughter exclaimed.

“That's *very* close,” Claus said. “But it's-”

“No! Sixty-three!”

“Imagine if you can then” Claus said, acknowledging the girl’s mathematics skills, “cold that is colder to the degree that our ages are greater than you and your siblings.”

The son and younger daughter turned to their sister. “That’s a very big difference,” she declared to them.

Claus tossed a nod her way, pasting it to a playful wink. “Let’s continue; imagine tiny white feathers, some no bigger than grains of sand, floating down from then sky, so many of them that you can scarcely see your hand if you brought it up in front of your face. Imagine all this on the ground, as high as you are tall!” Still with the stares. “Then I suppose you won’t believe me when I tell you about *ice*.”

“Oh, we know about ice!” the ruler’s son yelled, happy to contribute something to the conversation. Instantly, he covered his mouth in apology.

“Father has it brought to us at special times of the year,” the eldest daughter explained.

“From the mountains!”

Seeing the surprise on Claus’s face, the ruler clapped his hands. He whispered something to one of his attendants immediately at his side. As the man raced off, the ruler looked smug.

“In the winter, when a lake freezes and turns to ice,” Claus continued, still processing what he’d been told, “it’s like a great stone bed. One you can walk on. If you cut through this ice, which can be a very difficult task, you could catch fish. My uncle would take me fishing thus. We could force our way through the ice with a spear to get to the water below. Often we could see the fish swimming-”

Quite quickly, the attendant returned with a burly household worker hauling an exquisite chest. Reaching into a pocket, the ruler brought out a key and opened the box. He looked to Claus and smiled. “Next,” he said, and a further box...of another design entirely...was revealed. Which he unlocked. Finally, a third box was removed, the smallest in this trio. Unlocking this one, he gestured for the worker to present the chest to Claus. A thick piece of plain material, the African equivalent of burlap covering the container’s contents. “Take a look!” the ruler said to Claus, gesturing for his visitor to reveal what was actually in the box. Having eased back the

fabric, once Claus saw what was in it...ice from the nearby mountains...he was notably moved. Inclining his torso, he drew in a deep breath.

“Does it smell as you remember?” the ruler asked.

Claus’s eyes were closed. “It’s been many years since I last inhaled its aroma. This batch of ice has a slight *perfume* to it, but that’s simply the result of the container’s influence.” He took another long intake, filling his lungs all the moreso; to everyone witnessing this, it appeared as if the man blossomed, swelling to an even larger version of himself. “I’m taken back...” As he said this, a whole assortment of images flashed through his mind, vignettes playing out, childhood scenes, his friends running through a snow storm, shrieking and yelling happily, joy filling his heart to overflowing.

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“A song! A song! Sing us a bedtime song!”

“From the tip of the world!”

It was the end of the day, and yet rambunctious energy swirled. Claus looked to his host, who happily gestured his approval. Claus broke into his mother’s song. But he stopped; it was too painful for him to remember. And so he considered, then began singing another tune, one in another language.

The children lasted through four verses and three and a half choruses before The Dream King slowly pulled them under. Claus had to grin at their determination as he watched them fight the tiredness that anything new and exciting can induce, ultimately slowing from singing the words...to talking them...to finally whispering them as the little ones surrendered...and were *gone*.

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It was a gloriously star-crammed sky the ruler and Claus reclined under.

“You don’t want to talk about why you’re out in the world. I respect your need for privacy,” the ruler said.

“Thank you.”

“But you *lost* someone. Didn’t you?” the ruler enquired. “Someone somewhere along the way.”

“Why do you ask, my lord?”

“Because in every one of your presentations, I could tell that it pained you a little, as if there was something unspoken attached to each experience, someone you longed for, and yet couldn’t bring into your...your lesson.”

“I had been travelling the world with my uncle,” Claus explained. “We’d gone everywhere together, after leaving our homeland. He was much more than my mother’s brother.” Claus thought on this. “I suppose he was *my* brother, as well.”

“How did he die?”

“He took ill. And then death took *him*. Quickly, praised be...” he added, looking skyward.

“So tell me; what have you been *doing* out in the broad unknown all these years? You’re clearly not the type to wander aimlessly.”

“I have been a soldier. A master-of-arms. Mercenary. Courier. Bodyguard. Envoy. I like to believe I’m good with people.” Claus filled the air with a long pause. “This ‘skill’ helped when I was enslaved for a while.”

Silences held sway.

“And you have been a teacher,” the ruler eventually said. “What do you teach?”

“Children.”

The ruler was very pleased at this answer. “You have a natural affinity with them.”

“All those I knew as a child were killed. Murdered. Since that time, there has been a part of me that yearns to connect with young ones. No matter where I am.”

“Well, my ‘young ones’ are enamoured of you. Even without their gifts, you captivated them with your tales.”

“They’re fine children.”

“I have a proposition for you. Stay here a while and be their tutor. Their teacher. The last one died in his sleep recently. He’d been *my* teacher before them.” The ruler noted Claus considering his proposal. “Is there somewhere you need to be?”

“No. Not yet,” Claus answered, not really understanding how these words came to be loosed from his lips.

“Well, no matter your decision, I would love to see your maps from all your journeys. Maps are a particular passion of mine.”

“I have no maps. I use no maps.”

“No maps! But that’s impossible! How do you know where you’re going?”

“I-” Claus thought for a few seconds, for the first time in years remembering what his uncle had told him about ‘the sight’. He was surprised at how safely he’d kept that memory of them at the lake. Before the massacre. Before the bells. “I don’t know. I just *do*.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

## Chapter Four: A Child is Born

'In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.' Luke 2:1-5.

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You see, a story of Santa's roots, his beginnings, is tied to that of Jesus, bound by love and devotion.

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### **Nazareth, 5 B.C.E.**

It was a long way from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Roughly one hundred miles. And because Mary was pregnant, she couldn't ride a donkey. So they walked. It amounted to roughly six days' worth of travel. While there wasn't a direct road from the two cities, there was from Nazareth to Jerusalem, which was only about five miles from Bethlehem. Even though the terrain varied somewhat, it wasn't a torturous journey. Even if Mary was close to her due-date.

As they arrived on the outskirts of Bethlehem, it was clear that the child had chosen the time of its arrival in the world, and this moment had arrived. So Joseph found refuge for Mary in a cave, and there she gave birth to Jesus. It was what you could term an 'easy birth'; there was no screaming or wailing into the night from neither mother nor newborn son. Merely happy tears on Mary's part, and some degree of contented satisfaction on the part of Jesus; his blessed journey had just begun. Joseph immediately gave thanks in prayer.

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'And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto

them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.’ Luke 2:8-11.

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Ultimately then, by tradition and habit, we refer to the Christmas card scene featuring Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem with the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes, laying in a manger in a barn, surrounded by animals and the shepherds in attendance, enraptured by the sight. Understanding, of course, that what actually unfolded did not take place in a barn because ‘there was no room at the inn’, but rather, inside the home of –it’s pretty safe to say– a family relative who was hosting others due to the census, and there simply wasn’t sufficient room to accommodate everyone within the bedroom chambers given the very reason for Joseph, Mary and Jesus being in Bethlehem in the first place. Perhaps this was in fact a good thing; this isolation from all the hubbub of activity of a full house would have provided them some privacy and much-needed solitude.

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Persepolis, Persia, 3 B.C.E.

Here was a world as different from Bethlehem or Rome or Norway as it was from the North Pole and its elflings. Mysticism and wonder proliferated. The capitol of the Achaemenid Empire, the city of Persepolis sat at the foot of Kuh-e Rahmat (Mountain of Mercy) and contained such magnificence as the ‘Gate of Xeres’, the ‘Great Double Staircase’, the ‘Tachara’, ‘Apadana Palace’, the ‘Hundred-Column Hall’, and more.

Within these grandeurs of antiquity lived the Magi of the Nativity tradition, eleven-or-so Zoroastrian astrologers, adherents of Zarathustra, ‘the world’s first philosopher’. These were the Biblical ‘wise men’ whose calling compelled them to immerse their lives working at star-gazing, making astronomical calculations, extracting possibilities, probabilities and certainties, wrestling with the very meanings of existence and how the particulates of random occasions in an infinite flux determined what might be, could be...and the rarest of all, what *will* be.

After much deliberation and consultation, intense collaborations that stretched over what most would consider to be ‘long periods of time’, they determined that an event of great import had unfolded a vast distance away, and moreover, they *had* to make the long journey to pay tribute to what had been revealed to them in the starry heavens.

A great caravanserai was then assembled for their journey: the Magi, their servants, some six dozen protectors and the supplies required for such a train over such a distance. With great ceremony and their king's blessings, they set out in the middle of the night, the sky slowly, so very slowly easing to dawn, the Star shining brightly against cerulean blue, invigorating all.

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### **Sofia, Bulgaria, 3 B.C.E.**

*Bells.*

In the dark. Very, very faintly. A man sat up. Claus. His hair had grown even longer, and he had a full -though not *yet* overgrown- beard. He blinked, peering straight ahead. Rising, he moved deftly out of the room, silently and swiftly navigating his way through a home overstuffed with sleeping people, finally exiting into a back courtyard that edged onto a vineyard.

It was eerily quiet. Claus began scanning the heavens. Nothing. No matter where he looked. Disappointed, dispirited, he was wobbly on his feet, as if he's been gut-punched. He staggered to a huge tree, the centerpiece of the property. He leaned against it, closing his eyes. Defeated. He slid down the tree trunk, eyes still shut. When he was finally at ground level, he brought the bulk of his thighs to his chest, resting his forehead on them. Finally, he raised his head until it was inclined towards the sky once more. He opened his eyes to find The Star twinkling between branches. He stared and stared; it was clear by his swollen heart that *this* was the development that had driven him forward since Norway. Tears flowed. He stood, walked forward beyond the limits of the tree, humbled yet rapturous as he gazed up at this beacon. For such a big man, he landed on his knees softly, and his supplication consisted of no words either thought nor spoken.

With only as much preparation as was absolutely required, Claus departed at speed on a horse on a course defined by this celestial guide.

Had you been riding close beside him, you would have a) watched as his lips now moved as if saying something, and b) heard nothing at all, regardless.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The journeys of both parties called to venture were long and arduous; it's doubtful that one thousand mile treks can be anything but. Claus's may have been the more demanding, given the challenges of the terrain and the fact that he was going it alone. The Magi's proved a more gradual one, and because of their numbers, akin to a movable community. Though they left at entirely different times, their arrival at their destination would prove to be more or less the same.

Regardless, each was fraught with minor catastrophes, mishaps and marauders, both requiring patience, diligence and no small amount of hope. The Magi had their Zoroastrian faith to provide these. And Claus...though he would not have known it, of course... had his angel.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Claus peered at the river. More to the point, his attention was applied to where a bridge had been washed out in a recent deluge. He'd journeyed the area previously, so he knew just how pivotal this crossing was. While he did this, his lips moved as before. He looked to his right, calculating the distance of the next juncture point, where he might cross. Then he looked to his left. He frowned at the calculation, his mute utterances pausing in his consternation. He gazed up into the sky. Though the day had brought sunshine, he could still spot The Star. He closed his eyes to think; his lips moved in smaller increments.

Out of the silence, he could hear voices. Some shouting, some laughter, some singing. When he opened his eyes, a ship grew larger as it approached. A man at the prow called out to him. "Good fortune finds you when you're least expecting it! Consider us your bridge to better times!"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Rather than simply boarding the ship and then doing the reverse on the other side of the river, Claus had done a further calculation and determined that he was better off remaining on the vessel for a while, cutting substantial time off his journey.

Which is why some hours later, as day passed into evening, a fellow passenger tried to make out what Claus had been saying as he sat resting against his horse's leg. "I don't know what you've been saying all this while," the man said to him, "but if you want to have an actual conversation, don't be a stranger."

But Claus offered up no response whatsoever. Just more of his mumbling.

~~~~~

“Look! The star! It is gone!”

As it approached the great city of Jerusalem, the road-weary –yet dedicated no less than when they set out– caravanserai came to a halt. The sign that had drawn them across the miles had disappeared from the sky. Each of the Magi digested this, tried to process this development, staving off despair in their own way.

Ultimately, they decided to continue to the city before them in the hopes that King Herod the Great, Roman Client King of Judea could provide them insight.

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### **Jerusalem, 3 BCE**

Early in the evening, Herod stood at a window in his palace, looking out onto the expanse beyond. Though there was a sort of handsomeness about him, his inherent acidic nature spoiled his features, his soul constantly trying to push through his skin. Stock-still and beady-eyed, he tracked the Magi’s approach to the city. It required no effort to do this; lit torches provided a moving outline of the entourage. Truly, it was a regimented, serpentine retinue that approached. No matter these were mere foreigners to the most degree possible, there was still an undeniable element of *gravitas* to it all that appealed to him.

A soldier arrived, moving swiftly past the guards, having raced through the city and into the palace to deliver his news to Herod.

“What do they want?”

“They wish an audience, my lord,” the man replied, still catching his breath. “Something to do with the birth of a new king.” He hesitated. “A king of the Jews.” Of course the hesitation was due to the fact that a) Herod was king, and b) Jewish.

Herod continued to watch the approach.

“Shall I tell them you will consider granting it to them tomorrow?” the soldier asked.

Not one for putting things off...no matter what he'd already supposed about this visit, working out the variables in his mind, grinding small grains of paranoia into infinitesimal pieces...Herod shook his head. “Tell them that I would be honoured to receive them presently.”

~~~~~

Though Herod was no newcomer to ceremony and the trappings of other cultures, he was nonetheless affected by the arrival of the Magi. Certainly by their garb, absolutely by the air about them. Once the niceties of statecraft were dispensed with, the conversation began, the Magi communicating through their own interpreter. With every exchange, Herod checked with his own translator for confirmation.

“Some time ago,” one of the Magi said, “we began seeing portents of a new ruler in the workings of our arts. A king of kings, an emperor of all Jews. We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage, to pay tribute to him. To *worship* him.” Here was a very pregnant pause. “This would be your son...?”

Herod's anxiety showed in his voice. “When was this child to have been born?”

“Some time ago. More than a year, less than two.”

“Why the delay in your pilgrimage?”

“Your highness...Sometimes the stars...our *arts*...do not reveal the future so much as uncover and delineate the past, propagating our understanding of the present.”

“Your majesty,” another began, “revelation submits to no contract made by man. It happens when it is meant to happen, if it is to happen at all. There is, of course, a purpose to everything under the sun.”

“Often the lagging of time provides the potential for heightened comprehension of truth,” a third added.

“*Truth*,” Herod muttered softly. ‘*Whose truth?*’ he thought. “Tell me; how does it come that men from so far away have an interest in what transpires with the Jews?”

“Sire, Persia is the home of no small number of Jews,” a Magus explained. “When King Cyrus set free the captive Jews in our homeland some half a millennia ago, though a number of them returned to Israel, the overwhelming majority remained. Many, many times more. But even non-Jews, those who practice *our* faith know of the prophet Daniel.”

“And of Nehemiah, and Habakkuk and Esther,” another added.

