

*Chrystalla Thoma*

*Illusions*

*Christmas interlude*

*A Boreal and John Grey short story*

## Illusions (Christmas Interlude): A Boreal and John Grey short story

Christmas. A time for giving, for presents under the tree and partying till dawn. But not everything is as it seems, both in and out of Finn's and Ella's dreams. What is real, and what is Christmas really about? This is a story of a human and an elf trying to figure it out.

This story takes place during Season Two of Boreal and John Grey.

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### **Author note:**

The poem at the beginning is taken as is from the Poetic Edda – my only addition is the final line. You can find the Poetic Edda online, for free, on the Gutenberg Project site, if you're interested.

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# Illusions

*Christmas Interlude*

A Boreal and John Grey  
short story

## Part One

It was time's morning,  
When nothing was;  
Nor sand, nor sea,  
Nor cooling billows.  
Earth there was not,  
Nor heaven above —  
Until the first dream.

Garlands of lights hung on crystal towers. A glowing path wound among them, and Finn followed it, his steps light. He wore rich furs and a grey coat that brushed his knees, and his pale hair was combed back, pinned with jeweled clasps. He looked every bit a young elven lord, heart-wrenchingly beautiful, his blue eyes shining.

A double door stood open, revealing a cavernous hall, elves sitting at long tables covered with glittering dishes and flickering candles.

Ella followed him down the broad steps and the warm air wafted into her face, smelling of roast meat and sugar. What was this memory? As far as she knew, at this age Finn had roamed the plains, half-starved and heart-sick, and then joined the army.

When had he owned such clothes? When had he been invited to a feast with his own kind? Could it be he was finally having a normal dream, experiencing things that hadn't really happened?

But then what was she doing there?

Finn walked between the tables, not stopping, as if looking for someone. Nobody paid him any attention, and Ella wondered why. From what she could see, his attire wasn't richer than any other's, but dammit, he was the most handsome man in the hall, with his broad shoulders, straight posture, his narrow, fine face.

Not that she was biased or anything.

"Finn!" she called, but he didn't seem to hear her.

Whispers rose around her, and at first she thought they emanated from the seated elven lords and ladies and the dark-clad servants who poured amber wine into their golden goblets.

But no, these whispers were different. Odd notes jumped in the words, the voices rough and grating, their tone imperative — rising louder and louder, covering all other noise, piercing Ella's eardrums like a blade; deafening her, until she stopped and bent over, feeling sick.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Finn jerk to a halt and grimace, clapping his hands over his ears.

"You've escaped reality long enough," a male voice said. "Time to come back."

Pain lanced through Ella's bones, radiating down from the base of her skull. The hall faded into blackness, an eddy of sickening fear hurling her around until she was

back in the cave, and Finn hung from the restraints over the stone table, painting it with his blood.

His eyes fluttered, then opened.

He screamed.

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“This is unacceptable,” Mike said, leaning back on the sofa, a leg propped across his knee, bouncing his foot. “Really.”

“What is?” Ella said absently, sipping her sweet, hot tea. Too many sleepless nights had taken their toll on her poor brain. It felt like a fuzz ball, her thoughts helplessly tangled in spider webs.

“The fact we haven’t had dinner together since our anniversary. We even missed Thanksgiving. Time to cook something good and eat together, right, Finn? Scott can make his steaks, he’s getting really good at it.”

Finn didn’t look up. He hadn’t fallen asleep, though, because she could see a sliver of blue peeking through his pale lashes. The magazine in his lap was open on a page about guns.

Ella and Mike shared a worried look. Mention of food had failed to interest Finn. The end of the world was nigh.

Then again Mike didn’t know how dark Finn’s dream-memories were. Ella had barely gotten a glimpse and tried hard not to remember the bone-deep terror, the spine-crushing pain. He was losing interest in living and she didn’t know how to bring him back.

“So I thought we should throw a Christmas party,” Mike said and reached up to pat his perfectly styled hair, making no dent in the dark spikes. Ella wondered if he’d used superglue by mistake.

