

The Proletariat of the North Pole

I paused for a second to blow on my cold fingers. They were so numb that I was in danger of stabbing myself with my screwdriver as I tried to attach the wheel of a toy truck. Santa maintained his belief that elves didn't feel the cold, and attempts to correct him hadn't ended well for the people who'd tried. I'd been complaining to the foremen for months, arguing that we'd work more quickly if he let us keep fires lit, but I doubted they'd been brave enough to relay the message. I only bothered at all because I needed to pretend that it made a difference.

Beside me, Jamie's hand did slip and he winced as his screwdriver sank into the soft part of his finger, blood bubbling up. He didn't make a noise, just cradled the finger in his other hand, his face tight with pain.

"Here, let me." I gestured for him to give me his hand, keeping my eyes on the front of the long room. The foremen were in a cluster, talking to each other, so we had a minute, at least, of safety. I took hold of Jamie's wrist and studied his bleeding forefinger. It was a bad gouge, and it would make work painful, but it could have been worse. I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket and wrapped it around the wound, tied it off. By the time I glanced up again, the foremen had dispersed and were fanning out around the room.

Jackson's gaze roved over us just as I let go of Jamie's hand. "Better pick up the pace, Ant!" He called as he strolled between the rows of tables. "If you don't make your quota today, you can say goodbye to dinner!"

"Yes, sir." I gave him a look that probably read as sullen to everyone else, but I hoped he caught my silent warning: *don't overdo it*. Santa only picked foremen who took on their duty of harassing the rest of us with enthusiasm, but he didn't know that Jackson was a plant.

After Jackson had turned away, Jamie touched my hand with his good one. "Thank you," he whispered, one corner of his mouth quirking up in an almost-smile. I hadn't seen his real smile in a hundred years.

Jamie's parents had been close to mine, before. He'd lost them when Santa came, as I had mine, but at least I'd been more or less grown up by then. He'd still

been a kid, old enough to be put to work right away, but young enough that he'd cried himself to sleep every night for months. By the time he'd finally trained himself, grown up, learned to swallow it, whatever he'd done, I'd gotten so used to hearing his sobs in the dark that the silence felt heavy.

I could have comforted him, but I'd locked myself in my own prison of grief and anger, and it took me years to let myself out, to notice other people again. Sometimes, truth be told, I missed the anger. Nowadays I mostly felt tired.

The end-of-the-day bell tolled, and we all trudged out into the darkness and the swirling snow, too tired even to talk much as we walked to our cabins. In the first weeks of the new regime, we'd been reorganized into gender-segregated sleeping quarters, six to one tiny room. Santa didn't want us getting distracted from our work with romantic relationships, he said. Apparently he had no idea that most of us were perfectly happy to have sex with anyone, regardless of whether we could reproduce with them or not. Even the most brainwashed foremen had never told him, as far as I knew. Not to mention that he'd be in bad shape in a few hundred years when we all died off and he had to look for a new workforce. We lived a lot longer than humans, but we were mortal. Painfully mortal, as we'd all found out.

"How can someone who's immortal be so *ignorant*?" I'd asked Jackson once.

He'd shrugged. "Rumor has it that he used to be human, that he only became whatever he is a few centuries ago. If it's true, than I guess he still thinks like a human."

"A human from a few hundred years ago," I said. "And this is the person who's controlling all of our lives."

"Not if we have anything to say about it."

My fingers were still cramping with cold, so that I had a hard time gripping my spoon. At least the porridge was warm tonight: some nights no one could be bothered to heat it. On the other side of the cramped room, Jamie was having an even harder time eating with his bandaged finger. Watching him made me sad, so I looked out the window instead.

Once we'd snuffed the candles and everyone had climbed into bed, I lay in the dark and listened. One by one, my companions dropped off to sleep, exhaustion the only master who showed them any kindness. Jamie's breathing took the longest to change, always, but in the end he went too, leaving me alone.

I crawled out of bed, every muscle in my body creaking like a worn-out set of hinges, and slunk out of the back door, towards an abandoned shack crouching behind the row of cabins. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching, I squeezed through a gap where some boards had rotted away. The door had rusted shut years ago, and from a distance the gap looked too small for a body to fit through, making it the perfect headquarters for desperate plots.

As I stepped inside, a rustle went through the group already there. I counted: seven of them. I was the eighth.

“Good, you’re here,” Meg said. “We can start.” I nodded to her, her face just a pale blur in the dimness. She’d been my sister’s best friend, when I’d had a sister, but now I only saw her here, in this most secret of places. I couldn’t even remember what she’d looked like back then.

There was a second of silence, and then someone—his name was Alvin, I thought—said, “I still think that we should wait until after Christmas.”

“Doing it before Christmas is the whole point.” Beside me, Jackson’s clothing rustled as he shifted. “It’ll hit him where it hurts.”

“Yes, and that means he’s more likely to get angry and start opening portals. If we wait until afterwards, he might be in a generous mood.”

“Or he might not be.” Meg’s voice crackled through the night. “We’ve all heard the rumors about the human world. Fewer people believe every year. If he’s not getting fed the way he needs to be, he has no reason to be generous. Jackson is right.”

“Rumors are just rumors,” Alvin countered. “He hasn’t portaled anyone in twenty-five years. Do you want to be responsible for bringing that fear back?”

“Have we ever stopped being afraid?” I hadn’t meant to speak, but the words came out anyway. “I think I missed that.”