Not at all happy with what he was hearing, Herod *somehow* managed to compose himself, and returned to the conversation. “Whatever you have determined about this child, he is not mine. I have no son his age.”

The Magi huddled to commiserate. “What of the priests here?” they finally asked. “What do *their* arts tell them?”

Herod thought long on this. “You are my guests, the city’s guests. You will be provided comfortable lodgings. My assistants will see to your every need. Please, rest, eat, and in the morning, return here to discuss this issue anew. In the meantime, I will meet with my priests.”

Once the Magi had filed out of the room, Herod gestured to an aide. “I want them here. NOW.”

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Within Herod’s palace was the Chamber of Hewn Stone. This was where the Sanhedrin, the highest court of justice and the supreme council of Jews met. Reflecting the simple, tradition-bound purpose of the council, it was a simple affair: plain stone walls, plain pillars, little in terms of drapes or other hanging materials, and plain torches in their plain sconces. Constructed in a semi-circle, it featured seating for its 70 members on either side of the primary place for the High Priest and a students’ section in front, facing

him. Herod's aide had arrived at the temple and granted an immediate audience. What he witnessed was an unquestionable furor. After watching and listening for a minute or so, he interrupted the priests. "I was bidden by the King to attend you and take you to him. As quickly as possible."

The Pharisees ignored him and returned to their deliberations.

"He- He is in no mood to be kept waiting," the man continued after a brief pause. "He has barely contained his-" He hesitated, intimidated by everything...which he realized was ridiculous; he worked for *the king*. "I will leave you to your brief considerations, but we must-"

He was summarily cut off by the High Priest by way of a scythe of a sweeping arm.

~~~~~

Shortly after, an anxious Herod –his angst-mill having been working without respite– received the Pharisees. One of them read from a scroll. "Thus it has been written through the prophet Micah," the priest began. "'And thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, even though you remain least among the clans of Judah, nevertheless, the one who rules in Israel for me will emerge from you. His existence has been from antiquity, even from eternity. Therefore that ruler will abandon them until the woman in labor gives birth. Then the rest of his countrymen will return to the Israelis. Then he will take his stand, shepherding by means of the strength of the Lord, by the power of the name of the Lord his God. And they will be firmly established; indeed, from then on he will become great to the ends of the earth. And he will be our peace.'"

Despite his rising anger, Herod's innate ability to play things pretty close to the vest held sway. "And do you believe this prophet of yours?"

But the Pharisees couldn't provide a firm response.

Herod's fury now spewed. "Why do I have these men from the east telling me of this news and not my own priests?!?"

~~~~~

“Go and search carefully for the child in Bethlehem,” Herod told the Magi the next morning. “As soon as you find him, report back to me, so that I too, may go and worship him.” Once outside, they were filled with joy: the star had returned, clearly evident in the daytime sky, and was now situated directly over the town.

The Magi were in Bethlehem in only a few hours. Their anticipation had grown greatly, so that by the time they arrived at the home the star has clearly led them to, their ecstasy was barely restrained.

And so the Magi met Joseph and Mary, and Jesus, who was by then a toddler. They presented him with gold, frankincense and myrrh. Their visit was as long a one as seemed appropriate, not wanting to burden the couple nor the child they had come so far to find and pay tribute to.

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On the outskirts of town, the caravanserai celebrated throughout what remained of the day. Music. Dancing. Hummed verses of ancient observance. Wine decanted into cups especially crafted for occasions of such magnitude. Rare holy rites performed on the back of so long a time of anticipation. In the end, the celebrants’ gowns grew dark with the sweat of blissful effort, their faces glistening with the sheen of ecstasy.

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In the early evening, all was quiet in the Persian camp. There was little activity; most of the company having worn themselves out, their hearts and souls pleasantly filled against their heard-earned exhaustion.

Suddenly, one of the tents was aglow from within. No sound was emitted, despite the brilliance of the occurrence.

Within, the Magi faced something, some wonderful entity emitting a pure white light, unimaginable in its sanctity. Their faces basked in it, their expressions flush with wonderment...and then the solemnity of ill tidings.

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Clearly displeased, Herod addressed a man who had delivered news unexpected, the day following the Magi's angelic visitation.

"When did you see them?" he asked. "In which direction were they going? These *Magi vermin*," he spat.

"Away, my lord. Away from Jerusalem."

"In what direction?"

"East."

"You're sure of this?"

"Yes, your grace."

"Reward him," Herod said to his aide. Turning his back on them, his fists went beyond being balled; they were potent hammers now, and he had a need to use them...but he'd have to settle for issuing commands. He waited for his aide to complete the transaction and the spy was gone from the room.

As the aide returned to face the King, even though he could only see Herod's back, it was clear to the aide that he was near-apoplectic, fury close to boiling over; he could detect Herod's torso shaking.

"I want all of them dead."

"The Magi, your grace?"

"All male-born in Bethlehem," Herod replied, clearing his throat. "In the immediate vicinity, as well. Two years or younger."

"All of them, sire?"

Herod spun to face his aide, spittle flying out in a long arc. "ALL OF THEM!"

~~~~~

With a friend, Joseph was helping Mary and Jesus prepare to leave their lodgings. On this journey, the family was taking a donkey; the scant belongings they owned had been hurriedly crammed into heavily bound cloth bundles lashed to the animal.

“But why, Joseph?” the friend asked. "And where are you going?"

Calming himself, Joseph took the man’s hands in his. “An angel of the Lord has told me we must leave. I will not tell you where we will be travelling, in case you are asked.”

“Asked? By whom?”

“Herod’s men.”

~~~~~

At long last, Claus arrived in Bethlehem. The Star still sat above the town. His relief was palpable; the journey so hard, the efforts expended so great...all for this glorious sight. He’d do it again, were that necessary. He continued on his way, his recitation now audible as names happily sung.

Bells.

Screams and shouting in the distance tore through the night air. He sped his horse in the direction of the sounds.

There, he came upon Joseph, Mary and Jesus; they had been stopped by a gang of Herod’s motley, rag-tag soldiers.

“Give us the boy,” one of the men said, "or we’ll kill *all* of you. We’re here on the King’s orders. Your son must die.”

At the non-reaction they received, the soldiers carried on trying to complete their task.

“Stop.”

Herod’s men turned in the direction of this booming voice...to find a giant of a man holding a suitably giant sword; to them, he was a Greek or Roman statue brought to life. Hercules. Or perhaps Moses.

“We have no quarrel with you, stranger,” the captain of the group said. “Be on your way.” But the directive was diminished by the realities of the stranger’s imposing presence.

Claus stepped forward, shaking his head, energy shooting down his arm to his hand, to his sword. He felt consumed by *something*, something beyond any protective instinct, something he hadn’t felt in so very long a time. “If your intent is to harm these people, then *I* have a quarrel with *you*. Leave them, or I’ll separate all of you from your ragged, insolent breaths.”

Well, he *did* warn them: the soldiers attacked Claus, but they weren’t seasoned, well-trained Roman soldiers, the sort that Claus himself had instructed in the past. Just bullies. That’s all. Dispatching them quickly, Claus walked with his horse to the trio. “I am Claus,” he told them, reaching down to rub his weapon clean with a grab of dirt. “From the northern reaches of the unknown world.”

“I am Joseph, originally of Bethlehem. This is my wife Mary, and our child Jesus. Those men were seeking to take his life. Only last night an Angel of the Lord forewarned me in a dream to flee to Egypt. Herod’s thugs have murdered many little ones of parents unwarned. We are indebted to you. For being here. Right now.”

Claus seemed in a trance as he regarded the child snuggling in Mary’s arms. A trance suffused with a familiar metallic tinkling. “I was drawn here.” Claus continued to swim through the moment unaware of its meaning, yet somehow confident in his destination...though he couldn’t have articulated it even had he tried. “Perhaps going all the way back to my youth.”

“It is the Lord’s doing,” Joseph suggested.

“I- I am not of your faith.”

“Nevertheless, you have done a saintly thing,” Joseph replied. “He brought you here, and we are grateful to Him for His watch over us.”

“And to *you*,” Mary added.

Bells.

Claus turned away slightly, his attention commanded by someone, some *thing* else. His face was illuminated as he listened. With bells softly, daintily jangling in thin echoes, meaning reverberated in his head, but not by way of words or sentences spoken by any voice.

“Because thou hast done this, risking thy life and freedom for a little child, never shalt thou taste of death until thy work for the Lord is finished. Indeed, when your peoples’ Gods are long forgotten, the fires upon their altars sunk to whitened ashes and the voices of their worshippers have given way to silence and in all the world there is none to do them reverence, your names and fame shall live on. Thou shalt live immortally in every heart so long as men shall celebrate this one’s birthday, as long as gleeful children praise thy names at the season of winter solstice, with generosity and good cheer abounding.”

“Why me?” Claus asked into the silence, feeling a little awkward at his boldness.

“Because of the gifts you have so often given children. Because of your unbridled charity. Because of your unceasing generosity. Both in spirit...and in your handiwork. Thus are you perfectly suited for this task. You see the goodness and innocence in little ones. Most of all, you are a man who can still see through the eyes of a child.”

“Am I to journey this path alone?”

“For only for a while longer.”

Stunned in place, visibly affected, it was only faint sounds of lamentation in the far-nearby that snapped Claus out of his reverie. He turned back to Joseph. “Perhaps I should escort you safely into Egypt.”

“The Lord will protect us from here.”

“I mean no offence,” Claus said, “but your Lord did not protect you from Herod’s men.”

“But he did,” Mary smiled. “In *you*.”

After considering this, Claus reached into his red sack and retrieved one of his carvings. It is was a delicately whittled fish. It had been a work-in-progress for as long as he’d been out in the world. Long periods of time would pass, borders crossed, people met, bonds created, and he would eventually return to it with fresh eyes. “A gift. For your son. Please consider it an offering.”

Mary uncovered Jesus. Claus’s expression was made beatific by the child’s face. He extended the fish to Jesus. At the child’s touch (and the happy burbling he made) Claus spoke one final time. “Peace be with you.”

“And may the Lord watch over *you*,” Joseph said. “And keep you safe.”

Claus watched them depart on their journey, and then he likewise did on his. Renewed and invigorated...filled once again with a further suffusion of *hope*.

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## Chapter Five: The Second Travels of Claus, Golgotha and Androula

### Jerusalem, Judea, 30 C.E.

More than thirty years had passed, but Claus did not appear ‘older’. Rather, more ‘mature’, more substantive, his commanding presence an even larger one than before. Broader shoulders, deeper chest, legs reminiscent of tree trunks. Taking up more space. And yet there was something more agile about him. He was quietly *lethal*. He’d been brought before a rather officious looking aide; this was the man who controlled the comings and goings of all who wished to see his boss.

“I am here in service of Pilate. Please tell him that Claus- That The Northling *Claudius* has arrived from Rome with the item he had been commissioned to ‘retrieve’, and requests an audience.”

The aide’s eyes narrowed. “I thought you were but an empty legend. A myth. In equal parts warrior, poet, comedian-jester, tutor, trusted confidant, emissary, spy-“

Claus laughed a hearty, voluminous laugh; this consigliere could not help but be caught up in it. A little. “Do I look like a spy?”

“Perhaps not, but there are rumours of subtle stealth, of being able to move among men unseen as if there not there at all.”

Claus did not register externally the thoughts of yet another of his mother’s generational gifts to him. (What we now might refer to as ‘invisibility’, one of the things that allows Santa to do what he does on Christmas Eve.)

The aide ignored this. “It is also said that you have travelled far beyond the borders of the Empire. Beyond even the lands of conjecture to places undreamt of, too strange for the mind to even propose. To places that, were you to describe them, our ears would feel broken, inclining us to madness, the exotic nature of these places far beyond our powers of comprehension so great. That not even Pilate’s most accomplished trickster is capable of conjuring up such impossibilities by way of ingenious words. That you have seen the very margents of our world, peered over the edge and laughed. That you have learned a thousand languages, even those spoken by

animals and gods. That you have entertained at the courts of kings and queens and emperors of the land and of the sea, that you can juggle axes and torches while partaking of a fruit that-

Clearly enjoying the exchange, Claus interrupted. "Swords." He considered this a little. "Well, *daggers* to be precise. Though axes hadn't ever occurred to me previously, so I thank you for that. Oh, and kittens. Can't forget the kittens. Size doesn't matter. Short-hair, long-hair, bald... As long as they have a pretty 'mew'."

The man pulled a face. "I beg your pardon? Daggers? Kittens? A *pretty mew*?"

Claus nodded his head as a simpleton might. "Yes. Daggers, torches, and kittens. Oh! And the fruit was normally something local. So a *mangustaan*, or a *rambutan*, or a *kharbozeh*...even perhaps a *pomegranate*, a *malagasy*, or maybe *langsat*...

The aide shook off this silliness. "That you've witnessed a fantastical collection of animals-

"A menagerie," Claus suggested. "'Collection' is so mundane. And the creatures have proven to be anything but mundane."

The aide conceded the point. "A fantastical menagerie of unusual and peril-fraught animals, including gentle beasts with impossibly long necks, the height of a tall tree. That you've wrestled the alligator and the crocodile both, ridden the beast with one horn, enormous striped cats, and an elephant, with trunk as long as a snake, and ears as big tents-

"Saving the best for last," Claus interjected, "I've ridden reindeer. A magical breed, these regal northern beasts, with antlers as broad as my arms can reach..." He did exactly this, spreading them wide. "I have flown across the sky on them, touched the moon, blown kisses to the stars, revelling in the myriad sensations," he continued, his words taking on a whimsical tone. "The wind, the cool air, being able to see to forever...and beyond."

Sighing, the aide resignedly shook his head. "All lies, then. I'll inform the Procurate of your arrival."

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“I am in your debt, good Claudius. This is something I thought I would never see. I will send this to Antipas, and with what transpired this morning between us, it will surely put an end to our conflict. For a time, leastwhiles.” Pontius Pilate, Governor-Prefect of the Province of Judaea in the Roman Empire tossed Claus a bag of coins.

“Thank you, Procurator.”

“Tell me; since your arrival in the city, have you heard anything about this man who had been proclaimed ‘The King of the Jews’?”

“I arrived not long after dusk yesterday,” Claus replied. “I have not had time to hear word within the city’s walls. But I did speak with some travellers as I approached Jerusalem, and we both know that oftentimes accurate news is all the moreso outside a city.”

“Perhaps I should have my spies venture outwards on occasion”, Pilate mused. “What did they tell you?”

“That this teacher was seen entering the city four days gone. Meek and mild he appeared, humbly riding on an ass's colt, which was a good sign, for the Jews have a tradition that kings go forth to war bestride horses, but when they go in peace they use an ass for mount. This man's disciples claimed he had worked wonders, making blind men see and lame men walk, even raised corpses from the dead. That he went into the temple, and instead of making sacrifices, preached unto the people, bidding them to live as brethren, fear God, honour the King, and render unto Caesar that which is rightly his.”