*Hang on a sec... Christmas party?* “I don’t have the energy to throw a punch, let alone a party,” Ella muttered into her mug.

“You won’t have to lift a finger, I promise.” Mike beamed at her with that boyish shit-eating grin that was normally so endearing. Why then did she want to kick him in the teeth?

“You remember what happened last time we went to a party for Halloween,” she said. “I thought we agreed parties were out of the question.”

“We aren’t going out to a bar. It’ll be a small, cozy affair, at home. Just some friends. Can’t go wrong.”

Oh, it could go wrong — in so many ways. “Can we just leave it, Mike?”

He nodded, mouth flattening. “If you think it’d be best.”

*Yeah. Probably.*

A knock came on the door and Mike shot to his feet. “It’s Scott.”

Ella blinked. “I thought he was working tonight?”

“He’s off early. He wanted to bring the tree.”

“Thought you bought your tree, days ago.”

“This is *your* tree, silly.”

*Right. Silly me,* Ella thought, the cobwebs in her brain thickening. *Wait. “Our tree? What are you talking about?”*

Mike opened the door just in time for Scott to lumber into her living room, carrying a small pine, its scent permeating the apartment. He grinned at Ella. “Where should it go?”

Mutely she pointed at the corner, her face warming, and watched as Mike helped Scott wrestle the tree upright.

Finn was observing the proceedings, his face blank.

“Thank you,” Ella muttered. “I don’t even have decorations for it. It all burned in the old apartment. I’ll pay you—”

“Hey.” Mike grabbed her shoulders, forced her to look him in the eye. “I know you’re too tired now to even think about Christmas trees and presents and parties, okay? But the more you sink into the black hole, the harder it is to get out, and trust me, I know what I’m talking about. You let your friends help you out, lend you a hand. Cheer you up. Feed you and dance you around. That’s what they’re for.”

She nodded, not trusting her voice, then simply sat on the sofa and stared at the two of them decorating the tree. They’d bought golden balls and white lights and fluffy white stuff that was supposed to be snow.

Crazy, the both of them. Best people ever.

“Hey, Finn,” Scott called as he wrapped tinsel ribbons on the branches. “Is this your first Christmas?”

“Yes.”

“When did you arrive?”

“In February.”

*Huh.* He was getting answers out of Finn. *A miracle.*

“Do you also decorate trees?” Ella wanted to know. It was a custom that went back to ancient tree worship.

But Finn shook his head. He seemed distracted by the tree, though not in a good way. He glared as if the pine had personally offended him.

“Do you have anything like Christmas?” Mike sucked his lower lip between his teeth as he teetered on top of a stool to fix the star at the top of the tree. “Do you believe in a god?”

Ella opened her mouth and forgot to close it. She’d never talked about this with Finn. He hadn’t struck her as religious — but what did religious elves look like anyway? She had simply assumed that everyone around her was a skeptic, like her.

What it boiled down to was that she knew close to nothing about Finn and his world — and that although she realized this fact regularly, she hadn’t done much to change it.

*Dammit.*

“I don’t know what to believe,” Finn said and his hands curled into fists where they lay on the cushions of the couch. There was a strange light in his eyes — anger and wistfulness mingling, growing into something she couldn’t decipher.

“Can’t blame you. I wasn’t the type to believe in elves, myself.” Mike tweaked the star to his satisfaction and climbed down. “But I like Christmas, and not only because of the presents we exchange. It’s actually a celebration of light.”

Cautious interest flickered in Finn’s gaze.

“We celebrate the winter solstice, the moment the days begin to lengthen and the nights to shorten. When the darkness and cold begin their retreat. We root for Sol Invictus, the Invincible Sun. Maybe you celebrate that, too?”

Finn shook his head. “The days are short, and the nights long. It’s always cold.”

*Lovely place.* Ella reached over, covered Finn's fist with her hand. "Don't you have any celebrations, then? You know, with chanting and dancing, eating and drinking, processions with lanterns and sacrifices..."

"Sacrifices." Finn whispered.