Jackson glanced at me. “Anthony’s right,” he said. “He’s going to keep portaling people, no matter what we do. He only hasn’t done it in a while because we stopped fighting back, and things have kept getting worse since then. I’d rather die fighting.”

A murmur went around the circle. No one spoke for a second. Then Alvin started arguing again, and Meg reiterating why we’d made the plan in the first place.

For a few minutes, I wasn’t listening. I never thought about the portals unless I could help it. They led to the human world, and only he could open them, and in the beginning, when we’d fought back, he’d retaliated by sending people through them. We hadn’t even known for sure that humans and other worlds existed, before he came. Now, those fairy tales we’d heard around our parents’

firesides mattered too much, offering the only clues as to what might have happened to our loved ones. Too many of them said that we couldn't survive in that other world, that we'd wither and die like uprooted trees.

Some days, it made things easier to believe that my parents and sister were dead.

"Tomorrow?" Alvin's voice rose until several people shushed him and he dropped it to a whisper. "We can't do it tomorrow! We're not ready!"

"We're as ready as we'll ever be," Meg said, her voice like metal now. "We know that at least half of our people are with us, and all but a few of the foremen. Even if no one else joins us, that's enough."

Alvin fell silent. He still didn't look convinced, but he didn't argue anymore. Meg was right: we'd prepared as much as we could without giving the game away. We had a simple enough plan: stop work, break the tools, set fire to the workshops, march on Santa's house. If we were lucky, almost everyone would join us once they saw what was going on. If we were lucky, Santa wouldn't know what had hit him until it was too late.

I waited to feel something, nervousness or anticipation, but I just felt hollow. One way or another, I wanted this done.

As everyone started to disperse, off to do whatever it is that people do when they know it might be their last night, Jackson pulled me aside.

"I saw what happened to Jamie's hand," he said. "Is he OK?"

I nodded. "Yeah, he's fine."

He frowned at me. "Are you all right?"

I shrugged. "I guess. Just tired."

I was trying to remember Jamie's name, his real one. We'd all had to take human names because Santa said he couldn't pronounce ours, but by now we'd gotten into the habit of using them even amongst ourselves. Sometimes it scared me how much work it took even to remember my own, how I had to repeat its unspoken syllables over and over in my mind. Sometimes I just wanted to hear someone else say it, more than anything.

I was the last to scrape through the makeshift doorway, splinters catching in my sleeves. As I walked towards the back door of the cabin, a shadow separated itself from the wall. I froze. Took a few steps closer.

"It's all right," Jamie said. "It's only me."

“What are you doing?” I backed him closer to the wall. “You shouldn’t be out here.”

“I wanted to know where you’ve been going all of these nights.” The moon had risen, just a tiny crescent, but it shed enough light for me to see his face. All of these years, I’d still been thinking of him as a kid, but he wasn’t anymore. “Don’t worry. I won’t give you away.”

“I know that,” I said.

After a few seconds’ silence, he blew out a long sigh. “I can’t decide if I should be trying to convince you not to do what you’re going to do tomorrow.”

“It wouldn’t matter, anyway,” I said. “It’s all in motion.”

“Then I guess we’d better make the most of tonight.” He twined his fingers in mine. Over the years I’d memorized his hands: small palms but long fingers, perfect in comparison to my own, which were just big everywhere.

“Jamie, I—”

“I know.” He smiled at me, his real smile, so sweet that my breath caught and I was smiling back, using muscles that had stiffened ages ago, and I remembered—everything. His real name and mine and what it felt like to want a moment to last forever, to want and want and want.

I kissed him, and my heartbeat stuttered in my ears and it hurt to feel this alive.

I stood outside for a long time, staring at the hills and valleys of snow, blue-white under the cold starlight. I didn’t know what tomorrow would bring: another revolution of the sun could find me on the wrong side of a portal. Maybe I’d find my parents and sister, if I survived, if they had. Those first twenty-five years or so, when I’d been younger and stupider and desperate with loss, I’d thought about doing something to anger Santa on purpose so that he’d throw me out. I’d imagined thousands of ways to do it, but I hadn’t understood, then, why I could never bring myself to.

Now, though, as I stared up at the endless black sky, I knew: even if I was capable of surviving away from here, even if my heart would keep beating, I didn’t know if I wanted it to. We weren’t like humans, if the stories were true, flitting from place to place just for the fun of it. I couldn’t imagine living without the smell of snow every morning and the northern lights in the sky, without the air burning my lungs and my breath coming out in clouds, without endless days and endless nights.

lungs and my breath coming out in clouds, without endless days and endless nights. I remembered a time, though, when I couldn't imagine living without my family, and I had a century's bitter experience to prove me wrong. If I could have known that I'd find them again, that I was risking home for the possibility of getting them back, I might have felt braver, readier. But there were too many variables, too many outcomes that would carve away more pieces of my mutilated heart. How could I have already lost everything, and yet still have everything to lose?

I closed my eyes and thought of Jamie, of the moment just before I'd kissed him when his face had changed and I'd recognized the kid I used to know. For a second, I'd recognized myself, too, the way I'd been before aching fingers and exhaustion and forgetting how to smile, before before before. I wanted to see him look like that again, and if I didn't fight I never would. I took a deep breath, blew it out in a frosty cloud, and made a vow: that if we lost, I would remember that kiss and believe that it had all been worth it.