“And your sense of all this?” Pilate enquired. “I’ve heard about your intuition. Some might call you a soothsayer. Never mind a sorcerer, capable of making people feel compelled to tell you what they know, even if you ask but a simple question.”

Claus ignored the observation. “He seems a prophet rather than a priest or king, Procurator. My sense is that the Empire shouldn’t be concerned.” He thought on this. “I cannot say the same for your Caiaphas.”

“Ah, Caiaphas, Chief priest of the Pharisees in their counsel the Sanhedrin,” Pilate sighed. “He took custody of this self-styled King of Jewry in the middle of the night, tried him on a charge of blasphemy and treason and judged him worthy to be crucified. He then brought the case to me on high petition, telling me that this man had fomented sedition, and urged that I give him over to be crucified as one who preached treason to the Empire. Knowing full well that I alone, as Procurator, can mete out sentence of death, he also knew that if I declined to proceed as requested, these priests and their paid underlings might rouse the louse-bit rabble to

rebellion, and as the gods are aware, we have not troops sufficient to put one down. Furthermore, should insurrection come, Rome would have my life. I am sent out here to govern and to rule, but chiefly to collect the tax. And a people in rebellion pay no tribute to the throne.”

Claus waited for Pilate to continue.

“This morning, before all was done and our Galilean sentenced, my wife sent urgent word to me. ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous and innocent man,’ she said, ‘for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of him’.” He let this sink in for his own benefit. “Regardless, I have dispatched him to Golgotha. Calvary. There, he will be crucified and left on his cross to be devoured by birds and other wild animals, no different than contemptible criminals. The only thing that will remain of him is the notice I had made to be posted above his head: ‘The King of The Jews’.”

Claus continued to listen as only he was able.

“Good Claud- *Claus*, you and I have known each other for some years now. I respect your honesty. Your unflagging candour. I am regarded as a cruel procurator by some. Indeed, by many. Am I? Cruel? Speak freely.”

“I am honoured to be your trusted messenger, your sometimes-envoy.”

“Continue...”

“Yours is a difficult assignment,” Claus proposed. “This is no sinecure you hold. You have but a single legion to police this country, with treason and rebellion lifting their heads on every side. Do you one thing, the Jews cry out against you for that you have trespassed on some rite or custom which they hold in veneration. Do you the other, again they howl, this time to the heavens that the iron heel of Rome oppresses them. I have seen much cruelty in the world. Gross abominations of behaviour. Unspeakable acts of depravity, the likes of which I pray I never again- Do *you* feel you are a cruel Procurate of Rome’s?”

“Perhaps.”

“And perhaps history will judge you more fairly than some do, now.”

“Well answered! Your journeys have undoubtedly shown you that the nature of the scribe determines which truth history speaks.”

“And what *is* truth?” Claus asked, knowing full well that his mother’s gift in this arena allowed him to know *precisely* what truth was in any conversation.

“I have heard the sages argue about it, but never have I found two who could agree on it.” Pilate watched as Claus acknowledged this sentiment with a gentle gesture. “When do you depart from Jerusalem?”

“In three days.”

“Good. Join me for evening meal. I fear today will leave me in need of gentle distraction, and you have always provided me a surfeit of it. In the meantime, your lodgings await you.”

~~~~~

The sky above Jerusalem was as grey as it could be and not be black. The clouds were thick, slow muddy water churning. Golgotha and the throng surrounding it could *just* be made out, so thick was the air and everything charging through it.

One of Pilate’s men stood outside a low building. A cottage. He was staring at something. Transfixed. There, on the ground, sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, facing away, Claus. Mouthing his names. “You bring word from Pilate,” Claus said, eyes still closed. “Has he changed our eating hour?”

“I- I thought you were asleep my lord.”

“I am nobody’s *anything*,” Claus laughed. “And I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Oh.”

“I was-“ Claus began to say, then halted.

*Bells.*

“Thinking?” the soldier proposed.

Clearly distracted, Claus was slow to respond. “The opposite of thinking, actually.” Frowning, Claus opened his eyes; he was shocked to see how dark it had gotten. His reaction was crystallized by the high jangling sound pinching him behind the eyes.

“The opposite?” the soldier enquired.

The richness of the bells distracted him all the more. “The absence of thinking, removing all thoughts from the mind.”

“That sounds like being drunk.”

Claus’s patented laughter once more filled the air. He rose up without aid from his hands; you could have been fooled into believing you’d just witnessed someone levitating. “I know some spiritual elders in the east whose bellies would shake so much at your observation as to want to buy you a drink. So; to where am I being summoned, if not to feast?”

“Oh. Golgotha.”

“And in what capacity am I to accompany you?”

“Capacity?”

“Casually? Or officially?”

Oh, those *bells*.

~~~~~

They proceeded to the crucifixion, the soldier walking, Claus riding. He noted the roiling sky. The road. The people. He was seeing it all, taking it all in, absorbing it. The sustained echo of bells reverberating at the front of his mind.

As he arrived, Claus heard Christ's final words. "*Abba, beyadkha natan 'ana ruchi.* (Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!)"

In an instant: A mammoth thunderclap and the brightest lightning imaginable, its partner in shock. The densely-woven 40' high, 4" thick curtain at the sacred Temple's entrance was torn from the top down; it was as if a mountain had been struck...or God had rent it with His own hands. The scads of worshippers present were besides themselves; panic had been unleashed, scattering and wailing the proof.

"This one, now." It was the voice of a soldier at the base of Christ's cross. He was directing the actions of another who wielded a sledgehammer. It was clear that they'd already broken the legs of the criminals on either side of Christ.)They did so for two reasons: to hasten death to those who still lived, or to confirm that they were indeed dead.) They paused, distracted by Claus's arrival.

"No," Claus said, waving them off.

"Who are you?" the captain of the men asked.

Claus's accompanying soldier explained. "He was sent by the Procurator. He's Pilate's man."

The men's awe went beyond simple wonderment at Claus's physical stature.

"Give me your spear," he told one of the soldiers. Placing his hand on Christ's thigh, he pierced his side. Blood and water issued from the wound.

Bells.

...and Claus's face was illuminated once more.

"Once, in times long passed, you came to the defence of a child being attacked by murderers. Even if the ensuing years had been empty of beneficent behaviour and kind considerations, your true nature has once again been manifested, this time in the pity that bade you save a man from brutish violence."

Claus dropped the spear as if it had seared his hand.

“Thy true work is not yet started, Claus. Verily, before this day’s end, your journey will have taken a new turn towards your ultimate destination. Fear not the calamity that precedes it. Your life alone has come to an end; seek her out. She awaits you.”

“She?”

“Cleave to her, but know that your children shall not issue from your loins, but rather be the sons and daughters of the world, ever requiring care in the ways that you and she are abundantly capable.”

And then, aside from the tumult continuing to unfold in the background, silence. Slowly, in this silence, Claus turned to see Mary Magdalene and others...including Mother Mary, whom he hadn't seen in 35 years.

~~~~~

Now alone, Claus proceeded back to the city. All Hell had broken loose. Sheets of rain lashed in mad strikes of wind. The ground shook. The earth presented chasms. Buildings collapsed. Routs of people ran aimlessly as ants from a disturbed anthill. His horse spooked, Claus slid out of the saddle and with a gentle smack, encouraged the horse to escape to instinctive safety.

*Bells.*

“Help me!”

Claus turned in the direction of the scream, and headed down an alley. A lightning flash seared the darkness; when he inhaled, his nostrils seemed filled with the pungency of sulphur. Ahead was a woman trapped by some debris. He went to her, easily lifting a heavy timber off her foot and picked her up into his arms. It was only when he’d got her off the ground that he realized that she was no slip of a girl; this was a woman of delightful proportions. He carried her away from the melée, away from buildings and into the open.

He set her down gently. All the while, she’d been staring at him with just as much concentration as the downpour the heavens had unleashed upon them, the environs of Jerusalem, and the lands nearby. “Fear not. You’re safe now. You don’t seem to be badly

injured. But I suspect that you're going to be the proud owner of a brilliant bruise." She was all stares in response. "I understand. Something has happened that goes beyond everything that's happening before us here in the city."

A nod. A slow nod.

"So you *can* understand what I'm saying."

"I was visited by a voice. But the words were not spoken. I did not have to 'listen' to understand what it was telling me."

Now Claus was the one staring.

"I thought myself mad. It told me to go into the streets. That the road beneath my feet would turn asunder, just as my life's road would turn. That one would come for me. That I was to leave my prior life and cleave to him. That I should fear not—"

"The calamity."

Exhaling a long-held breath, in her sougning a calm consumed her, her fear vanquished. "You are *he*."

"And you, *she*."

~~~~~

Outside his cottage, Claus's contented horse munched away in safety, the rain reduced to a mild shower where it stood.

Inside, Claus tended to the woman's foot, confirmation clear that she'd barely been brushed by the fallen wood, mysteriously pinned. It was clear that things had shifted in him; his face was lit from within because of her. "What is your name?"

"Androula."

"Greek?"

“I am a Cypriot.”

“How are you here?” Claus asked. “In Jerusalem?”

“I was kidnapped by slavers when I was young and taken across the bright waters,” Androula replied. “In time, I was brought to the city.”

“Where do you live? What has been your life?”

“Of late, I have been in the household of Herod Antipas. At first, they thought I was a boy. But then I was forced to become a hetaerae-” She hesitated.

“A whore.”

Once more, she nodded. “Then a dancer. But I am too-” She looked down on her body. “I am too much like a man in structure for either pursuit. I was never requested. I next worked in the kitchens, then as a servant, drawing baths, washing clothing, tending babies and the such, where my-”

Claus interrupted with a shake of his head. “There are good words to describe women so *blessed* physically as you.”

If he had said this and this alone, Androula would still have felt warmed by his generosity of spirit.

“Statuesque,” Claus continued. “*Diaoxiàng. Sttuaskua. Escultural. Sadaul. Escultòrica.*”

He’d made her laugh.

“Indeed, you are as the Valkyie are said to be,” he beamed.

“Val-kyrie?”

“Legendary female warriors from my parts of the world. Or perhaps more appropriately one of the not-quite-mythical Amazonian race,” he added, his appreciation of her showing in the slight *wonder* in his voice.

“Though they sound as of tongues foreign, your kind words are poetry to my ears, and their meanings an ease. I thank you.”

“Where I come from,” Claus continued, “women are as revered for their hardiness as much as their heartiness. Their strength...physical, mental, emotional...are valued as much as features, how pleasing they are to look upon and-”

“Where you lead, I will follow.”

Yup; Claus nodded as a further revelation in him blossomed. “You and I, we shall, as ordered, cleave to one another as equals. As partners in this wonderful adventure before us. We will follow the lead provided us, as one.”

This affected her as much as anything else that had transpired; they were now attuned to each other.

“Antipas, you say?” Claus asked, grinning. “I once took something from his father, Herod the Great. And now, I take from his son, Herod the Lesser.”

Androula did not share her rescuer’s bravura. “They will search me out,” she whispered, as if she might be heard. “You will not be safe.”

Claus sighed as he smiled. “They will believe you perished in the calamity. When in fact, that is where you have been born anew.”

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Over the ensuing three days, as a religion was born, so too was Claus and Androula’s life together.

At Pilate’s post-crucifixion feast, Claus was distracted. Not at all how he would normally be under such circumstances. He’d always been an entertaining and energetic dinner guest, with the best of tales to tell, a seasoned raconteur. Better still, he put everyone at ease, prompting *them* to tell their own stories. And who doesn’t like a good audience?



As the evening lengthened, so did Claus's distraction, ultimately giving way to something else: desire. A desire to be with the woman he'd only just met...desire with the imprimatur of one of the Heavenly host. A desire from the heart and the soul. And so Claus rushed back to Androula.

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In the light of day, Androula watched Claus carving a small something. As he worked away, Claus sang a song composed of names, its frolicsome metre both contrasted with complemented the movement of his knife. It may well have been a spiritual practice he was partaking in, performing a holy rite.

Something stirred within her, and she began to hunt around the cottage. "Who are they?" she asked him.

Claus observed this for a short while, watching her search absentmindedly. his song fading. "Who are who?"

"The ones you've been singing."

He had no clue as to what she was referring. "What do you seek?" he instead asked.

"Something to *create* with," was Androula's soft –and self-conscious– reply. She stared at the evolving item his knife was revealing. "Something like *that*...and yet not."

As their conversation unfolded, one thing was certain: this was *definitely* the future Mr. and Mrs. Claus.

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As it was not safe in the city for Androula, Claus went to market. There, he retrieved a list of items according to her requests. Every vendor was helpful, listening carefully to that which Claus was enquiring on, and time and time again, offering suggestions that made his booty all the more bountiful. Indeed, while he left with more than anticipated, so were they, by their own work-weary workaday expectations; no matter how down-in-the-mouth any of them had been at the beginning of the transaction, by the time they were watching Claus walk away from their stall, they were always in better cheer, mood lifted, heart swollen.

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Over the days that followed, a trio of occurrences unfolded. The first was Claus and Androula working away in his lodgings, using everything Claus had gathered...not just materials, but also the requisite tools to create what she, and eventually they had envisioned. Only this was not 'work' to them. More the early fulfillment of a promise. Indeed, Claus had to insist that they go into the sun at points when it was clear the light in the cottage was insufficient, so diligently did they carry on their efforts. As well, the fresh air fortified them.

The second was gifting these creations to the children of the city, mostly leaving them in places easily discovered, so as to enhance the items' *specialness*. They performed this subterfuge in darkness, with Androula wearing a shawl, so as to avoid being found out. These midnight offerings were talked about long after Claus and Androula had relocated themselves beyond Jerusalem's gates. (And so it can be said that the first gifts given in the spirit of Christmas were to Jewish children!)

The final thing was the creation of a different sort: they were brought together in a wedding ceremony of their own making, the vows of which were a brief summary of their commitment to their assigned purpose, the rings of which were constructed of the finest gold yarn and the stringy meat of a palm tree frond wound intricately of their own hands' artistry, and the witnesses of which were two children whose roles were that of simple attendance. (Who were, let it not be doubted, paid well for their attendance. In two different currencies.)

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## **Ashdod, Judea**

As Claus and Androula rode his horse to a dock, she was the embodiment of barely contained excitement. "Rome is such a faraway place," she sang. "It's always seemed unreal to me. The capital of the empire. Where Caesar resides. And now I shall see it for myself!"

Grinning as he leapt off his horse, Claus helped Androula down, but not before pausing for a kiss. He removed his red sack from his horse, and threw it over his shoulder. “We’re not travelling to Rome, my love.”

“They told me to expect a giant of a man!” the captain of the ship called out, awaiting Claus at the end of the dock. He gestured at the red sack. “Though you travel light.”

“You’d be surprised at how much I can carry in it,” Claus said, handing the captain a note. “Looks can be quite deceptive,” he declared, looking at the man directly. “She’s not here. I travel alone.”

“Passage for *one* to Rome, then.” The Captain acknowledged this with a respectful nod.

“And there’s been a change in destination,” Claus told him, turning to Androula. “I understand that Cyprus is quite beautiful this time of year.”

