

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE
OTHERS' CHRISTMAS



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KEEP EVOLVING STUDIOS

CHAPTER 1



*The gods are all gone; they left in the night,
Abandoning myth and legend alike.
And when they departed, shutting Heaven and Hell,
Ev'ry creature immortal, to Earth they all fell.*

*Born not to die, now mortal made low—
The gods were so cruel, when they said, "Time to go!"
How could they do this to beasts of their birthing,
Who know of our culture not even the first thing?*

*Angels of light, and fairies of dust;
Jinn smokeless fire, and succubae lust.
All creatures were formed as the gods did deem,
Save one who appears in ev'ry child's dream.*

*He's not angel, nor fairy, nor mischievous gnome,
Yet children 'round Earth oft welcome him home.
They don't call him Zeus, Achilles or Rick,
Instead they call out, "Bring us presents—"*

“*ST NICK?*” I cast a skeptical look at the hobo lying in the gutter. Lying next to him was my best friend, Penemue, the twice-fallen angel. “I’m pretty sure that’s not St Nick.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, for one, St Nick is not real.”

“Not real? Not real!” Penemue spluttered. “Do you honestly believe the man responsible for bringing joy to millions of children is not real? Do you honestly think that a being who not only ushers in a joyous season, but also is the guest of honor at an annual festival, is *not real*? The arrogance of you humans... Not only is St Nick real, he is a legend! A legend... and a saint!” Penemue sat in a clinking bed of discarded Drambuie bottles. I counted twelve. A strange mashup of “12 Days of Christmas” and “99 Bottles of Beer” started playing in my head.

“OK. St Nick was real. But he died... When? Several hundred years ago?”

“Legends never die,” the twice-fallen angel said, patting the unconscious hobo on the head with a sanctimonious tenderness.

“Legends might not, but people do.”

“I assure you, this is St Nick.”

“No... It’s a hobo with a white beard.”

“Are you telling me you don’t believe in St Nick?”

“I’m telling you that he’s just an unconscious hobo, Penemue, and you should leave him alone. And as for *believing*... Yes, I am telling you that I don’t believe in Jolly Ol’ St Nicholas.”

“Let me remind you,” Penemue said, struggling to his feet. The discarded bottles of Drambuie clinked their agitation, and at this late hour it sounded like the ringing of discordant bells. Once standing, the twice-fallen angel spread his wings

pointedly. "There was a time you didn't believe in any of us – angels, especially. Yet here I am, a living, breathing, *drinking* angel."

He was right. I never believed in dragons, fairies, jinn or *gods* until, that is, the gods left. Apparently they got bored or frustrated or whatever emotion gods feel when abandoning their creations, and packed up and left. And what was their last message to humanity after eons of us worshipping them? "Thank you for believing in us, but it is not enough. We're leaving. Good luck." Then – *poof* – gone, and with their departure they closed all the heavens and hells, forcing creatures once thought of as myth onto Earth where they live as unwanted refugees.

I didn't believe in the gods before they left and I don't believe in them now that they are gone.

As for angels...

Penemue arrogantly thrust out his chest – *Pride goeth before a fall*, I thought – and overbalanced by his wings, he fell back on his rump. The Drambuie sounded its discord once more.

"You're drunk," I said.

"And you have an unshakeable need to point out the obvious."

"True," I said. "And here's something else that's obvious: that's not Santa Claus." As if to accentuate my claim, the fat hobo stirred in his sleep, letting out a snort that would have scared off a parcel of hogs.

Penemue lifted a finger. "First of all, how do you know? And secondly," Penemue lifted another finger, this one on his other hand, "I didn't say 'Santa Claus.' I said 'St Nick.'"

"What's the difference?"

"One is fictional; the other is not."

This was going nowhere and, what's worse, I found my rage beginning to bubble up. Again. It had been a tough

month. Who was I kidding? It had been a tough year – the love of my life, Bella, died, effectively leaving me alone to run the One Spire Hotel. I'd been at my wit's end trying to keep her dream alive ever since. A hotel, she'd said. A place where Others will never be turned away, no matter what.

