

Last Christmas

It was late afternoon and touching darkness as Nicholas Hill sat at the edge of the small wharf. His feet dangled over the side. He drank in silence, crumpling each beer can and tossing it onto the ice before him. The cans were getting harder to see as they shimmied along towards the shadows.

Otto, King of the Elves, sat beside him. He did not drink, opting instead to smoke weed from his corn cob pipe. He joined Nicholas in silence until he decided it was time to speak.

"You do know this is nothing personal," he reminded his friend. "The council has decided, on a myriad of factors."

"How long has this been frozen, Otto?" Nicholas asked as he threw another can.

"I dunno. Maybe six hundred years. Just before you came. You know someone's going to have to pick those up, right?"

Nicholas threw another can in response. This time it was full. "Have they decided on the replacement yet?" he asked.

"I believe its the Kringle gentleman. He had a strong case in his favor. I'm not sure though." Otto lied.

Nicholas tutted his disgust. "The German?" he asked. He looked at Otto with raised eyebrows. They're replacing me with the German? Jesus. And stop crossing your fingers when you lie. It's a dead giveaway."

"Jesus had no part in this. He left it to us. He knows better than to micromanage."

“The German,” Nicholas muttered as he stared out over the lake. “Augustine have mercy.”

“Any thoughts as to what you plan to do? Have you reached out to my cousin in Detroit?”

“I’m NOT selling cars.” Nicholas answered. “I’ll work a garbage truck or cut wood or even go roofing before I do that. And I still have my fists if nothing else works out.”

“Selling cars is honest work, I’ll have you know,” Otto pointed out, but neither of them thought it was. Then the elf added, “Maybe there is a larger market for old, out of shape pugilists than I realize.”

“This place grew since I came here,” Nicholas smiled and looked at Otto. “Just one shop back then, no tunnels.”

“No indoor plumbing, no union, no grey hair and no arthritic knees,” Otto chimed in pointing at both their legs.

“The old sleigh that weighed a tonne, and only three reindeer,” Nicholas added, smiling. He took a drag off Otto’s spliff and Otto cracked open a beer.

“This should be rum,” Nicholas said as he looked at his can.

“Spiced rum,” Otto corrected him.

“Jesus, its been six hundred years?” Nicholas asked. “It doesn’t seem that long.”

“Time eternal for those that are deemed Saints.”

“How long have you been doing this? No vote for banning elves, eh?” Nicholas asked.

“Too long. And, no votes for those that are already cursed,” Otto told him.

“I remember being told this wasn’t forever,” Nicholas remembered. “But still. its hard to accept.”

“I know. But you are going out on top,” Otto stressed. “And we’ll keep in touch,” he added as he offered his baby finger. An elven promise. Nicholas took his own baby finger and wrapped it against Otto’s. A deal was a deal.

“Carol going to go with you?” Otto asked.

“The current Santa may have gotten canned. But not the current Mrs. Claus,” Nicholas asked. “To be honest, I haven’t told her yet. Not even sure I’ll ask her. She likes it here more.” Nicholas knew Otto would be MORE than fine having Mrs. Claus stay back. Prick. “Do I do this year or is that it?”

“I’ll know more tonight. Do you want this last year for it?” Otto asked.

Nicholas stared out at the lake, then towards the village. “Yeah. I do,” he admitted. “I’d like to go out on top.”

Before Otto could answer, the fire bells of Arctic Village rang. It had been so long since it rang Nicholas at first thought it was for celebration. Plus he was drunk. Otto’s face explained everything and the two jumped to their feet and ran up the hill. First they smelled the smoke. Then they saw the glow over the ridge before finally cresting it and seeing what the commotion was about.

Second Factory, the one with the nursery, had flames shooting out one end, and smoke coming from the eaves at the middle of the building. Nicholas was two feet taller than Otto, but much heavier also. The elf led the way.