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Some time later, the captain was busy making final preparations. “Did you hear about the so-called miracle?”

“Which one?” Claus replied, brushing his horse. “The world always seems ripe for a miracle.”

“The man they crucified. The so-called ‘King of the Jews’. Their *Christ*.”

Claus was stopped in his tracks, his hand stalled in mid-stroke. “What of him?”

“You’re familiar with this man?”

“I was at Golgotha when he died. I was there.”

“Well, after he was removed from the cross, he was placed in a cave, with a large boulder sealing it. Guards were posted. The following morning, the boulder had been rolled aside, and the tomb was empty. The guards maintain that nobody had come and made off with the body. I know one of the guards; lying is not in his nature,” he adds. “This Christ, they say he is risen.”

“What does that mean? ‘Risen’?”

“That he was resurrected,” the captain replied. “That he had risen from the tomb, rose and walked again amongst mortal men.”

Claus was now looking to Androula. “A miracle.”

“As you say,” the captain offered, “the world is always ripe for one.”

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Chapter Six: A New Beginning

Limassol, Cyprus.

Androula stood at the prow of the ship in pea-soup fog. Searching. Claus joined her, enfolding her in his arms. “You’re shivering,” he said to her, pulling her even closer. “The breeze *does* bring with it a sniff of cooler weather.”

“I’m not cold, husband. I’m trembling because I’ve waited so long to return home. I’d given up hope in Jerusalem. I thought I would never see-”

Finally, the thick drapes of fog dissipated, dissolving to wisps, then all was revealed: the solid outlines of land straight ahead. Androula jumped up and down like a little girl. Releasing her, Claus laughed as she jumped onto the dock; this was no fainting maiden. She began asking dock workers questions, going from one group to another.

Claus smiled at this as he led his horse onto land. “Thank you for getting us here safely,” he told the captain.

“You’re welcome. Your wife...the woman who isn’t here. She’s overflowing with...”

“Some might say ‘piss-and-vinegar’,” Claus laughed. “Please forgive my Mandarin.”

The captain was a little confused by the reference. “I was going to say ‘childlike enthusiasm’.”

Claus continued to watch Androula and his smile deepened, taking over more of his face. Finally, he offered up a quote from a distant land in its own strange tongue.

“What language is that? And what does it mean?”

“It means that you are a kind and generous man,” Claus replied. “May health and good fortune go with you.”

As with all others who come into contact with Claus, the ship's captain had been impacted by him. "Should you ever need conveying anywhere, anywhere at all, find me, or send word. I'd be honoured to take you wherever you please."

Claus reached inside his sack and retrieved two small items. Giving them to the Captain, he led his horse away, calling back "For your children."

The captain turned the carvings over in his hands. "How did you know I have children?" He was quite taken with Claus's workmanship. "And *two* of them?!?"

Androula raced back to Claus, tugging at his hand. "Husband! They're still here! Everyone's still here!"

At his generous, big-chested laugh, she got a little abashed. Girly. She brought his hand to her lips. "You've made me so...so...! I have not felt this happy since...since I was *here* last."

Claus pulled her close, kissing the top of her head. "Lead on!"

As they proceeded, Androula pointed things out. Sometimes enthusiastically, sometimes not so much; she had to remind herself that *nothing* stays the same. But invariably, her joy returned every time.

At last, when they rounded a corner, Androula stopped, overcome. Voice breaking, she called out "Mama! Mama!"

The woman looked up, didn't recognize Androula at first...and then her hands went to her face.

It was an understandably emotional reunion. Additional family members gathered. The happy tumult of a celebratory crowd rose to fill the air. Lots of tears.

Eventually, someone noticed Claus, who had purposefully remained still, allowing his wife to relish her reunion without the distraction a man his size, colouring, beard and long hair invariably causes. But as his presence was noted by more and more, the crowd went silent.

Androula didn't quite understand at first, as she looked to everyone's faces for some kind of explanation, then turning towards what they were all gawking at...Claus...then back again at everyone...she realized that they were actually afraid. She lost herself to laughter, bending over in great gusts of release. Finally, she went to Claus, hooking her arm through his. "Everyone, this is Claus."

Silence. Confused silence.

Androula fought to keep down another onslaught of laughter. "Claus is my *husband*."

And another celebration erupted.

~~~~~

Later on, Claus sat with children at his feet, and one on each knee, red sack poised beside him. They were transfixed as he told them tales of his travels.

Androula watched this while she was catching up with her family and other villagers. She thought of their brief time in Jerusalem, gifting the children there, and she understood that *this* would be their life together.

"Your husband is a strange man," a woman said. "I'm glad you love him, and it's clear that he loves you, but he--"

"He doesn't drink," another woman quickly added.

"What do you mean?" Androula asked, some of her attention still fixed on Claus.

"He's very polite about declining some wine, or ouzo...but still he refuses."

"Oh," Androula said, heart melting at the sight of a child going in for hug after receiving a toy.

"He asks for *milk*."

"Milk," Androula repeated, finally entering the conversation.

“Milk.”

“But he’s an *enthusiastic* milk drinker!” a woman offered.

“I’ve never seen anyone so passionate about drinking milk! His thirst seems *endless*.”

“He’s like a suckling babe.”

“An *enthusiastic* babe. A giant one!”

Androula was all grin. “Then this is a good thing.”

“And what of you?” a woman asked.

“Of me and milk?” Androula replied. “Well, I-”

“No. You and children.”

All the women considered this. The only sound was that of happy squealing, the high din of laughter. Finally, into the silence, a woman offered:

“We’re going to need more goats.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Creating a lull of their own in the celebrations, high above the village Claus and Androula lay on their backs, making out animals in the puffy clouds. (He was *very* good at this.) His horse chewed on grass nearby.

“Would you like to stay a while?” Claus asked.



“Could we?”

“Of course. For some time, certainly.”

“And then? After this? What about *your* home? Do you have no desire to return there?”

“My home is now with you,” Claus replied, taking her hand in his. “Wherever we go, wherever we are. But some day, I will take you to the lands I left. That *we* left, my uncle and I. I will show you its wonders! The sky at night... It *dances* with colour!”

“Didn’t you say it’s cold there? What was the word you used? ‘Freezing’?”

Claus pulled her close. “Yes, but you will always have *me* to keep you warm.”

“When? When do you think we might venture there?”

“I don’t know. When we do, it will have been worth the wait. But before that...” Sitting up, he indicated the sea. “Out there. All of it. Everything, everywhere. There is so much I want to share with you. And I don’t believe that it matters precisely where we are. Only that we search out children in need. In distress. And provide some care to them.”

“Yes.”

Claus took a deep breath. “Androula, there are some things you need to know. Some things I need to tell you.”

“This sounds serious. Is it serious? Did they find out I left Jerusalem alive?”

Claus shook his head. “Androula, how old are you?”

She playfully smacked his wrist. “Husband! It’s not polite to ask a woman her age!”

Claus brought her hand to his lips. “Please.”

“I’m twenty-one. I was fourteen when I was taken from here.”

Claus kissed her hand again. “I’m sixty-nine.”

“But how can this be?” Androula laughed. “That would make you older than my father.” She thought some more. “Older still than my grandfather!”

“Our angel told me this,” Claus explained. “So long as men celebrate the Christ's birthday, while gleeful children praise my names at the season of winter solstice, with generosity and good cheer abounding, I would not taste death, that I would live immortally in every heart.”

Androula sat up, joining him. “He told you that? When?”

“When the child Christ’s life was being threatened by King Herod the Great’s thug-soldiers.”

“You saved him? When he was a child?”

“A toddler.”

“And you believe that I too, will live-“

“The angel also told me that I would not be journeying alone,” Claus said. “Androula, how you look right now is how you will always look.” Claus nodded at her blank stare. “This will be both a blessing...and a curse. When next we return here...I mean, after we’ve stayed a while, then gone away...everyone in your family will have aged. Not so, you.”

“So in five years...”

Claus nodded.

“Ten years...twenty years...”

“In time, your grandparents, your parents, your brothers and sisters...will pass. Your nieces and nephews will have children, they will have children...and all will pass.”

“*Children*,” Androula said in a monotone. “What of us? Will *we* have children?”

Claus shook his head. “The angel told me that the sons and daughters of the world would be our children.”

Androula was devastated. “This is cruel. If what you say is true-“

“My love, I will *never* lie to you.”

Androula was now weeping. “This is a cruel fate.” Her head shook almost imperceptibly. “When I was taken, I thought I had lost any chance at having a family of my own. As the years passed, the pain faded. But then we were brought together, and we came here... Oh, my heart is heavy...and my head is spinning.”

“I have an idea,” Claus said quietly.

“Will it make the spinning less so?”

“It will undoubtedly make it worse!” His laughter was an instant solace to her. “But it might lessen the weight of your heart. Will you take me as your husband once more? According to your people’s practices? Here, in front of your family, your village?”

Androula squealed like the child she was, hugging him. “Wait!” she said, wiping her eyes. “His birthday? The ‘winter solstice’? When will these come to pass?”

Claus had no answer.

“And your *names*...?”

This time, a shrug.

~~~~~

This wedding was a simple affair, with the entire village in attendance. Joyous, exuberant. Lots of eating. Dancing. Drinking. And Claus...actually drank wine. For Androula, for her family, her village.

During the festivities, Androula sent her nieces and nephews to Claus, asking him to sing. He looked to her, smiling through her tears. He began to sing a song in a foreign tongue, but stopped. Then he sang his mother's song.

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It was morning inside the honeymoon couple's dwellings. It was dark, and Androula was spooning Claus. "Husband..."

There was a pause, then Claus shot out of bed and out the front door.

Outside, he hurled into the bushes, plastering branches and leaves with vomit. Passersby noted this, and laughed. The bright sun bothering him more than the embarrassment, Claus re-entered the home off-balance.

"Are you all right, my love?"

Claus grasped his head with one hand while reaching out with the other as if to steady himself. "It's my head."

"Oh. The drink."

"Yes, the drink. For the record, *that* was my wedding gift to you."

Androula managed not to laugh. "I know it came at a high price. Come back to bed. More sleep will help. Later, I'll fix you a curative. I have my own concoction. It's a family--"

"No. I need fresh air...and my knife. I will still my innards, cease the relentless pounding in my head, focus my spirit with the balm of small movements. I-" His need returning with a vengeance, once more he was out the door in a flash.

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Claus lounged under the cover of a tree near the shore, putting the final touches on a piece, for which a boy was waiting. Off to the side, another child watched. A girl. Claus noticed her, but the girl kept her stare on Claus's handiwork. When he gave the boy the piece, he looked up to see that his observer had vanished. Claus immediately closed his eyes and sat quietly. Meditating, new names released within a deep smile.

He was awakened by a tap on his knee. It was the observing girl. She held a piece of driftwood out to him.

Claus's shift to 'joyous' was instant.

"Now *this* is what I would call a fine piece of wood!" he said, examining it closely. "What would you like me to release from it?"

The girl frowned.

"Inside the wood," Claus whispered, "a creature awaits. To be released. But you have to tell me what it is? What's *in there*? What is your wish?"

"A dolphin."

"A handsome creature! A wonderful choice!"

The girl revealed another piece of driftwood from behind her back.

His laughter filled the air. "Don't be greedy!"

"Not for me," she explained. "For the next child. To release *their* creature. A gift."

~~~~~

Androula stood at the Mediterranean shore, staring out to sea. She was thinking several things. The first was how nice it was to have this view, something she'd grown up with. She felt comforted. The second was that out there, beyond the horizon lay the life Claus had described to her. Which thrilled her, really. And the final one was connected to it: Even if she was able to stay in the village forever and ever, she couldn't. Being in Jerusalem had changed her, and not just by being a slave. She'd always been fascinated by visitors to the palace of Herod Antipas, and was eager on each occasion to hear of the world 'out there'. She loved her family, her old friends, her birth town, but she'd evolved past this bucolic previous life. She had been blessed. Not just by the angel and her mission, but by having a husband whose passion to see everything that could be seen, hear everything that could be heard, breathe in everything that could be breathed was as big as he was a man. Life was good.

“What is your husband doing?”

Several of the village woman had arrived at Androula's side seemingly out of nowhere, so deep had been her stare.

“I don't know. What is he doing?”

“He's-“

“He's *cooking something.*”

“He has gathered this and that-”

“He has some ingredients-”

“He *brought ingredients with him.* Did you *know* that he brought some ingredients with him?”

“I've never seen some of them.”

“Jerusalem is a big city,” Androula explained. “Its market is enormous. Bigger than our village. Bigger than the capitol. Claus *has* travelled the world, remember. So he's come across food that none of us could imagine.”

“It's not the ingredients that are most strange.”

“Men...don’t...cook.”

“Claus is different!” Androula laughed.

“He has a name for what he’s cooking.”

“Baking. He’s not cooking it. Them.”

“Is it bread? Some kind of bread with fruit in it? Because it has fruit in it.”

“I couldn’t pronounce what he calls them. In his native tongue.”

“He says it’s something his mother used to make.”

“Did *you* know he cooks?!?”

“*Bakes.*”

“The things to know about my husband...” Androula began to say, picking up a handful of sand. After she’d let the grains slip through her fingers, she said “*This* is how much I know of them.” She spread her arms wide, indicating the entire beach. “And *this* is how much I don’t know about him. *Yet.*”

“I’m not sure I’d want my husband to be *that* much of a mystery to me,” one of the woman offered, thoroughly mortified.

“It sounds *dangerous.*”

“You may never know *all* his secrets.”

“We’re going to have a very long life together.”

“You might still not know all his secrets, even if this is so.”

All Androula could reply with was a smile.

~~~~~

Yes, Claus was making his pics. (You may remember him arriving during storytime and delivering a tray’s worth to the elflings.) The children were entranced. To see this stranger hard at work this way, to be sure. But also because they’d never seen anyone but their mothers and sisters cooking. As well, he was singing. And when you combined that with his infectious, good-spirited ways, you had a captivating performance. At one point, he stopped what he was doing to whisper to two of the older kids who, with their new purpose, then dashed away. Claus then returned to his cooking. Baking.