And how will we pay for this if we let them all stay for free? I'd asked one night when she was still very much alive and I was still very much happy.

Those who can pay, will pay.

You think so? I mean... humans wouldn't.

Others aren't humans. Then she'd given me that Don't-worry-it-will-all-work-out look of hers and, well, I'd melted. That's what I always did when she gave me that look. Hell, that's what I always did when she gave me any look.

But that was a lifetime ago and now Bella was dead and gone, and I was the one stuck finding a way. But I made a promise to Bella: to help Others as they found their way in this GoneGod world. That promise is the last thing I have of her, and so I'd keep it, even though it would probably kill me one day.

Penemue, the once-upon-a-time fallen angel, now drunk and permanent non-paying guest at the One Spire Hotel, tried to stand again, this time with considerably more success because he used his massive, dirt-stained wings as crutches.

The commotion was bound to annoy the neighbors – again – and since most of them had the police station on speed dial, I knew I had to get these two inside as quickly as possible.

I lifted a finger of my own and said, "Firstly, you find a fat man with a jolly big beard snoring in the gutter and, because tomorrow's Christmas, you instantly think he's Santa Claus – that is what we humans call *profiling*. Secondly..." I lifted a second finger on my other hand and placed it alongside the

first one, doing so with considerably more grace than Penemue had managed. “If we don’t get you and your hobo-who-is-not-Santa-Claus-or-St-Nick inside, you’re going to spend yet another night in the drunk tank. Wouldn’t you rather get upstairs and sleep—”

“On a bale of hay?” Penemue interrupted.

“I was going to say in your own room, but yes... on a bale of hay.”

Penemue huffed at this. “In Hell, my bed was made from alabaster and gold.”

“Look, I already told you, they don’t make beds big enough to carry someone your size and weight.”

“I know, I know, but still... I’m not a chicken,” he pouted. “I’m an angel.”

“An angel who is literally sitting in a gutter with a passed-out,” I waved a hand at the hobo, “whatever he is. Inside, Penemue. Now.”

“And him?” he asked.

“Yeah, him,” I sighed. “Room 4 is empty. Help me get him up there.”

“How charitable of you,” Penemue said, and I honestly couldn’t tell if the angel was being sarcastic or genuine.



CARRYING a five-foot-five passed-out fat man into the hotel is a damn-near impossible task, but when your *helper* is an eight-foot drunken angel, the task shifts from impossible to absurd. We manipulated rolls of fat and pushed against pudgy skin, and by the divine grace of the GoneGods, we somehow managed to plop him into the tiny hotel room.

As soon as his ample frame hit the bed, he stirred, a smile cracking open the gray bush of his beard. “You’ve been nice. No coal in your shoes,” he said before promptly passing out again.

“See?” Penemue slurred. “St Nick.”

“Drunk hobo,” I countered and threw a blanket over the snoring man.



AS SOON AS we left the room, I was greeted by a chorus of “What is going on here?”

The closer, more pleasant voice came from the succubus, Astarte, who lived in Room 5. Astarte had been living in the One Spire Hotel for three years now, but unlike most of my regulars... Astarte actually paid. You see, after the gods left, Others struggled to find their place in this new GoneGod world – but not Astarte. For the uninitiated, a succubus is a being who literally sucks your life energy out of you via sex – think of her as an orgasmic vampire. After the gods left, her sexual photosynthesis – or rather, orgasmosynthesis – abilities were no longer viable. So, Astarte used her talents in more *traditional* ways. In other words, she traded sex for money, which she in turn used to buy everything she needed: food, water, shelter and lingerie. Today’s ensemble included a black see-through teddy, matching panties and nothing else. *’Tis the season.*

The other, far more judgmental voice came from Judith, my mother-in-law, who was human... sort of. She used to be human, but then she died and, because she never approved of my marriage to her precious Bella, came back to this world

to haunt me as a ghost (well, *poltergeist* if you want to be technical). For years things would go missing, I'd wake up in the night in a cold sweat and I constantly heard this nagging voice that told me I wasn't good enough for Bella. Turns out that nagging voice was Judith's, haunting me from beyond the grave.