Pandemonium had replaced the tranquil scene that was often associated with Factory Two. Some elves ran to and fro looking to organize a bucket brigade and grab axes while others attempted to figure out who if anyone was inside. Snow men, women and children (known more simply as the villagers) huddled together. They looked and moved very much like penguins, so much so that in the far North if one did not know penguins were absent from there, a snowman could be mistaken for a penguin quite easily at a distance. Not known for their thinking abilities nor for being creatures of action, the three-foot tall snow villagers huddled together and hoped for the best, offering each other hugs and prayers. Outdoor creatures by default, fire and any type of heat gave valid reason for concern.

One snow woman waddled up to Otto. She looked up at him. She had on a top coat and wore too much blush. "My Hans is inside, I do believe. The only time to properly do inventory is when the building is empty."

Otto looked around at the chaos, then up the hill towards the lake, then at Nicholas. "It'll take a half hour for the water. The ice in the Lake is a foot thick of Polar ice. I'm going in."

"No, I'll go," Nicholas said without hesitation. "This place would fall apart without you. I'll be quick. I know the layout better too."

“Your crossing your fingers. You don’t know it better,” Otto corrected him. Otto put a slender tattooed hand on Nicholas’s shoulder. “An elf can get in and out quicker than a human.”

“I’m a Saint, remember. And I’m still Santa. It’s my call. I’m going in,” Nicholas answered as he was already at the door.

“God speed, Nicholas. Stick to the outer walls.”

Nicholas smiled. “If He lands, tell him he still owes me a six pack of mead.”

Nicholas took one last look around the village. He only looked for a moment, but time slowed and the moment lasted long. Snow villagers stood huddled in clusters and by now had broken out in random Christmas carols. Not the joyous ones we all know today. These were carols that sang of grievous loss of Christmas time, from a time back when they were still legal to sing.

Hustling around the snow people the elves ran with axes to the lake while others threw snow through the factory windows with shovels and even their hands.

Nicholas opened the door and went inside.

The smoke filled his lungs and stung his eyes as he dropped to a crawl.

Stick to the outer walls.

Nicholas advanced through the foyer, then through the doorway which led to the main shop. The heat here was tolerable. Bad enough for a snow man to be certain, which lived and slept outside and came indoors on only the rarest of occasions, but not

too bad for Nicholas. He pressed on keeping his head low where the breathing was a bit better. "Hans! Hans! Can you hear me? It's Nicholas!" Nicholas shouted.

He was halfway along the shop, noticing a substantial increase in the room's temperature when Nicholas thought he heard a weak voice. He stopped and listened.

Towards the middle of the shop, the voice spoke again. "I'm over here!" Hans answered. I do believe I am quite trapped and in need of assistance!"

Don't leave the wall.

Nicholas listened as Hans spoke then left the wall and worked his way towards him.

He felt it before he saw it. A large ceiling track used to glide larger tools and toys along the length of the shop had collapsed in the burning part of the shop, bringing much of the remaining track down with it. Hans was pinned by one of the large pieces of this timber as he was attempting to leave. Through all this Hans did not lose his top hat. Nicholas wondered if it was nailed to his skull.

"Can you move at all?" Nicholas coughed as he felt around the snowman for anything out of the ordinary. Hans was still cold despite the heat in the shop. Snow men from the North Pole are made from hard Polar snow. Much harder than what other climes in the world sees. Rivalling the hardness of the ice in the lake, Nicholas had seen one attacked with a hammer once by a drunken elf and suffer no serious damage. He wondered if snow men had blood like himself, or perhaps warm water. Or perhaps nothing at all. Nicholas knew they had to get out of there soon or they wouldn't get out at all.

"I- I can wriggle from my bottom to my top, but I do believe I feel myself melting," Hans answered. He didn't cough as he spoke and Nicholas wondered if he even breathed as he did.

Stop believing shit and just tell me.

Nicholas tried to shove the timber but it was far too heavy. Even for a saint. He held his breath, stood up, and lifted with everything he had.

Nothing.