Not too long a time later...though it seemed far too long to the children waiting with watering mouths to finally taste what this giant had been making them...Claus placed a huge plate of the items on a table. Once the pair of kids he'd sent on a mission returned with a jug of milk, Claus clapped his hands grinning all the way. He poured each of the children a mug. “Go on then,” he said. “Take one each.” When they had, they watched him bring one of them to his nose and inhaled its aroma. One of the kids brought his to his mouth, but stopped when Claus dipped his in his mug, and only *then* eat it. One-by-one, the children followed suit. Instantly, they fell in love with the taste. Noting the adults looking on from a distance, he called them over to join them. They did...cautiously...and were immediately fans. Finally, Androula joined them, going to Claus’s side. He dunked one for her...then fed her. The women of the village watched, whispered to each other...then blushed.

~~~~~

After shopping at the market, Claus and Androula were hauling their purchases home equally. As they did, they turned heads. They made for such a lovely sight, their marital bliss manifested in the way they walked together. Despite having known each other for so very short a time, they had indeed done as their angel had guided them to, cleaving to each other.

“You’ve grown quite fierce in your good cheer,” Androula said in their moving shoulder-hug. “Your laughter. Watching you make those around you laugh too...it makes my heart sing. And my features crimson. So say my sisters.”

“Aye,” Claus replied. “I often feel enormous jollity of late. Especially when I’m with you. To laugh is to love.”



“Are all of your kind so quick to laugh? So full of mirth?”

“My people...if there are any left...we’re fierce in everything we do. Fierce in living, fierce in dying, in eating, in celebrating...and in our mirth.”

Androula pondered this. “Do you suppose *he* laughed? The Christ?”

“Well, again, to laugh is to love,” Claus said. “And we know how he loved all. Even those who killed him.” Past this cold thought, his eyes twinkled as he pondered. “He laughed bundled in his mother’s arms when I gave him the tiny fish I’d carved. He was a jovial old soul even then.”

“Do you see him in them? Children?”

“I’ve never thought of that before. I don’t *see* him in them, but I think I *sense* him in them.”

As they continued on their way home, Claus could tell Androula was deep in thought. “You’re doing some carving of your own.”

“Hmm...?”

Claus gently knocked heads with her. “Inside. Carving out thoughts.”

“You’d think me foolish.”

“Speak,” he laughed. “I am your husband, not your father.”

“I never saw nor touched the Christ.”

“No.”

“But...but...”

Claus waited.

“But *you* did, twice. And in loving you, I feel your contact with him. I feel him through you. In the way you speak with people, how a mere conversation with you raises their spirits, leave them a little more joyous, I suppose.”

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## Chapter Seven: The Journeys of Claus and Androula

This is the point in the story where I'm supposed to regale you with the breadth and depth of their adventures over span of... well, *three centuries*. (As opposed a handful Claus's decades between him leaving Norway and his two conversations with his angel. But that would make this tale far too long. As would detailing the 1,700 that followed. That's not to say there weren't some astounding interludes. Jaw-dropping events. Incredible episodes. Breathtaking escapades. But *those* aren't our story. *They're* our story. Claus and Androula, our future Santa and Mrs. Claus. In a nutshell, they lived in innumerable locations doing innumerable things: working in a wide range of jobs; tending to children, caring for them, teaching them, defending them; witnessing some of history's recognizable events; visiting notable places; at the courts or residences of monarchs and rulers, usually delivering something from afar, even if just a message, but on other occasions, playing counsel or advisors, tutors and schoolmasters... Does it need to be pointed out that over the years, their combined *curriculum vitae* was of incomparable depth and variety, so deep in variation as to beggar belief? And oh, the distances they covered. To some of the places Claus had already been, to some of which he'd only heard the barest of descriptions. But they were never what we might refer to as 'tourists', even 'travellers'. In most instances, immigrants en route to yet another home.

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### Nicaea, Bythnia 325 C.E. First Council of Nicaea

The small sounds of a city waking up were played against the sun lighting up up domes, roofs, glass and other elements of this ancient city.

Not so for the Council; chatter and declamations rose and fell, a cacophony of yelling and arguing, a symphony of discord and noise.

The vast chamber that hosted the stupendous and solemn confab was filled with an equally vast assemblage of wizened old men in religious garb, the differences of which indicated that all present were from the four corners of the Christian world. The exchanges between these honoured brethren ran the gamut from patient discussions to animated arguments.

“You have something that many emissaries, heralds, ambassadors, envoys and the such don’t, in the main, have at their disposal,” a regal voice intoned. “It’s not your patience, your intelligence, any wiles you possess...which I’d wager are substantive...any inclinations towards cunning manipulations or facility with terminological inexactitudes. Do you know of what I speak?”

Claus stood in front of a throne. Grinning.

On that throne, a man whose body language wasn’t at all confrontational; a surprise, given the male specimen before him. This was Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus Augustus, Constantine I, Roman Emperor. “Precisely!” he cheered. “That smile! A tiny sun unto itself, it lights up a room! And its genuine nature, its pure authenticity instantly disarms...but just as quickly reassures. I’ve seen you smile at the most hardened of men and watch them fall under your spell. They become children! Children eager to tell you their secrets!”

“I do not ask them to, your grace,” Claus said plainly. “Seeking a truth is not my intent. I am nobody’s spymaster. It’s not like I bid them sit on my knee to be dandled, state secrets then whispered in my ear,” he added, thoughts of his uncle and his mother dancing through his mind.

Constantine considered this notion. It was clear he liked Claus. That he was fascinated by him. “In a world where suspicion and wariness season each and every diplomatic, every commerce, every financial exchange, you...are...*trusted*. I trust you more than I trust even the most pious of holy men, yet I can’t claim to know you well, despite our dealings over the years.” He shook his head at his own candour. “Is this some form of sorcery? Indeed, you speak as if you are a man of faith, and yet you are not a holy man. You do not behave as a priest might. *Are* you a man of faith? To what god do you offer up sacrifices? At whose altar do you worship?” He paused. “Are *you* a Christian?”

“Your grace, I am no holy man. I know nothing of the scriptures. I only know of the importance of the Christ having been born...crucified...and resurrected. I understand you have convened this council towards clarifying the specifics of Christ’s very being, to address contentious issues that threaten to tumble the Church. Those things are not in my domain. Nor my beloved wife’s.”

~~~~~

“Then are we disciples?” Androula asked. “We have no ‘fever’ as those who go to church and worship do.”

Claus and Androula watched an evening procession to a church. Lots of lit torches, candles, incense and general grandeur, sweet smoke, lamenting voices rumbling requiem verses into the late night air. The attendant crowds knelt.

“Are we honouring the calling our angel charged us with?” Claus asked in response. "Are we living within the spirit of his expectations?"

“Yes.”

“Are our day-to-day actions infused with Love and devotion?"

“Yes.”

“Do you address each sunrise with excitement, looking forward to being of service, aiding the children, the opportunity-”

“You know that to be true, dearest.”

“Androula my love, I suspect there is a difference between religion and spirituality. Let us continue to live according to the angel’s request, finding comfort in it, taking strength from it, leaving others to subscribe to their beliefs as they feel they are compelled.”

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### **Yelang Province, China 1023 CE**

Clearly war had come and gone, scouring the landscape; everything had been reduced to scorched timbers and rubble. While Claus dug graves and sang verses of the name song, Androula carried another body in her arms; she walked slowly, more burdened than by the weight of the corpse alone. She laid it beside others lined on the rough ground. Towering over it all, she peered down on their faces; innocence knows no borders, and these were definitely innocents. Androula stepped back, stumbling onto her bum, trembling as her own body came to a rest. She shook her head at it all. “Claus, please.”

Claus continued to dig, a machine in his efforts, names droned in his gravelly timbre.

“Claus!” Androula called out, the effort crippling her.

Claus finally looked up. He walked to her.

“I don’t want-“ she began, shaking off her trance. “I don’t want to just be offering up clothing and food, trinkets, baubles and the odd bath, cradling sick and dying youngsters, each and every one fated to perish, always waiting for the next calamity, the next catastrophe, the next war, the next plague, the next pestilence-”

Claus half-knelt to her, taking her under the arms, easing her back onto her feet.

“What *do* you want, my love?”

“I want to- I want us to raise some children, Claus. To love and care for as if they were our own. I don’t believe that our angel...or God...would deny us that. We will never have children from our own blood. As tortuously painful as it’s been, I have understood and accepted this from the beginning. Surely wanting to love so much more isn’t forbidden. Surely we can still obey and honour the expectations of the journey set out for us.”

“Androula-”

She affixed herself to him, kissing him in the process. When she began to pull away, he eased her into his arms and she wept on his shoulder. “I know why you move us around in the ways that you do,” she whispered. “Departing one place to another tremendous distances away. And it's not just to prevent talk of magic or demonic machinations, the root of our non-aging. It’s also to keep me from getting too attached.” She let all breath out of her lungs and clung to him, surrendering. “But it’s in my *nature* to become attached.”

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And so many a battered house was either given to them, financed by a patron, or purchased by the couple with the receipts from good investments. Excitement and expectation led the way, fixing it up, and over time, filling a home with children, then over more time these children growing up, leaving home, on and on, in villages and towns, cities and metropolises, remaining in one place for only as long as it took to complete the final child's upbringing, until at last, they would leave the area once again to relocate elsewhere.

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An important, if not obvious point: Claus and Androula not only had to travel to distant lands when relocating, they also had to change their names. Regularly. It made no sense to change their appearances, though; at a few hairs shy of six-feet, Androula was taller than most men, and nothing could hide her statuesque frame. Never mind her particular complexion; some of the less-gracious variety of observers would call her 'swarthy'. The first time she heard about this, she was doubled over in laughter so hard that Claus thought that perhaps something was wrong. As for Claus, radical adjustments such as cutting off his beard or worse, shaving his head were, in the words of the great travelling philosopher 'not going to happen'.

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## Chapter Eight: The Printers' Triptych

Very early on in their peregrinations, our immortals took on of his habits and made it moreso, making it theirs. And so together, as a team, Claus and Androula began keeping track of the children they had known, children they had helped, children they had befriended, children they had loved. It grew to be a 'memory activity'. A game or sorts, a friendly competition. Were you riding behind them, sitting at a dinner table nearby or walking in close proximity, you might hear a long stream of names. Popular names, exotic names, dull names, exciting names...all monikers of those who had touched their lives as much as Claus and Androula had touched theirs. I'm sure you can appreciate by way of simple math just how long a list this would grow to over the years.

Eventually, because of the weight of the accumulation of names, they realized they'd have to augment their memory capabilities with some other type of record-keeping. (For the record, these capabilities were astonishing. In fact, many were the royal courts and associations of citizens-with-great-wealth that were entertained by the couple's abilities in this arena. Oh, the bets won and lost, almost always wagered by Androula.) Which is why you would see one of them dictating names to the other, who would be jotting them down. This was *never* a rapid process for them. Because these weren't merely names. They were *relationships*. Some of these relationships lasted a day, some less than an hour...some merely a few minutes. But others lasted years. So when a name was tossed into the air for consideration, always, always, *always* a spirited discussion would result. Depending on the circumstances of the interaction, the emotions attached could be simple, while others, when there were saddish endings, not so much. You see, they *cared*.

It would be a long time before they collated the names in one repository.

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Venice, 1500 CE

Androula opened the shop door and its 'announcement bells' at the top of the jamb rang. She looked to Claus; the warmth of their smiles could stave off even the fiercest of weather. She held open the door for him, and he stepped over the threshold with a jaunty flourish, ubiquitous red sack slung over his shoulder. Once they were both inside, they were warmed not just by the fire in the hearth just off to the side, but by the smell of the printing press, of leather, of the entire enterprise of the creation of books.

"Hello!" a voice from the back of the building called out. They could then *just* hear the same voice instruct someone...which led to a small boy about seven or eight arriving tentatively at the counter, initially running, but then slowing as he saw our couple.

“Well, hello there!” Claus said, immediately going down on one knee. “You must be Matteo. My name is Claus...and this is my wife Androula.”

The boy’s frown mixed with his wonder. “How did you know-”

“He just has a way with names,” Androula explained. “He thinks it makes him appear *important*.”

“*Talented*,” Claus cough-said.

“Hello.” A man in his early thirties joined them. Ink on his fingers, sweat on his brow, a tired expression beneath his smile.

“Greetings,” Androula said, “we were interested in having something printed.”

“A book,” Claus added.

“What kind of book?” the man asked.

“A book of *names*,” Androula said.

“Names?”

“Names we have accumulated over the years,” Androula explained.

“We’re *historians* of a sort,” Claus continued. “They are the names of children we have encountered. Children who have taken up special places in our hearts.”

“A book of names,” Matteo said, charmed. (It wasn’t clear at this point whether it was the notion of the book that had charmed the boy, or simply Claus being Claus. That the man knew his name probably pushed to the latter possibility.)

“An intriguing project,” the printer said. “How big a book are we talking about? How many copies? How many names? And where *are* they? Did you bring them with you?”

“Only one copy,” Claus replied, watching Androula take a good gander at the counter. She shook her head. Then she addressed the floor, and moved some boxes aside. Boxes overstuffed with heavy mechanical items. The bookmaker’s eyes went wide at the ease with which she managed this small task. “About *there*...?” she asked her husband.

Claus opened his sack and began pulling single pieces of paper out. Then fingerfuls. Finally, he resorted to grabbed bunches in his suitably large hands.

The man and his son looked on, watching the pile mount. “Almost done,” Androula reassured them.

“There,” Claus said, victorious...then pulled out another piece of paper. He read it, then showed it to Androula with a grin. “Remember?” Her rich expression revealed the name’s story and its impact on them.

“That’s quite the cache of names,” the man said. “Are they to be printed in any particular order?”

Claus didn’t answer; he was too bemused by Matteo’s regard of the enormous mountain of slips just sitting there, *waiting* to be jumped into. “You have my permission,” he told the boy. “Opportunities such as this don’t come around every day.”

Matteo looked up at his father, who really didn’t know how to respond.

“Consider it an early Christmas present,” Androula smiled.

Claus made as if to roll up his sleeves and dive in himself. “Well, if *you’re* not going to...”

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**Venice, 1550 CE**

With carriages raising a racket (and mud...and whatever else might end up in a public street in those days) behind them, Claus and Androula stood staring at the shop as people moved around them.

“It looks...*different*.”

“What *doesn't* look ‘different’ after so long a time?” Androula asked. “What did you expect? That the building would be unchanged? After all these years?” she teased.

Claus turned to Androula. “But *you* haven’t changed,” he whispered. “You are the same lovely Cypriot Amazon-cum-Valkyrie I fell in love with a millennium-and-a-half ago.”

“Stop!” she laughed. “You’re going to make me blush.”

“Choose my weapon!” Claus laughed. “My endless compliments highlighting your endless loveliness...or these wiggledy-fingers...” he said, digits dancing in a way-over-the-top display of rascally charm, “...making you-”

“Don’t you *dare* tickle me!” Androula replied, performing her own way-over-the-top schtick as she danced away from him... while somehow remaining in place.

From inside the store through gauzy windows, the kind that obscured details, but still provided outlines, a wizened man watched this display of loving coupledness. Though he couldn’t hear what was being said, he *could* hear the swell of laughter, and was immediately taken back to his parents when he was growing up, how dearly they loved one another. In his smile, he reached under the counter and retrieved the item his customers had finally returned for.

“Items left beyond reasonable time-frames incur additional charges,” he announced, holding the book close to his chest as he stepped onto the sidewalk.

“Late fees?” Androula asked, now falling into her husband quietly hoping that he would hoist her into his brawny arms.

“*And* I’ll have to charge you rent,” the man replied. “For the book *and* the years’ worth of accumulated dust.”

“Matteo!” Claus called out, taking him in a swift hug; Androula laughed at the sight. “You *definitely* look like your father!”

“And *you two*...” he marvelled. “How is it possible that you don’t look as if you’ve-”

“We eat well, stay active and get lots of sleep,” Androula quickly offered.