But then the gods left and ghosts like Judith no longer had the ability to remain invisible and incorporeal, and thus were forced to manifest. She came back in the same dress she was buried in... and, to the casual observer, looked normal enough, until you realized that Judith didn't walk, but instead floated around on the tattered remains of what used to be her legs.

I lifted up my hands in surrender. "What is it now?" Before they both could begin their relentless complaints, I cried out, "One at a time! Astarte, since I can guess what your issue is, I'll let you go first."

"You promised me Room 4," she said in a sultry Parisian accent. I was pretty sure Astarte didn't speak French and had never been to Paris, but only spoke that way because she knew the accent drove me wild (I prayed to the GoneGods that *Judith* didn't know this).

"I did?"

"Yes! Humans aren't the only ones who have parties on Christmas. When I ruled over the Fertile Crescent, we frequently used the Winter Solstice to—"

"Let me guess: host an orgy."

"Worship, Jean-Luc. *Worship*."

"Worship with lots of people in one room?" I asked.

Astarte nodded.

"And most if not all of them are naked?" I asked.

Again the succubus nodded.

"Orgy, Astarte. That's an orgy."

"Actually, Jean-Luc," Penemue interjected, "many sex cults

in the Far East do not experience climax during their fornications, oft times—”

“Penemue. Get to the point,” I said.

“Not all orgies are orgies,” the angel muttered under his breath.

To this Astarte nodded in agreement.

“Fine, fine,” I said, turning back to Astarte. “The two rooms on the second floor are empty, will they do?”

Astarte grumbled but, seeing that this was the best deal she was going to get, acquiesced with a bow.

“Now hold on...” Judith said, staring at me with eyes of condemnation. “Tomorrow is Christmas Day, and I will not sing Christmas carols to the accompaniment of moans and groans!”

“Fine,” I said. “Astarte can throw her party in the cellar, which should be soundproof to any... musical ‘accompaniment.’ There’s more space down there anyway.”

Astarte cocked a subtle grin and I got the feeling that the cellar was what she wanted in the first place.

“Now, if there isn’t anything else I can help you with—”

“Actually there is,” said all three this time.

“What *now*?”

All three of them started talking. From what I could gather, Judith wanted access to the kitchen to cook a turkey; Penemue wanted more hay, Drambuie and books (and had no money for any of it); and Astarte wanted the master key so she could take the bedding and linens from the unoccupied rooms to furnish her *worship* party downstairs.

And even though it was damn near midnight, they all wanted it now.

Just as their demands were reaching a crescendo, I cried out, “Enough!” The force of my voice must have been quite jarring because all three stopped speaking at once. “I don’t get it... All year, I do stuff for each of you. You,” I pointed at

Penemue, "I bail you out of jail, I give you money that you squander on booze and I'm constantly helping you with some harebrained idea." I gesticulated wildly at the room housing the drunk hobo to prove my point.

"And you," I pointed at Astarte, "I let you have your parade of costumers, but no matter how many times I tell you, you just don't seem to get that wearing lingerie out in public is *not* an acceptable thing to do."

I finally turned to Judith. "And as for you... I get why you think I wasn't good enough for your daughter. She was amazing and the truth is, no one on this Earth was good enough for her. But I did my best and she loved me! For that reason, if nothing else, I deserve some slack!"

I started down the stairs to my room, then turned back. "Do any of you know how hard running this damn hotel is? We hardly have any guests and when we do, half of them can't pay anything and the other half thinks that a vial of ground granite is a perfectly acceptable form of payment."

"Actually, for dwarves, granite dust is very valuable—"

"Shut it, Penemue! Seriously. Not now. Just for one day can't you act like what you are? An *angel*." I shook my head in frustration. I looked at my watch – quarter past midnight. "You know what? It's officially Christmas Day and I'm taking the day off. For the next twenty-four hours I'm on holiday and you guys are on your own. Now, if you'll excuse me... Goodnight."