By now Nicholas could hear the cackle and low rumble of the approaching fire. Through the dark smoke an orange faint glow began to show itself.

Nicholas looked around for something-anything, to help him. Hans stared at him with the same indifference of one waiting for change after buying a newspaper and Nicholas found himself resenting the snow man.

Hans flipped over his red and blue scarf and removed a pocket watch from his undersized vest.

"How are we doing on time?" Nicholas asked in between coughs. The snow man never picked up on his sarcasm.

"I truly don't know, as I can't tell time. I just like to look at the picture of my pappy and ma mere when I'm scared."

Nicholas took his overshirt off and laid it over Hans. "It's insulated and will help," he assured the snowman. He concentrated. A lever. Perhaps a lever would be enough

to pry the timber enough for Hans to get out. Most of the work benches had levers. “I’ll be right back,” Nicholas promised Hans as he crawled away from him.

Hans didn’t have a chance to respond, for at that moment the ceiling still holding some of the track over their heads collapsed. The shock load of the ceiling was too much for a part of the floor to handle and it gave out sending Nicholas to the cellar beneath them.

It took a moment to regain his senses, but Nicholas could feel a badly twisted (possibly broken) leg and he knew his arm was broken. He had the wind knocked out of him and tried to breathe. The cellar was filled with smoke also, but not to the extend of above. The temporary reprieve from the smoke-filled shop above gave him relief as he filled his lungs with cleaner air.

“Hans!” he cried out as he tried to get back on his knees and unbroken arm. “Can you hear me? I’m coming back up!”

But first, Nicholas would have to figure out how to get out of here. In his six hundred years in the Village he had never known Factory 2 to have a cellar.

Otto would have known.

Despite less smoke than upstairs, visibility was still poor. There was no lighting whatsoever. Nicholas tried to find an outside wall. The breathing, though better, was still difficult. For the first time since entering the building, Nicholas felt he would die in here.

Footsteps.

Nicholas stopped and listened. Aside from the roar and cackle of the fire overhead with the orange brighter than it was before, he could hear footsteps. Deliberate clacking like cowboy boots on the hardwood floor of a saloon. They walked towards him. Much slower than an elf would be attempting rescue, and heavier.

Nicholas waited.

From out of the smoke a small man walked. He was the height of an elf, but thicker. Aside from the cowboy boots, the man wore tight jeans and a long sleeved pulled over white v neck shirt that had frills on the collars and cuffs. As he walked up to Nicholas the air cleared around him. His hair was short, and he had a large handle-bar mustache. The man looked down at Nicholas, then sat down on the chair beside him. He pulled a cigarette from his chest pocket and lit it with a match he struck off the floor.

He took a long drag then looked again at Nicholas as if he had just done something rude in Nicholas's presence. "Oh, pardon my French... You don't mind if I, uh..." and gestured towards his lit smoke.

Nicholas stared at him.

"The man leaned back, stared straight ahead and smiled. "I'll take that as a no. You ever wonder why the wolf in the forest is alone? Its not because he is fast and death unleashed. No, THAT all came after. You see, the wolf was not much more than a pup when he was kicked out of the "club," the other forest creatures. The man made air quotations as he said club. "They didn't understand what the wolf would become, or

else they would never have let him go. By the time they realized and wanted him back, that wolf, well he had already decided he was better off doing his own thing.”

“What?!” Nicholas asked. “We need to get out of here!”

The man looked at Nicholas again and burst out laughing. “You’ll have to forgive me. I tried to get all “deep and mysterious” on you there, Nicky ‘ole boy. I’ll cut to the chase. Your time is short. I see what’s happening to you here. You put in some of your best years, doing your thing. But not all of your best, not by a longshot. And here these guys, these little elf pricks, go wanting to cut you lose like the young wolf. But, that’s the Elven Council for you. Screw ‘em, and screw Otto.” The man spit on the floor.