“Papa!” a voice called from inside the shop. “We have a *deadline!*”

“Sounds like quite the taskmaster,” Androula mused, forehead wrinkled with curiosity.

“Come out, daughter!” Matteo shouted, grinning.

An eleven-year old girl appeared in the doorway. Tow-headed and tall, especially long of limbs, she wiped her ink-stained fingers on her apron. “Paying customers, Papa?”

“And we tip very well,” Androula said, moving closer to shake hands with the girl. “Hello, Ariana.”

The girl looked up at Androula, disarmed. “You’re *very* tall!”

“And apparently *you* are quite the businesswoman,” Androula laughed.

“I’ve never met a woman as tall...” Ariana was spellbound. “Do you like it? Being so tall?”

“I like that I’m the perfect fit for my husband,” Androula replied, indicating Claus with head-gesture.

“Oh!” the girl cried. “You’re the name-book people!”

“That would be us,” Claus said.

Androula watched as the wheels in Ariana’s head moved silently but purposefully. “In the sack,” she smiled. “What you’re wanting to ask about.”

“More *names?!?*” her father laughed.

Claus looked at the girl. “We might not be back until *you* have children of your own,” he winked.

“Ew.” Ariana said this as she pulled a pretty wicked poopy-face.

“I understand completely,” Androula laughed. “I didn’t want to have much to do with boys at your age. But about a decade later,” she said, pointing at Claus, “I met *this* fine one.”

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### **Venice 1570 CE**

This time, they managed to get through the front door unsuspected, Claus keeping its bell silent with a long reach of his hand. He waggled his eyebrows at Androula, who stood slightly behind him. Once more with the poked-out-tongue reaction from her.

(In the dictionary, next to ‘loving couple who never lose their sense of fun’ would be a photo –or illustration– these two.)

Suddenly, a tiny one appeared from out of the back of the shop, and she quickly pulled to a stop, almost not catching herself, barely avoiding a tumble onto the floor.

“Marguerite!” Claus sang, going to one knee as he threw open his arms.

Androula smiled as the child leapt up for a hug. “Just *once*,” she sighed, “I’d like you to get a name wrong.”

“As I live and breathe.” Coming into the front of the shop, Ariana –now as tall as Androula– had two more children in her arms with another latched onto a leg. “I won’t charge you rent this time, by the way.”

“No?” Androula asked, moving to the woman, hauling the solo child up into her arms. The girl instantly gave her a kiss...and then a hug of her own.

“No,” Ariana replied, transfixed by her offsprings’ behaviour. “Every time I was missing my father...or my grandfather...I’d pick up the book. Not so much to read it, but to remember Papa tooling the leather, his care he took in choosing *just* the right paper, how careful he was in printing the names. So I thank you for that.”

“Are any of these little ones going to be following in your footsteps?”

“I’m so glad you’ve come by,” Ariana said. “We’re moving. Well, what I mean is that we’re selling the shop. And moving. To Florence.” She rolled her eyes at herself. “Sorry; I often feel my brain is being turned to mush. Every time I have a new one,” she said, bouncing the infants in her arms, “my mind feels like it’s a little more...*mushy*.”

Claus managed to take a split-second look to Androula, who, because they’d been through this moment so very many times, *knew* that he’d check with her, and so demanded her face *not* register any reaction. Regardless, she still experienced the pang, the same pang that reminded her that she would be for all times, barren. For ever and ever, Amen. She could keep the pain associated with the pang at bay...fifteen hundred years’ worth of experience brought with it tremendous skills, indomitable fortitude in calming the spirit each and every time...but in the end, it still hurt. Only love and laughter prevented scar tissue from forming.

“I’m sorry,” Ariana said, placing the children on the ground. “Your custom has been a wonderful family tradition. I wish we could keep it going. But my husband is taking over his father’s business. The gentlemen assuming ownership of the shop are very nice; I’m sure they could do *almost* as good a job as we’ve been doing,” she added hopefully.

“It might be best to *vary* our patronage.”

Ariana hesitated, looking to one, then the other. “I’m not going to pry about...well, how neither of you seem to...you know, *age*...”

Claus and Androula waited.

“But may I ask you one question?”

“Of course!”

Even before she'd asked it, Ariana felt relief. "Are you working in the service of our Lord? On some kind of mission that provides you-"

"Yes."

## Chapter Nine: A Summer Christmas (Sortakinda)

### Village of Tween, Kingdoms of Almaguer and Requena 1631 CE

Early one hot summer morning, Claus and Androula looked out onto a valley. They were on horseback, and a donkey pulled a small wagon behind them. Claus's thick hair was now wonderfully braided, including his beard. Androula's skin was a deep bronze, her hair streaked with gold. Directly in the distance, bracketed by two enormous trees, a waterfall, and from it, a river running through the middle of the village Tween underground before it made its reappearance in the broad space before them. Roads led out of it on either side, as well as the one they were on; it was clear that these were the only access to the village.

"Eleven children in all," Androula said, as if they were in the middle of a conversation. Which they were. (Constantly and always. Naturally.)

"Yes," Claus confirmed. "Five from King Prosper and Queen Arlet in the Kingdom of Almaguer--"

"Alba, Caterina, Estel, Arnau, Gulliem and Iker..."

"--and six from King Arnau and Queen Noa in the Kingdom of Requena--"

"Oriol, Pascual, Flor, Jacinta, Aleix, Dídac and Jaume."

"The kings, twins."

"As are the queens."

"This should be fun!"

"I think it's good every once in a while to do something different," Androula offered.

"While still thinking of the children."



After looking carefully at Claus, she pulled out a rag and wiped his glistening forehead. “Christmas in July?”

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Claus and Androula decided to begin their visit by shopping in the village open market. Androula bought mostly fabrics, Claus picked up some small hardware items and got his knives sharpened. Discussion opened up around them; everyone was captivated by this odd-yet-wonderful couple. Androula hung back a little; she liked to watch him interact.

“Is he your husband?” a vendor asked her.

“Yes.”

“He’s a terribly handsome man. I’ve never seen the likes of him before. And we do get some unique sorts passing through.”

“He’s from far away,” Androula said, the past rushing through her thoughts, all their adventures, all their struggles...all their laughter. “Long ago and far away.”

“I’m sorry? He appears a vital man. Certainly younger than me!”

“People from his part of the world age differently,” Androula offered as she picked through some of the materials piled up on a table.

“And you?”

“I like this leather. Could I have an arm’s worth?” she asked. “And this fabric...two, please?”

“No offense intended, but we don’t offer credit to-“

Digging into her pocket, Androula presented a few coins in her outstretched palm.

“Apologies,” the vendor said with a slight bow. “Fascinating outsiders with money. I’m sure you’ll be enjoying your visit. No matter how brief it might be.”

“We’ll be here for an extended stay. What can you tell me about the poor in the village? Especially those children who have lost their parents, who are left to fend for themselves...”

~~~~~

A little later, a crowd had gathered; there were villagers all around Claus and Androula. None were shy about speaking up.

“You’d think they were children!” “My children are better behaved.” “I’d wallop mine, if they acted that way.” “I’d take mine by the ear-“ “A good spanking. That’s what they both deserve.” “You’d think that royalty would know better.” “And the saddest thing of all is that the cousins are not allowed to play together.” “It’s like they put up a wall between the two families!” “You know, each kingdom will only purchase goods from certain vendors. But what they don’t know is that we often help each other out, trading items to fill orders.” “We consider ourselves citizens of the village, not subjects of either kingdom.” “It’s far too silly, this feud between the brothers,” “The idiot kings!”

There were gasps at this last opinion...then silence...then laughter.

“This ‘never-ending tiff’ isn’t even an ancient one!” one of the villagers called out. “It doesn’t deserve any lore!”

Claus and Androula commiserated silently. (Mind you, their plan was already set to go, no matter the reaction from the villagers.)

“We would like your help in organizing a special event in a week’s time,” Claus finally said. “For the two kingdoms and your village. A festival. I’ll provide you a list of what we’ll require.”

“Who’s paying for this?”

“Are you rich?”

“You don’t look rich.”

“Unless that donkey of yours is standing guard over something particularly valuable in that wagon of yours.”

“You can’t believe you’re going to get either kingdom to pay for it!”

Claus just grinned at these opinions. “I’ll wager we’ll get *both* to.”

“Impossible!”

“My husband never lies,” Androula said with no small amount of pride.

“He can speak his truth until the sheep come home,” one of the older villagers shot back, “but he’ll still lose that bet.”

Claus reached into a battered old leather satchel and pulled out a small bag of coins. Then a piece of paper, which he handed to Androula. “Who’s the smartest assistant in your market?” he asked everyone.

All present pointed to a girl, about 14 years old.

“Sally, the butcher’s daughter,” someone offered.

“She’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

“Sally!” Claus called out.

The girl was in front of him in a heartbeat.

“Can we borrow you from your father over the next few days? Better yet, *contract* you, so he doesn’t lose out on any enterprise?”

“I’d have to check with him, but I’d imagine so.”

A younger girl beside her...seven-or-so...tugged on Sally's trousers.

"This is Emily," Sally explained. "My sister."

Claus bent down to look at the child directly. "Is Emily *your* assistant? Might she be for hire, as well?"

Both girls were thrilled.

As the villagers looked on, Androula posted a notice announcing the fair.

"What does it say?" someone asked.

"Few of us can read," Sally explained.

"*That* has to change," Androula said softly.

~~~~~

Claus and Androula were ready to head out. Claus's red sack was slung over his shoulder; it may as well be a piece of his clothing at this point, rather than luggage. Sally and Emily stood beside them.

"Sally, do you understand the instructions?" Claus asked. "Can you remember enough to get started?"

"Yes, Mr. Claus. I believe I do."

"Good," he smiled. He turned to Androula. "Shall we away to the two kingdoms?"

"Well?" Androula said to Emily. "Are you ready?" She reached a hand down, grabbed the girl, and pulled her up to sit in front of her.

~~~~~

Once they were on their way, Claus and Androula each worked on something. Occasionally, they would pass these back and forth; a mini assembly line. It was also like a very playful dance, the intimacy that only a couple together for a very long time possess. Emily watched all this with great interest. When Androula asked her to hold something, it was the best thing that had ever happened to her. (At least since she was hired for this project.)

“What are they?” the girl asked. “Those things you’re making.”

“Knick-knacks.”

“Bagatelles.”

“Oojahs. Bibolets. Curios.”

“Novelties, bric-a-bracs, kickshaws, folderols-”

“Mustoesines, sierads, bichlimpidis, whim-whams, doobries, bijoux, baratijas...”

“One can *never* have too many gifts,” Androula said to Emily, rubbing her nose into the girl’s scalp, inhaling her scent. When she came up, she saw that Claus was looking her way. He offered a gentle smile...and got a poked-out tongue in exchange.

~~~~~

During the ride, Claus and Androula sang a song in an endless stream of languages. Eventually, Androula managed to teach Emily to sing the chorus with them. The couple delighted in the additional voice.

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(As we take a look at their visits, remember that there were two identical twin kings and two identical twin queens, with much about their kingdoms just as identical. Trust me; once again I’m saving you additional –and boring, to be honest– reading.)

When the trio ultimately arrived at each of the castle gates, the guards stepped out officiously and began their by-the-book declarations. “Admittance is restricted to those who have either been invited,” they told them in perfectly twinned lines. “Or have leave to enter. We operate under the-” They *started* to say this, but when they looked up at Claus and Androula, their challenges melted away. Smiles erupted on each face, a kind of recognition warming their hearts. They now greeted them as familiars, if not friends, waving them inside. Emily gave something she had helped make to one of the guards, who was noticeably grateful...almost as affected as Emily was at having gifted the something. Or as Claus at having witnessed the exchange.

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“We bring you greetings...from the children of the world.” Claus said this in the throne room with a respectful bow, while Emily looked to Androula, who silently encouraged her to curtsy as she did. “From the children of the world.”

“Could you be a little more specific?” a king asked.

“The children of the world sent you?” the other enquired.

“Do you bring any particular message from them?” the first followed up with.

“Truthfully,” Androula said, “the message was for *your* children. Are they here?”

“Why?”

“We come bearing gifts, as well,” Claus replied.

“For *your* children,” Androula added.

“*Our* children?”

“Are they here?” Claus asks.

“*Our* children?”

Eventually, after few more rounds of these back-and-forth exchanges (clearly the two kings were proud *dunderheads*, or at the very least, well-seasoned doofuses, just as the candid Tweeners had maintained), the royal children arrived in the throne room. They were immediately transfixed with Claus...as well as with Emily; it wasn't clear whether the combined eleven children had ever seen any outside their own siblings.

With the royal children all lined up, Claus grabbed what was clearly a very heavy chair, hauling it effortlessly to the middle of the floor in front of them. Everyone was in awe of his strength. He noticed this, picked up the chair and balanced it on his forehead. Sitting at last, he patted his knee, gesturing for the first child to come forward.

“Well, Estel, are you having good day?”

The child –fivish– reached out to tug gently on a braid. “How do you know my name?”

Claus tapped his nose, and whispered “That’s a secret.”

Meanwhile, with Claus’s sack before them, Androula knelt with Emily. They regarded the child on Claus’s knee, and after some whispering, Emily reached into the sack, retrieving a toy. Androula nodded, and Emily delivered it to Claus to give to the child. This was repeated over and over. The children didn’t run back to their parents, but rather, remained in the vicinity of Claus and Androula. The parents marvelled at this bubble that had been created.

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And so, with all the gifts having been given out, Claus and Androula got down to the real business of the visit.

“We are also here to invite you to a festival in the village in a week’s time,” he announced.

“On the Saturday,” Androula added.

“And this festival’s purpose?” a king asked.

“Why, to celebrate children!” Androula replied.

“*Our* children?”

“*All* children, actually,” Claus clarified, mesmer in his voice, rendering any need for clarification about the other kingdom was also invited null-and-void. “But certainly, the royal children.”

“Saturday next,” a king said.

“That one, indeed. Mid-morning,” Androula added. “So we have the entire day to celebrate.”

“Will there be fireworks?” one of the children asked hopefully.

Claus responded in Cantonese. It was a lengthy description of how magnificent the show would be, how dragons and serpents would wrestle across the sky against the backdrop of shooting stars, streaking comets and exploding suns.

“What does that mean?” the same child asked.

“That they will be of a kind you only see in the best of the bestest of your dreams,” Claus replied with a wink.

As they were preparing to leave, Claus hoisted Emily into the air, plunking her on his shoulders to ride up top. “A final request?” Claus asked.

Emily cocked a curious head at Androula, who was barely holding back what is definitely more than a tiny titter.

Claus ignored this. “Could I borrow a pair of your best cows?”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~



Over the following week, Tween was a very busy place. A stage was built. As were booths. Claus worked with some cooks, trying out some recipes. Some were liked, some were subject to pulled faces. Androula meanwhile worked with some of the women of the village and their children on costumes, a few of them already made, some requiring starting from scratch. Regardless, all of the requisite materials were either purchased at market, or brought out of their wagon.