And with that I left a drunk angel, a succubus and the poltergeist of my mother-in-law alone on the stoop of the third floor landing.

Hallelujah!

CHAPTER 2



*Inside the room, the hobo hears all;
Jean-Luc is just mad, sad and appalled.
Though this hotelier thinks he's no St Nick,
He is—or was, but the world lost its magic.*

*The gods may be gone, and with them magic's throne,
But there's still a bit left in ol' St Nick's bones.
So harkening back to who he once was,
He touches the hearts of ghost, angel and succubus.*

*Inspiration's within and also without,
For these Others three, there's little to doubt:
They owe Jean-Luc for One Spire's refuge;
So this Christmas Day, why not give back what they've—?*

“I REFUSE TO TAKE THIS ANYMORE,” I said with a huff as I walked into my room, slamming my door. Immediately I regretted it. Tink would be asleep. I looked over at my shelf.

It was filled with relics of my childhood: the complete ensemble of 1984-'91 G1 Transformers, a troop of GI Joes, Smurfs, Voltron, Cabbage Patch Kids and a herd of My Little Ponies. Castle Grayskull – Tink's home – didn't light up, so either I didn't wake up the three-inch-tall golden fairy or she knew I was in a mood and chose to pretend to sleep.

Either way, I whispered "I'm sorry" in the direction of the castle and went to bed.

The real world might have been overwhelming and frustrating, but there was one place I could always go to find peace. My dreams.

I closed my eyes, figuring it would take a while to fall asleep... but it didn't. Either I was more exhausted than I thought, or I was excited to see the girl of my dreams again.



"MERRY CHRISTMAS," she says.

Bella stands on the beach, wearing the same sleeveless sun dress that she wears on all our nightly rendezvous. It's the dress she wore the night I proposed to her. The same dress she wore when we drove up to my PopPop's cabin for what would pass as our honeymoon.

The dress she was wearing the day the Others killed her.

"How do you know it's Christmas..." I start, but then I remember. Tapping my head, I smile and say, "Because you're in here."

"And in here." Strolling over to me, she places her hand on my chest. Her hand passes through me like a ghost. But Bella is no ghost... She can't be. For when the gods left, they closed all the heavens and hells. Since the GrandExodus, the

souls of the dead have had nowhere to go. They just fade into black and disappear forever.

And Bella died after the gods left. After the GrandExodus. My Bella is gone. Forever.

But not in my dreams. This Bella – standing on the beach with her hand pressed to my heart, but not actually touching me at all – is just a hallucination conjured by a sad man who misses his wife. And for reasons that Freud would have a conniption trying to figure out, Dream Bella and I never touch.

As her hand passes through me, I feel the old pain. What I wouldn't give to be able to touch her again... Hell, what I wouldn't give to have any part of our past be tangible once more.

Bella senses my disappointment and says, "No pouting. Not today."

"Why not? Today seems like a totally reasonable day to pout."

"Christmas?"

"No. Tuesday."

"Oh, ha-ha, mister. OK, fine, pout. But while you do, why don't I give you your Christmas gift?"

"There's only one thing I want for Christmas," I say, reaching out my hand.

She doesn't try to take it. "Remember our first Christmas?" she says. "As man and wife?"

She waves her hand and the beach that we stand on fades away, its grains of sand coming together to form a hard, uneven wood floor. The water of the sea rises up and becomes four walls covered in terrible, pastel wall paper.

She has transformed the beach into our first apartment, the one we lived in right after the gods left. The world was in turmoil during those days and we were broke, afraid of what

the appearance of Others meant for our world and unsure what the future would bring. And I had never been happier.

An old foldout poker table sits in the middle of a living room. On the table are lit candles and a red-and-blue polka-dot tablecloth. "What? Where did you get this from?" I say, rubbing the cloth between my fingers. "I lost this thing years —" I stop myself. "You have it because this is a dream and you are a figment of my imagination built from my memories of you."

"Bingo," the dream of my Bella says.