Then the man added, “I’ve got work for you, if you want it. I’ve been watching you, and I need a man like you. A Saint in my corner. I’d tell you its good honest work, but I wouldn’t be telling the truth.” The man smiled at Nicholas.

“Doing what?” Nicholas asked as he cradled his arm.

“Well, for starters, we are gonna take this fire and spread it to Factory 1 and 3, the barracks, hell, even the mead hall. We’ll burn this whole village to the ground.” The man flashed the nastiest grin at this. “And that’s just for starters. I can fix you up, too. No worries there, ‘ole chap,” he added as he gestured to Nicholas’s arm and leg.

“I need to get out of here,” Nicholas said as he tried to stand. The smoke immediately around him had cleared. “I have a snow man upstairs that needs my help.”

“Too late for Hans,” the man said matter-of-factly. “Too late for you too, unless you take my hand. It’s your only chance, cowboy. C’mon. You can do so much more

than all this. Just say it. There won't be a six-hundred-year limit to this. No sir, I'm talking real time eternal."

Nicholas had to sit back down, his arm and leg were too sore. He briefly considered his resentment towards the elvish rulers that were taking his only way of life he could remember, towards Mrs. Claus that would undoubtedly stay on to see her thoughts of the new Yuletide champion that would replace him. Even the resentment he felt towards the stupid lack-of-emotion snow man melting upstairs. He thought of it all.

"Do you have an extra smoke?" Nicholas asked.

The man took one out, lit it against his, and handed it to Nicholas.

Nicholas took a long drag, exhaled, and relaxed. "Now piss off," Nicholas said, as he laid back. "I'll be quite fine without the likes of you."

The man looked at Nicholas and frowned. "Jesus. (Not that we need the pride of Nazareth here. He already had his chance.) You too? Don't worry Nicky 'ole boy, I may give you another opportunity yet. I just don't have time to dick around with this right now. I'll be talking to you, either on this side, or the next". He flicked his butt into the darkness and another fire, quite large, started where it landed. "Good luck with all this."

The man got up and walked out, saying nothing else.

Nicholas passed out.

He half remembered or perhaps just hallucinated being dragged outside. He opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw was Hans's wife staring down at him with that same expressionless overly blushed face as before. Nicholas tried to sit up but the

numb pain consuming his body escalated during his attempt. His injuries had progressed far past a broken arm and leg. He was very tired. His throat was hot and his mouth tasted of ash.

Hans's wife was pushed to the side and Otto stood above him. "Get outta here." He then looked down at Nicholas. "Don't move," he cautioned.

Nicholas went back asleep. For how long he wasn't sure.

He opened his eyes, and the pain felt both worse and less noticeable at the same time. "Hans. Did he get out?" he asked.

"Yes. A bit smaller than when he went in, but he'll be ok. He wouldn't have made it without your shirt," Otto answered. Then added, "He had a while yet before he would be small enough to be an ice cube in your rum." Otto smiled a sad smile.

"Spiced rum," Nicholas corrected and cracked his own half grin. "How bad is it?"

"Just stay still for now," Nicholas assured him. "We've given you something for the pain. Carol has been sent for."

"I had wanted to go out on top. Just one more year," Nicholas thought out loud. He was beginning to wheeze.

"Nicholas, you are going out on top. Remember that." Otto answered. He touched his friend on his left hand, the only part of him that he knew wasn't burnt. For the first time in his fifteen hundred years on this earth, tears rolled down the elf's cheeks.

“Tell Carol that—“ Nicholas started, but he never had a chance to finish. He died, only two minutes before Carol would arrive.

That was a glum Christmas, in nineteen fifty-three. Gifts were drastically reduced in both number and quality, and kids had to share more than ever before, which in itself isn't such a bad thing.

Factory Two was rebuilt and named the 'Nicholas Hill Factory of Courage', and only the bravest and best of kids would ever receive gifts from it. Nicholas Hill, though perhaps not the longest serving or even the kindest of Santas, would always be known as the best.