Through it all, the village was about as fun a place to be as could ever be remembered. All you had to do was to ask Sally or Emily.

~~~~~

Saturday had arrived. (A good thing, too; the almost-dozen royal children had become quite persistent in their versions of ‘Are we there yet? Are we there yet?’ Which may have annoyed their parents, but it was actually quite refreshing hearing the excitement in their voices). The Celebration of Children Festival day. Not a cloud in the sky, a sky the loveliest shade of cobalt blue. A slight wind. Claus led one royal train to the fête, Androula, the other, from opposite directions. At the intersection, the roads had been blocked off by a big sheet. Actually, it was a big *quilt*, comprised of at least two dozen bed sheets and other such large pieces of material, many from foreign lands. At the appropriate time, the royal trains stop, and as they do, Sally and Emily pulled back the sheet, revealing the two groups. Instantly each king foamed at the mouth, making to break away back home...but Claus prevented this.

“Your *graces*...” he said, and everything that everyone over the years has pointed out about him, the *way he has about him* to compel people was in full effect here; the kings froze in place.

As they did, the gaggles of royal children moved to meet one another. Though they were excited, they moved slowly, regardless.

“Today,” Claus continues, “we gather to celebrate children! Children of the village, of Houses Almaguer and Requena, and children everywhere!”

Androula looked to the royal siblings and cousins. “Come! Let’s celebrate together!” and led them away towards the festival. Sally and Emily at her side.

The four heads of state remained until the sister-queens finally went to each other. Reunited. All tears and laughter, they too headed off to the fête. Which left only the Kings and their aides...who Claus indicated should join everyone else, leaving the two men.

“I heard tell of something at the waterfall,” Claus said, indicating it in the distance. “A relic, a monument of sorts. A marker of two brothers, two sisters, two husbands and two wives, created long before they’d taken their wedding vows, so long had they been betrothed. I was told that this quartet were, while they were growing up, inseparable.”

“How do you know about-“

“That was a secret!”

“Apparently,” Claus continued, “something happened along the way.”

The two kings immediately began to shout at each other...

...and Claus proceeded to sing a song. His was a voice capable of communicating in *so* many ways. To relay important messages. To instruct eager minds. To encourage damaged souls. To *love*. Right now, though he was capable of issuing a *basso profundo* singing voice, he’d gone in the other direction and was singing- Well, like an *angel*.

Though she was a ways away even now, was Androula heard Claus’s voice floating on the wind, and smiled. (Can’t forget the shivers. Or the goosebumps.)

Though he didn’t sing much of it, maybe a verse and a chorus, the song acted as a comfort, quieting and calming the brother-kings.

“That is a song my beloved wife and I learned in our travels,” Claus explained. “The journeys that have had us witnessing war. Strife. Disaster. This song is about the importance of children. How they should be protected from harmful grudges, resentments or animosities, that they should be given as many opportunities as is possible to embrace life, to live in awe of the wonders of the world.”

In the space that Claus allowed in his pause, his words worked their magic on the men.

“A wise man once told me,” he added softly, “‘Life sends so many things our way that are beyond our control, it behooves us to do something about those things we’re able.’ Your majesties, I beseech you: put aside your petty squabbles, no matter how time and tide have swollen them in your minds, and think about the children.”

There was no need for Claus to say more; the brothers rushed to each other, embracing, one holding up the other in their tears.

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It was a day like no other that had come before it. No matter that we’re talking two kingdoms with all their state celebrations, the hosting of foreign dignitaries, anniversaries and birthdays and the such. Claus and Androula brought Tween (and the royal families) aspects of the greater world that few –if any– had even the scantest notions of.

Oh, the laughter. The screams of delight, roars of amazement that seemed like some wild chorus, the composition of the performance piece owing everything to Claus and Androula’s imaginations and big-hearted intent.

The various games of skill. The donkey rides. (Named Homer, the animal enjoyed them even more than the children; he had always been a little jealous that of the couple’s three four-legged beasts, only he was never ridden.) The kites, the magic, the clowns, the marionette shows, the brief theatrical vignettes starring Claus, Androula, Sally and Emily...and quite unexpectedly, the girls’ father!...the magic, and Claus’s jugglery. (He’d added *pics* to the already-impressive mix; he would munch on them while dazzling with his skills...only to ‘sell’ them at a booth with milk. Naturally.)

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Late in the afternoon, the two cadres of bodyguards watched as the four royals walked out of the village, hand-in-hand heading to the waterfalls. None of the men knew what to do. They’d been asked to ‘stand down’, but...but it was *unheard of*.

“I’ve often found that accepting ‘No’ for an answer is a righteous path to take.”

They all turned to find Androula standing behind them, Emily affixed to her hip...holding what could pass for a cigar box.

“Come; we need to keep you gentlemen occupied,” Androula said, gesturing for Emily to lift up the lid. She removed playing cards. “Surely at least *some* of you have a gambling streak...?”

~~~~~

The royal quartet were sombre...but good cheer bubbled as they approached their destination. Quite big from a distance, up-close the waterfall could be found within the category of ‘astonishingly ginormous’, a breathtaking wall of crashing water, obliterating hearing, crushing all sounds together. To say the quartet were dwarfed as they made their way to it would be as great an understatement as could possibly be uttered. The bookend trees were as big as ancient Redwoods, they too almost impossibly huge.

En route, piece-by-piece they stripped off their clothing. With the removal of each item, their moods lightened a tad more. (Did you know that ‘tad’ ...denoting something small...comes from the word ‘tadpole’? Neither did I!)

Using a secret access point, they disappeared behind the waterfall.

Inside, there was no roaring. Instead, a perfect calm. It was as if they were cocooned.

A huge tree trunk stretched from one side of the rumbling curtain of water to the other of the outcropping connecting the two trees. It was covered with moss.

Getting down on their knees, the kings removed a section of furry growth. Revealed were two hearts carved into the wood, connected by intricate ivy. Inside each of these, the names of each couple.

The couples embraced, wives smiling through happy tears.

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Nobody had seen them before. Yes, rumours about had circulated over the years. These explosions in the sky that filled the heavens with fusillades of phantasmagoria, cacophonies of colour, explosions of excitement. Perhaps the closest description was ‘You know when you slam a big rock into a fire that glows with embers, and sparks plume into the air? Like that. Only the sparks are different colours. And it’s as if someone’s painting with them. And deafening sounds to accompany the visuals.’

Claus and Androula didn't watch the fireworks. Instead, they took satisfaction...nay, pleasure...in watching the childlike awe light up everyone's faces.

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A low hum often makes itself known at the end of a day full of adventure, deep personal experience, or simply *fun*. A tiredness that takes over the body, one that mischievously switches to feeling *energized* and back again until bedtime insistently bumps you. Witness the villagers of Tween returning to their homes. Or the royal parties are embarking on their return trips to their respective castles with sleepy children.

In the middle of it all, one of the Kings approached Claus. "I'll have my paymaster arrange for the funds for this celebration."

"Actually, *I'll* be paying for it," his brother interjected.

"Actually, no!" the other countered, reverting to long-held habit. "It'll be coming out of *our* coffers!"

Just as they were about to go at it, the Queens stepped in.

"Actually," one of them said, "we are *all* going to settle the bill," she added with a smile.

"That's not all! We have something additional to announce!"

"An orphanage," her sister declared. "Right here, in the village."

"And that's not all!"

"And we already have a name for it!"

"The Four Hearts Home for Children'."

"That's not all! Androula has agreed to tutor our children!"

“She’ll teach half the time in one kingdom, half in the other!”

“Or all of them together! In the village!”

“What, with the villagers?!?” one king asked, indignation dripping.

“That’s absur-”

Both Kings got the royal stink-eye from their wives.

Androula winked at her husband. (If you think there have maybe been too many occasions of winking in this narrative conveyance, for the record, you can *never* have too much of it. And you *do* think it’s possible...specifically in regard to their presence in *this* story, then I might suggest that you *could* end up on a certain list. And you wouldn’t fit on the ‘Nice’ side of the ledger. Just *sayin’*...) “If only my husband had marketable skills. If he were a passable teacher of languages, or history or sciences, of the arts of war or animal husbandry or gardening, the planting and harvesting of crops, a juggler, a clown, playwright, musician, actor, magician-

“Prestidigitator.”

Androula now rolled her eyes at Claus. “Prestidigi-“

Claus held up a finger. “No, *conjuror*.” Clearly thinking deeply: “Yes, conjuror says it best.” He bowed to his wife to continue.

“Conjuror, or perhaps experience captaining marine vessels, or running a successful business, or a translator of great renown, or emissary or courier...”

“Alas, I am merely a carver of simple gifts,” Claus sighed.

“And baker of sweet nibblies,” one of the royal children suggested.

Emily held up a hand. “And milker of cows.”

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Using our Magical Time-lapse Device, we can take in a highlight reel of their activities over the ensuing years: yet another run-down home moved into; Claus working with royal architects and tradesmen to refurbish it; Claus and Androula teaching the children, royals and villagers alike; the orphanage being established; Sally and Emily growing older; the royal children growing older; Claus and Androula deeply embedded in the community; Claus continuing his pils and milk tradition.

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At the end of their time in the village, a now-grown Sally and Emily stood outside the orphanage saying goodbye to Claus and Androula.

In the midst of the farewells, a villager ran over to Claus and went in for a hug. “Bless you! You truly are a *saint!*” Teary-eyed, she walked away.