"So what else will my subconscious conjure today?"

"Oh, don't be like that," she says. "Such a cynic. Tell me, are you happy to be here, with me, now?"

"Yes."

"Then just because this isn't real doesn't mean you can't be happy to be here. Besides, reality is overrated." She gestures for me to sit down. "And I say we indulge the lie for as long as this night lets us."

She pours me a glass of wine and picks it up, sipping. Even though I can't taste it, the memory of that cheap, super-market wine floods back to me. It's bitter, bordering on vile. And I love it.

She balks at the taste, passing me the glass. "I'll never know how you could drink glass after glass of that stuff."

"Just gets better with age."

"Or inebriation."

"Indeed," I say, lifting the glass. I look over at the love of my life and suddenly I feel a vast emptiness come over me. I miss her. And dreams, as pleasant as they are, will never be enough.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"It's been tough and I don't see it getting any easier."

"I know. But you can take it, I know you can."

“Can I? I know I made you a promise to keep the hotel working and always open for Others, but...” I shake my head.

“Jean-Luc,” she says, her voice carrying with it a kindness that makes my soul swoon with comfort, “I would never ask you to do something you couldn’t handle. You know that.”

“I do, but still...” I take a deep breath, then put down my glass and exhale with a sigh. “Bella, can I ask you something? A Christmas gift of my own, if you will.”

“Of course, anything.”

“Can you free me?”

“Of what?”

“My promise.”

“But Jean-Luc,” she says, giving me a curious look that I have never seen before. “You think I’m a figment of your imagination. Following that logic, I can’t free you of *anything*.”

I mull this over. “Maybe. But you behave exactly like Bella does, so in a very real way, you are her. Tell me, if she were alive today, would she free me of my promise?”

This seems to hurt Bella’s apparition, because she looks down and she bites her lower lip. I honestly don’t know if she is upset because I don’t see her as my wife or because I want to be free of my promise.

She sits silent for a long moment before getting a smile on her face. She stands up and walks over to the hole-in-the-wall that once passed as our kitchen and pulls out a tray of cookies. “I made these for you. Your favorite. Chocolate chip and macadamia nut.”

The memory of freshly baked cookies whisks into the room as she places the tray in front of me. I pick up a cookie but don’t eat it. “You didn’t answer my question,” I say.

“What good would an answer be?”

“I need to know that, if I walked away from this, she — ah, I mean *you* — would understand.”

"She — ah, I mean *I* — would want to know why," she says, her voice mocking my cadence.

"Because they cause me nothing but misery."

"They're lost. Refugees on a planet that doesn't want them. Our culture is so foreign to them and—"

"So what?" I say. "They should learn. Adapt. Evolve."

"They're trying, but it takes time."

"Again, so what? Why do I have to suffer because they're slow at catching up?"

"Because no one else will do it. You have fought in their corner for so many years—what's suddenly changed? What's going on?"

"What's going on is—" I throw the cookie back on the tray. "—is that I can't do it anymore! Yeah, I fought for them, but that was because of *you*. You were my strength. You were — *are* — the best part of me. But you're not here anymore. You're dead, killed by *them*."

"Jean-Luc, you take that back right now," she says, anger rising in her voice. "Penemue, Astarte and my mother had nothing to do with my death. Lumping them all into one neat little package is not only wrong, it's irresponsible. You know that."

I lift my hands in surrender. "Yes, yes, I do. I'm sorry. It's just that lately it's getting harder and harder to hold onto you."

"But Jean-Luc... I'm here every night."

"No, the memory of you is here every night. You're dead." I point at the tray. "And this... None of this is real."

As if to accentuate my words, there's a thudding noise that causes one of the walls to come crashing down. "You see?" I say. "That's the real world knocking. Probably Penemue drunk, or Astarte throwing some wild orgy and Judith complaining about it." Another thud, followed by another wall falling. "Answer my question, please... Before I

have to face another day of this, please answer my question.”

She gives me a look that says, *patience*.

“No.” Another wall comes crashing down. “Not this time. I need an answer.”