Androula watched this. Claus smiled, but shrugged, a little embarrassed.

~~~~~

From the same vantage point we had at the beginning of this portion of their journey, it was plain to see that Tween had changed. It had grown. Clearly flourishing. And if you squinted, focusing your sight laser-like, Sally and Emily could *just* be seen waving to them.

Claus and Androula looked at each other. She was a little surprised at what she saw; reaching over, she wiped a tear off his cheek. There was a long pause, and then she laughed “*Saint* Claus?!?”

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## Limoges, France, 1729 CE

It might be easy for the reader to assume that much of the adventures over a staggering number of years of our Christmas Couple was sunshine-and-roses. Kittens-and-rainbows. Pics-and-milk. (See what I did there?) Not the case, not the case at all. There were painful occasions that tested what some might refer to as ‘faith’. One such had Androula as a nanny. She was *very* close to the mother, the wife of a man of extraordinary reputation and means. One day, her charge –whose name is Esmée– fell ill. The cause was a mystery. Which meant that its possible treatment was also one. The best physicians are employed. Using a variety of approaches... unguents, salves, potions, syrups, pills and powders...they delivered a variety of failures.

Androula was understandably very affected by this. There by the child’s side day and night, she tended the infant as best she could, offering what she was able to the mother. Having seen similar situations over the centuries Androula felt hollowed-out, fragile, just waiting to be crushed; Esmée was dying.

Fatigued, she returned home one evening to get some sleep; her long history had taught her that while *she* was immortal, she wasn’t all-powerful, and that burning herself down to a guttered wick helped no one.

Claus guided her to the floor, to sit cross-legged. He then sat down in front of her, finessing how she was sitting.

“Claus...” Androula absently protests. “I know what you’re trying to get me- I cannot remove all thoughts from my-”

Claus placed his hands on her knees. “Let us sit and simply *consider*, my love. Just as we would with the masters of the mountains and of the deserts.” An inspiration hit him, and he managed a smile. (Even if it was a tiny one. Which, considering the size of the man, was still substantive. Naturally.) “Let us invite our angel to ponder with us. To consider this, we three.”

And so this is what they do. They sit and they remove all other thoughts in their minds, restricting themselves to the concentration of ruminations about Esmée just as Claus had proposed.

Were you there in their room, you would have witnessed their faces becoming *illuminated*.

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Some time later, Claus and Androula were asleep in their bed. This time Claus was the one doing the spooning. Suddenly, breaking the near-silence (It's true; our Santa Claus snores.) was a loud banging on their door.

“A miracle! A miracle!”

Claus and Androula made short work of their race to the child's quarters. There, Esmée's eyes were open, and she actually managed a smile when Androula gazed down on her as she stood by the mother's side, her hand squeezed by the woman.

The child had begun to recover. Esmée would live. Their angel had assisted.

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## Chapter Ten: Of Elves and Reindeer

### Colmar-Berg, Luxembourg, 1817 CE

One winter evening in the middle of Europe, when snow was piled so deep it made walking a true challenge, Claus and Androula sat around a fire, a lean-to behind them made by sure hands after centuries of practice. The not-very-many remnants of dinner hissed on a spit. They were reciting names to each other. The loving silence they shared between names only accented each child's presence in their lives.

*Bells.*

Faintly, the sound of mournful, dirge-like singing could be heard. It got louder...until it passed nearby. Four eyebrows were raised.

Claus whistled a short excerpt of his mother's song.

Out of the brush came a procession of several dozen elves, walking *on top* of the snow. A mix of male and female, none more than knee-high, and all wearing packs, they presented themselves in an arc of disciplined, serried ranks.

"Waes hael to you, my aelfmen!" Claus cheered.

"And their distaff companions," Androula brightly added.

En masse, they considered this pair of humans, softly conferring with each other.

"You know of us," one said finally.

"That we are neither the figments of someone's addle-brained imagination..." continued another.

"...nor the stuff of wary-minded fable."

“Are you friend or foe?” an elf asked, squinting her eyes.

“Good aes sídhe,” Claus smiled. “Variously named across the known and unknown lands alike as daoine sith, Tylwyth Teg, Ellyllon, haltija, jinn, Mrenh kongveal, diwata, orang bunian, patupaiarehe and several score more,” he added. “*Vos mundi originale earumque artifices extiterunt.*”

“The world’s original magicians,” Androula translated with a smile.

Squeezing Androula’s hand, Claus began again. “We are *friends*. As we are with all good-spirited creatures under the sky. Why do you go so sadly, doleful and dreary-headed?”

The elves replied in turn, reminiscent of handbell choirs, one speaker after the other, as if reciting the lyrics to a song.

“The folk whom we did help aforetime now cry out upon us and say we are creatures of devilry-” “-and set no pan of milk or barley bread beside their doorsteps for us as was the custom-” “-nor do they tell the tales their fathers told of kindly deeds done by we Little People-” “-only freshly forged stories of terror and wickedness.” “For this we are no longer able to come out and play upon the earth’s good ground-” “-nor dance and sing by moonlight in the glades-” “-whether it be by bulbous face-” “-or even slim, silvery crescent.” “Worst of all, our human neighbours have no use for our good offices-” “-but drive us hence with curse and chant, bell, book and candle.” “For countless generations, our traditions have seen us as great artificers-” “-in wood and metal, fabric and stone.” “There are no smiths like unto us-” “-not any who can fashion better crockery-” “-or the finest gold or silver filigree-” “-jewellery made of rare and precious stones-” “-stitching and weaving, brother and sister arts-” “-delicate embroidery and embossery-” “-tapestry and ruggery.” “Long has it been our purpose and our pride to shape things for humans service-” “-and bestow them on the good people of the farms and villages, cities and town-” “-but now they will have none of us or of our gifts!” “Why, to say a present is an elvish gift is to insult the giver in these days!”

Claus and Androula considered all this. “We too, know of rejection and persecution,” Claus nodded. “It is the stuff of heartache, indeed even a crushing of soul when you mean well, but others bend and twist the truth so much by way of bent and twisted dogma that your good intentions are misconstrued. And damned.”

“It is said that the road to Hell is built with the best of intentions,” an elf offered.

“It is also said that no good deed goes unpunished.” All the other elves nodded at these offerings.

“Aye, ‘punished’ is what those who persecuted us have aimed at,” Androula said.

“Sometimes to the most painful degree possible.” Claus’s sigh was profoundly deep.

One of the elves looked to her corps for approval. “We would hear your tale,” she said brightly.

“It suggests some familiarity,” another added.

“Its sounds...it stirs within us...the sense of it...”

“Because to what my good husband alludes *resonates* with you,” Androula suggested, “the similarities of our collective pains endured?”

“YES!!!”

“Gather, then,” Claus told them, “and we will tell it.”

And so the elves settled in around the fire...looking for all the world like *elflings* assembled to hear a story well-told.

“One Yuletide some years back,” Claus began, “we were lodged in a small city. The harvest was not plentiful that year, and want and famine stalked the streets as if an enemy had laid siege to the town. The feast of Christmas neared, but in the burghers’ houses there was little merriment. Scarce food had they to keep starvation from their bellies, and none at all to make brave holiday.”

“We witnessed all this. And it saddened us greatly,” Androula continued. “We could not leave things thus. Not when we felt we could remedy the situation at least to a small degree. We conspired to construct this remedy by way of the necessary materials and some wily industriousness. And so we worked and worked away, our spirits rising with each present completed, so that in no time, our dimmed and weighty moods had melted away, the rightness of our project driving us on night and day, day and night.”

“With sharpened knives, and abundant wood from the nearby forest that we two in tandem harvested,” Claus said, “I was able to fashion an assortment of carved precious things, toys and games and several zoos worth of animals-”

“While I took what fabric and cloth and thread and twine, baublery and beadery...” Androula waited for her phrasing to register with their audience...which it did, resulting in a rousing cheer. “...and concentrated my own talents on thingamajigs of entirely different natures.”

“But because of the want felt so keenly in so many kitchens and larders, we also wanted to provide some sustenance to go with the amusements,” Claus added. “Though our supplies were scant, somehow we were able to create an abundance.”

“We baked and baked and baked, pies and breads and the such accumulating beyond all reasonable possibilities,” Androula said, looking directly into her husband’s eyes. “I like to believe that our angel was with us, once again.”

“It was bitter cold on Christmas Eve, and the members of the night watch hid themselves in doorways or crept into cellars to shield them from the snow that rode upon the storm wind's howling blast; so none saw us as we made their rounds, leaving on each doorstep of the poor a little sleigh piled high with fruits and sweets the like of which those children of that northern clime had never seen before.”

The elves raised another cheer. Then checked themselves and quiet down...but not before Claus winked at Androula.

“One small lad whose empty belly would not let him sleep looked from his garret window,” Claus continued. “He espied us in the scarlet cloaks we both wore, for we went bravely dressed as mighty persons of valour might, those who walk in confidence with princes and emperors.”

“We do so to lend to the acts a certain ‘ceremonial import’,” Androula explained.

“When he waked he knew not if it were a dream he dreamt, or if he really had seen us pass through the storm all muffled in our clothes and our driven, almost feverous intent. When the church bells called the folk to prayer and praise next morning, and the house doors were unbarred, the people found the sleighs all freighted with their loads of comfits on their thresholds, and great and loud was the rejoicing, and children who had thought that Christmas was to be another day of fasting, clapped their hands and raised their voices in wild shouts of glee.”

“We went privily about the street and saw the result of our work, and knew that it was good.”

“And our hearts beat quicker and our eyes shone with the tears of happiness, for we had brought joy where sorrow was before,” Androula added.

“We returned to our home. Though we had not made any plans for our own Christmas feast, we were in fact sated by the thought of the joy we had brought to the children of the town,” Claus concluded.

What the experience meant to the pair was clearly written on Androula’s face.

“Ah,” one elf muttered. “Those were the previously mentioned ‘good intentions’.”

“In the distance,” another grumbled, “Hell awaits, for certain.”

“But when the clergy of the town were told about the miracle of fruits and sweets that came unmarked upon the doorsteps of the poor they were right wroth, and swore this was no Christian act,” Claus explained, “but the foul design of some fell fiends who sought to buy men's souls away by bribing them with Satan's sweetmeats.”

“It is *ever* thus!” an elf cried out, as if wounded.

“Now, the lad whose waking eyes had seen us in our scarlet mantles told his tale, and all the poor folk praised who he had witnessed at work the night before as those who had compassion on the sufferings of childhood,” Claus said.

“But the churchmen went to the High Minister of the city saying, ‘Go to, this man and his wife foment rebellion; they have sought to buy the people's loyalty away by little gifts made to their children.’” There was sadness in Androula’s voice.

Silence.

“When they heard this the clerics murmured one to another,” Claus said, “and finally put forth the saintly pastor of the High Minster to make answer for them all. He was a very learned man and skilled in disputation. He knew how many angels could dance on

the head of a pin, and whether traveling from one place to another, they passed through intervening space. Moreover, he was deeply versed in demonology, and could smell wizardry or witchcraft fealty as the beagle scents the cony,” Androula explained.

“So off to they went to the city’s military commander. And when the High Minister spake, he spake with great authority, and thus he said to him: *‘The poor we have with us always. Did not Jesus say as much, aye, and wrathfully rebuke His disciples who would have had Mary Magdalene’s embrocation sold to buy bread for them? It is no work of merit to give bread unto the poor. If it were Heaven’s will that all men should be fed then we should have no poor, but it is stated most explicitly that the poor we shall have with us always. It is the well-considered thought of this most reverend company that it is little less than a defiance of divine purpose to alleviate their condition. If wise all-seeing Heaven had not willed them to be poor they had not been so, but since their poverty is obviously by divine decree, whoever makes them less poor, even though it be by giving them no more than a dry crust, thwarts Heaven’s will, and is therefore no better than a contemnor of the Holy Gospel. And as all wizardry is a species of heresy, it follows as the night the day that heresy is also a form of witchcraft, and Holy Scripture saith expressly, ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.’*”

“Boo! Hiss!”

“Many an elf has encountered witches!”

“And *none* deserved such treatment!”

Androula took up the tale. “‘Look ye to it, then,’ said the High Minster to the Commander. ‘If you permit this man and woman, who are no better than a witch and warlock, to remain at large you are not friend of true religion, nor of the Landgrave from whom you hold this city as a fief. I have spoken.’”

“‘Amen,’ said all the others in attendance”” Claus added. “‘Our reverend brother speaks most sound doctrinal advice, which you will take to heart if you are truly righteous.’”

The elves waited for the conclusion of the tale.

“The commander would have put us into prison on a charge of witchcraft and treason,” Claus said, “an interlude to consumption by fire, but certain townsmen came to us and warned us of the net the churchmen wove; we escaped before the men-at-arms came clamouring at our door, and we fled across the winter snows. Behind us swept a raving tempest, so that those who sought

to follow were engulfed in drifting snows and lost their tracks upon the road, and finally turned round and fought their way back to the city with the tidings that we had surely perished in the storm.”

Utter silence.

“This was not the first time we had been chased out of village, town or city,” Androula explained. “These occasions greatly exceed your numbers, unfolding as they have over the centuries.”

Claus stood and went to the elves. Though understandably captivated by his size, they felt no fear. He knelt before them. As this gesture was one of respectful gravitas and not idle indulgence, clearly no intent to insult as if to ‘accommodate’ their shortness, the elves swelled visibly with pride.

“Would you come with us to a place of safety and there work diligently to craft things that children are joyous to have in all corners of the world, known and not-yet known, providing endless smiles and comfort?” Claus asked. “If you will do this, I’ll see that your gifts are put into the hands of those innocents.”

“Your purpose seems much greater than merely the Earthborn efforts of two such humans as yourselves,” an elf opined.

“There be an air of *holiness* about you.”

“This much is plain.”

“It is beyond us, yes,” Claus confirmed. “It has been our calling for innumerable lifetimes.”

“Yes,” one of the elves declared. “Yes we will accompany you on this journey, be a part of your endeavours.”

“You don’t have to discuss this?” Androula asks.

“All those in favour,” the elf shouted, “say ‘Aye!’”

“AYE!”



This elf bowed a little, then shrugged happily. “There’s no greater thrill to an elf than the casting of votes.”

“Excellent,” Claus grinned. “Then I have your first commission for you.”

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The very next morning, this greatly augmented company prepared to begin their maiden adventure. When all was ready, Claus and Androula were wearing freshly-made snowshoes. Claus bent to accept especially long straps of leather from one of the elves, handing Androula one of the loops.

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” one asked.

“We can walk,” another offered.

“Though we do not move as quickly as humans,” a further elf explained. “Even with our quick paces atop the snow.”

The elves sat within a sleigh. It wasn’t terribly large, but it also wasn’t plain; clearly, the elves had been busy, the vehicle had been lovingly crafted. Wood and iron, strong buttresses and delicate whorls, greens and reds and golds in perfect combinations.

“There would have to be a thousand of you for my good husband and I to be overly burdened!” Androula assured them.

And so Claus nodded at Androula, but before setting off, kissed her.

As they began their journey, the elves sang a song, this time not a doleful one at all.

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Claus, Androula and the elves ventured north, ever north, Claus’s heart-compass directing them. Joviality and laughter were bounteous as they trudged through bush, along abandoned pathways, up and down mountainous stretches, climbing through valleys, sometimes having to correct course when the way was blocked. Nevertheless, their bearings were consistent. The elves would listen to

Claus and Androula sing in perfect, intricate harmony. That they might not understand the languages being used didn't seem to matter one whit; they were still transfixed. It took a while, but eventually they joined these two human voices, lending to the choir an other-worldly thrill.

En route to their eventual destination, our future North Polers continued their gifting inclinations, fashioning toys and the such for children. Not wanting to put at risk their mission as their ultimate destination called out to them, only Claus and Androula entered the towns and villages, while the elves remained hidden on the outskirts for safety's sake.

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Perhaps the most notable aspect of these times was Claus's hair and beard. Gradually, it went from its long-coloured flaxen with sorrels and rufous streaks to greying, then silvering until eventually, they morphed into the white masses we've all come to identify him with.

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### **Borlänge, Sweden 1819 CE**

One day, in a heavy snowstorm late in the afternoon on the precipice of dusk, Claus suddenly stopped.

*Bells.*

Cocking an ear, he listened. Dropping the the reins, he walked up a rise in the landscape. Once he was there...looking for all the world like a statue...he gazed out...at *something*. Androula and the elves were an attentive group brimming with curiosity, an enraptured audience, wondering what he saw, knowing by instinct that it had to be something important. Finally, into the silence, Claus made a clicking sound with his mouth.

In a broad glade, where nary a snowflake fell, a herd of majestic reindeer in the distance looked up at Claus.

He walked slowly down the hill, letting loose a whistle. And for the final time in this tale, he sang his mother's song.

Androula indicated to the elves that they should all join him, and so they headed to where Claus had been standing at lookout.

What they saw was eight enormous reindeer making for Claus. They weren't racing, but they weren't taking their time, either. While Androula softly smiled, the elves were *very* excited at this. Practically jumping up and down.

Claus and the animals met halfway across the glade. Then the reindeer moved about him in a circle, so that he was the hub in their wheel. Finally, they slowed, then stopped. He went to each one, whispering in its ear.

Androula began to walk down into the clearing, but stopped. "Are you able to bring the sleigh to him?" she asked the elves. One elf snapped his fingers and headed back to the sleigh, while the others caught up to Androula.

Moving about the reindeer to get to Claus, Androula scritch'd under their chins and on top of their huge heads, between their ears. The reindeer seemingly *bowed* to her, nuzzling as much as they were able, filling her with wonder and awe, overbrimming her eyes with tears-of-happiness. "These are *they!*" she marvelled to Claus.

At her childlike response, Claus merely nodded.

"What were you whispering to them?" she asked.

"Their *names.*"

The elf retrieving the sleigh arrived back with it, carting it on one shoulder; it was now no bigger than a breadbox, and, given that he wasn't struggling with it, not swaying from the burden whatsoever, not much heavier than one, either.

"Right there is *perfect,*" Claus told him.

Walking with one on either side of him, Claus guided two of the reindeer forward, arms over their thick necks, leading them into place. He didn't have to repeat this; the others lined up in pairs unbidden. When he was done, the sleigh was now big enough to fit everyone in...and *then* some.

Running along the backs of the reindeer, the elves attached leather harnesses to each; already there was clear kinship between the species.

All was now set.

Squatting, Claus conferred with the elves one last time. They dashed to the back of the sleigh as he climbed up into the ‘driver’s seat’.

“What now, husband?” Androula asked.

Against the faint sound of metalwork, Claus explained. “I’ve told you of the sounds I have sometimes heard. Mostly in the distant past.”

“That set you on your journey from your home. Sounds reminiscent of your mother’s necklace. Your *bells*.”

“Close your eyes, my love.”

Having hurried about, making final touches on something, the elves assessed the situation, looked to Claus, then scampered into the sleigh.

Claus snapped the reins, and as the sleigh left the ground, ascending upwards, ever upwards, the loud jingling of bells now filled the air.

“You can open them now,” he whispered to Androula.

As she did, as they rose above the blizzard, through the dense clouds and the sky opening up beyond comprehension, the Northern Lights were revealed.

“Home?” she asked him in the thrall of understanding that their destinies had *finally* been realized.

“Home!” he shouted, snapping the reins a final time. “Ho-ho-home!”

## Storytime Epilogue

“And *that’s* how my good Androula and I became Santa and Mrs. Claus!”

“Yay!” most of the elflings cheer. (And chirp. Naturally.)

Save for one. Luna. She sits quietly crying elfling tears. (Which are different from humans’ tears both in shape and colour; theirs are completely round...like teeny marbles...and silver-white. Oh, and they taste like peppermint and hazelnuts.)

“What’s the matter, sweet one?” Androula asks, gesturing Luna to come forward. But the elfling seems stuck to the ground, unable to do anything but shake her head and cry.

In one fell swoop, Santa has reached out, plucked her out of the bunch, and brought her back to the bench. She sits on his knee, somehow looking even tinier than the tiniest child sitting there at Christmas night. “It’s OK. The story’s over now. We’re back in the present.”

She buries herself in his chest.

Her elfmates know instinctively not to do anything but let her *be*. (They’re not averse to hugs, or any other such soothings. It’s just that *everything* with elves comes down to *process*.)

And so they all wait.

In time, Luna’s sniffled her way out of her tears...even though her eyes are still welled-up. She stares at the ground.

“What’s made you so sad?” Androula asks.

“Our story ends happily!” Santa insists. “We’re all here! Safe and-”

“You *ate* a reindeer!”