“Do I relieve you of your promise?”

“Yes?”

“In answer to your question, I say... Wait a day. Wait a day, and if you still feel like you’re done with it all, then the answer is yes, you are free of your promise.”

“Thank you.”

The final wall comes crashing down and reality replaces my dreams.



I WOKE with a jolt to another thud on a door. “Coming,” I said, pulling off my blanket.

Light streamed in from the window and I looked over at my clock. It was one in the afternoon. I guess I did manage to sleep in after all.

Another two knocks, and with a bitter “Yes, yes... I’m coming,” I readied myself for whatever drama waited for me on the other side of that door.

CHAPTER 3



*But succubus, angel and ghost alike,
Know not what are Jean-Luc's preferred delights.
Each ponders and pines and wonders and plans.
What gift to bestow on this frustrated man?*

*Astarte knows lust would not entice;
If anything, Jean-Luc wants her to play nice.
And as for Judith, once flesh and bone,
She does not like her son-in-law's tone.*

*The twice-fallen angel, now sobering up,
Knows not what Jean-Luc prefers in his cup.
With a wave of his wand, a flick of his hand,
Good ol' St Nich'las helps them under—*

“STAND STILL,” Astarte said in a British accent that would have made Jane Austen proud. “You’re going to mess them up.”

I looked over at Astarte, who was wearing a Victorian dress complete with bodice, a crinoline skirt and white lace gloves. She was carrying a little parasol. "Oh, like they did a good job on you?" I said, overemphasizing my sarcasm in hopes that she would detect it.

She didn't. "Exactly. They did a perfect job for me, and if you'll only stand still, they'll do a perfect job for you."

Ten minutes ago she had knocked on my door dressed like an extra in a Monet painting. That threw me off. I was used to her being barely clothed, often completely naked and, on more than one occasion, in the throes of passion. If Astarte sensed my confusion, she made no show of it; she daintily lifted her hand in my direction and said, "Shall we?"

"Shall we *what*?"

"Why, prepare for Christmas dinner!" And with that Astarte had simply taken my hand and led me to her room, where four pixies greeted me with scissors and needles in hand. They tore off my clothes, which, considering I was still in my pajamas (in other words, T-shirt and underwear) wasn't much. Before I could protest, they immediately started fashioning a suit over my body. Talk about bespoke. It felt like high fashion's equivalent of being in a NASCAR racing pit.

Soft wool was sown over my legs to make my trousers. Egyptian cotton was measured, cut and sown over my torso to make a shirt, complete with pleats. More soft wool, lined with silk for my jacket. Hell, there was even a dwarf in the corner cobbling my shoes.

In less than twenty minutes I was in a three-piece suit, complete with a red silk tie.

"Ah, they forgot my underwear," I said.

"They didn't forget." She rolled her eyes. "Come on, Jean-Luc... You can only stop a leopard from mounting its mate for so long."

"I don't think that's the expression."

"Is it not?" Astarte lifted her hand and guided me out of her room and down the stairs.



THE ONE SPIRE Hotel isn't big. Once upon a time, it was a hostel for backpackers who made their way through Paradise Lot to wherever was next on their trek. The One Spire Hotel was built to be small yet fit lots of people, so it was efficiently designed for sleep and nothing else.

But amongst those unshowered young trekkers, it was considered "upscale," simply because it had a small room in the basement that was used to serve breakfast. Now that room was mostly abandoned, only used by Miral, the local doctor, to throw her weekly "Coping with Mortality" seminars.

A table was set up in the middle of the room, and Judith stood at the head of the table with a carving knife and a smile. I hadn't seen Judith smile since, since... Well, since forever. I looked at the big knife in her hand and gulped. That smile wasn't helping, either.

But before I could say or do anything (like run away, perhaps), Judith clapped her hand and two fairies flew into the room. They guided Astarte and me to our chairs, placing napkins on our laps and pouring us each a glass of wine. They buzzed off and returned with turkey, cranberry sauce, three kinds of potatoes, Brussels sprouts and stuffing. Judith's smile widened as she started to carve the turkey, asking only one eerie but oddly appropriate question: "White or dark?"

“Both,” Astarte said, with a sultry moan that implied she wasn’t just talking about turkey.

“White,” I said, still unconvinced that this wasn’t some kind of trick or dream or trick in a dream.

“And dark for me,” Judith said, unable to resist throwing Astarte a judgmental look before shaking it off and smiling again.

The fairies started serving us the trimming. Once they were done, they fluttered out of sight.

I took a cautious bite... It was good. Better than good. “Judith, did you make all this?” I asked.

Judith nodded.

Astarte took a bite of cranberry and said, “This is almost as good as what the hobgoblins of Sherwood would make. Back in the seventeen hundreds, I spent a lot of time in their woods and—”

“Astarte,” Judith said in an admonishing tone, “it is not polite to compare a hostess’s meal to that of other cooks. We promised to try.”

I braced myself for one of their typical full-blown rows. But instead Astarte took a deep breath and said, “You’re right. How silly of me.”

This day was getting weirder and weirder.

Awkward silence followed, and I took several bites before wading back into the conversation with, “Where’s Penemue?”

“Who knows?” Judith smirked. “We knocked and knocked on his door, but he didn’t answer.”

“I believe the human expression is ‘sleeping through it,’ ” Astarte mused.

“Actually it is ‘sleeping it *off*,” Judith corrected.

“Off?” Astarte tilted her head at this. “Humph, I guess that makes sense. In ancient Assyrian, we used to say, ‘Sleeping until the carp passes through.’”

We both gave her a blank look.

"That makes little to no sense," Judith said.

"Well," Astarte said, "it is a rough translation and in my culture carp are sacred and... Yes, it makes no sense. But then again neither do so many of your human expressions. 'Hammered': I have heard you refer to Penemue as such with nary a hammer in sight. 'Sloshed': yet there is no liquid in which he wades. 'Sleeping it off': what is on him that needs to fall off." I thought Astarte was goading Judith into a fight, but the succubus was smiling as she spoke and I realized she was making a joke. I've never seen Astarte make a joke. Well, not clothed at least...

Judith laughed. I mean she actually *laughed*.

"Regardless," Judith said, wiping away a tear. "We figured a hungover, annoyed angel would ruin lunch and we wanted to... You know." She nodded in my direction.

"Well, this is lovely, thank you," I said.

"Yes," Astarte said. "I have never enjoyed an event without sex until now."

"Well, maybe this is the start of a new life for you," Judith mused.

Astarte nearly choked on her wine. "I doubt it," she said with a sultry wink.

"I don't know... The occasional party that isn't punctuated by moaning and groaning—"

"Wouldn't be a party at all. Not for the Queen of Lust that is," Astarte pointed at herself.

"Astarte, remember we said we'd try. *Trying* means—"

"I said I'd try today. Once today is over I will—"

"Trying doesn't last for one day," Judith said.

"Well then, why don't you try my way for a while?" Astarte purred. "A poltergeist's rage can really shake things up when—"

"As if I would ever—"

"Here we go again, questioning my ways. But have you

ever considered that maybe it should be I who question *your* ways? After all, a chaste life is a boring one.”

“ ‘Chaste?’ Just because I don’t fornicate with everyone that I see—”

I slammed my hand on the table. “As nice as it is to go back to what makes us comfortable – namely ripping into each other’s character – I was actually starting to enjoy the peace and quiet.”

Both Judith and Astarte looked at me, evidently remembering their promise to be good for a day.

So Judith smiled and Astarte became conservative again, and we enjoyed our meal for exactly three minutes before Astarte muttered, “I know how to make that smile more permanent... After all, someone without legs can be quite—”

“Astarte,” I said.

“Why, you sex-obsessed—”

“Judith, please,” I cried out.

“Have you ever slept with a ghost? You never know what you can go through and what you can’t—”

“Both of you, please shut up!”

But it was too late: Astarte and Judith had returned to their old ways.

I was considering flipping the table, perhaps throwing gobs of meat at both of them, when a giant *THUD!* shook the entire basement.

We all ran upstairs, followed by a flurry of fairies, and out the front door, where we saw a friggin’ eighteen-foot pine tree standing in the middle of the road. On top of it was Penemue, striking a majestic pose as he balanced on the topmost needle – a single angel on the head of a pine.

“What the hell are you doing?” I screamed.

The twice-fallen angel cocked an eyebrow before saying hesitantly, “What you asked me to do?” He returned to his regal stance.

"I don't remember asking you to uproot a tree and—"

"I beg to differ. You said that all you wanted for Christmas was for me to act like an angel. It's Christmas. What is more angelic than an angel standing atop a Christmas tree?"

"He has a point," Judith said.

"Get down from there!" I said, slapping my head. I could just see the police report: *unauthorized kindling in a city street*. How much would the fine for that be? "Now!" I screamed.

"Oh, Human Jean-Luc, you are being quite ungrateful," Astarte cut in. She was selectively ripping off pieces of her Victorian dress in what can only be described as a reenactment of an 1800s burlesque show.

"I'm being ungrateful?"

"Indeed. Look at us. Judith is being polite. For you. I am dressed like a... a... I don't know what I'm dressed like. All I know is that I *tried*," she said, removing her glove. "And as for the angel... He only did as you instructed. Don't you see? We're all trying very hard to give you a very merry, merry Christmas."

"This is a 'very merry, merry Christmas?'" I said. And then it hit me: Judith standing there, her lips pursed so tightly together that her lip line was (quite literally) whiter than a ghost, Astarte in her dismantled Victorian dress, and the angel Penemue on top of a GoneGodDamn Christmas tree...

It was too much. It was too... "Ridiculous," I muttered to myself. As the word came out of me, so too did the months and years of my life pour out. The relentless Other drama, the absurd situations that they put themselves into, the hilarity of this new GoneGod world. It was all too much.

I did the only thing I could do when faced with lunacy: I laughed.

And laughed and laughed. I laughed until my guffaws were chortles mixed with titters and snorts. I laughed until

my sides hurt and my eyes had no more tears to shed. I laughed until I was dizzy, as my soul emptied of rage and filled with mirth.

I laughed until I started seeing things. For in the blur of bliss, I could have sworn I saw Santa's sleigh fly over Penemue's Christmas tree.

The sight of it only made me laugh some more.

I laughed and laughed because in the end, Astarte was right. They did give me a very merry, merry Christmas.



I WAS RIGHT. Well, *half* right. The police did come and they did fine me, but not for the tree. By the time they showed up, Penemue had already hoisted it up in the air and returned it to wherever he'd stolen it from. The fine was for *disturbing the peace* and *public intoxication*. I tried to argue that I wasn't drunk, but all that came out were tear-filled chortles. Officer Steve, the youngest of the Billy Goats Gruff and one of Paradise Lot's finest, even called Miral – our angelic local doctor – to make sure I wasn't, in his words, "broken".

Miral said I was suffering from the terminal condition of being human.

I couldn't agree with her diagnosis more.

Eventually the police left and Astarte, who at this point had ripped off enough of the dress that she might as well have been naked, went inside with a lustful wink. Judith rolled her eyes before floating away, and that was when I knew things were returning to normal.

As I walked to my room, I thought to myself that I would keep my promise to Bella – if only for a little bit longer. After

all, she was the best part of me, and why throw that away? It didn't change the fact that I missed her, and that I would give anything to have at least a small part of her with me.

Maybe that was what my promise gave me, that for as long as I kept it, the part of her that *cared for everything around her* would still be with me. That would have to be enough.



I OPENED my bedroom door with a sigh, and what I saw waiting for me on my bedside table brought forth sober tears. For, sitting there was a plate filled with chocolate chip and macadamia nut cookies.

*COOKIES ARE FOR SANTA, freshly baked and fair,
But even St Nick is willing to share.
And as for believing—you don't have to! It's OK!
I believe in you—Merry Christmas and good day!*