"But mainly eating and drinking," Ella hurried to clarify. "And no real sacrifices, not anymore."

Finn seemed to give this some thought. "When the ice winds blow, we light fires and eat yellow berries to bring back the sun."

Mike brightened. "That's more like it, my man. I was starting to think your people never did anything fun."

"What else?" Scott asked.

"Dragon passing," Finn said.

"Sounds like a movie title." Mike dumped his ass on the sofa next to Finn. "You celebrate the death of the dragon?"

Finn blinked. "Dragons pass in the sky. Moving to other places."

"Migrating," Ella said.

"Dragon migration?" Scott drew a chair and sat, leaning forward, his gaze bright. "Going where?"

"Caves in the mountains," Finn said. "They move before the endless night falls."

"Damn. Your world sounds as cold as Dante's seventh hell," Mike said with a grin, because he liked reading weird stuff and wasn't even getting paid for it, like Ella.

"And you celebrate this dragon passing?" Scott pressed.

"We sing songs." Finn frowned. "We drink and hide. And offer sacrifices."

"What, to the dragons? Why?"

"So they don't eat us." Finn bared his teeth. "Sometimes it works."

Scott blanched.

"That's what I call renewal of faith," Mike.

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The dragon curled on the rock platform like a milky opal jewel, its sleek head resting on the ground.

Finn heaved himself over the ledge with a muffled groan, swinging a leg over and clambering on the platform.

Below fell the mountain slope, made of cliffs and gullies, all the way to the plain far down.

"*Dreki*," Finn whispered, slinking behind the slumbering creature and drawing his dragon knife — a long, serrated blade. "*Nu*."

*Now.*

He lifted the blade over the dragon's head, brought it down, and blood fountained, splattering him, covering his face so that he had to wipe at his eyes to see. The dragon writhed, struggled, the great tail lashing, knocking Finn on his back.

He was back on his feet instantly, stabbing the dragon's long neck, slicing through it, snuffing out its life.

Finn dropped to his knees, panting. He put down the dragon-cleaver, spread open his satchel and pulled out his skinning knife.

“What do you see?” a voice whispered on the air, and Finn froze, his skinning knife raised.

“Who’s there?” he rasped. “Who’s talking?”

A roar went through the mountain. Loose rubble rolled down, crashing around them. “Open your eyes, boy.”

Reality tilted. The mountain side flickered, and the dragon’s bloodied form twisted and splintered.

Corpses. Human? No, elven. Bloody and reeking of death, laid out on the snow.

Finn bent over and howled.

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“Finn, wake up!” Ella shook him, half-blinded by tears. “Finn!”

He hurt, so she hurt. She felt as if she’d been staked through the chest, each breath searing her lungs.

*Hell.*

Finn curled on the bed, shivering, his eyes moving behind his lids. The muscles in his back twitched, and his arms trembled. Air whistled through his gritted teeth.

“Hey.” Ella put a hand on his cheek, stroked her thumb over his cheekbone. It was wet. “Enough of this. Come on, wake up.”

She kissed his lips, salty and yet sweet, and gathered him closer. “Everything’s fine. Come back to me.”

Finn grunted and uncoiled, reaching for her. She wrapped arms and legs around him, brushing his hair off his face to see his eyes.

They were focusing in degrees, zeroing on her.

“What was that?” she whispered. “Like a dream inside a dream — what does it mean?”

“Can’t remember.” He grimaced, closed his eyes again.

“What was real?” she whispered, fear thudding in her every bone. “Was any of it real?”

He shook his head and rolled on his back. “Don’t know.”

“But the bodies... you knew those people. Those elves.”

He nodded. “In the army.”

“But then you must know. Did they die?”

He nodded again, his jaw clenching.

“How did they die?”

“I can’t remember,” he bit out the words, his teeth audibly grinding.

She reached up, placed a hand on his chest. His heart still raced; she listened to its frantic rhythm and traced a circle with her fingertips over his heart. The silence reverberated with his ragged breathing.

“Go back to sleep,” she said. “It’s way too early. Mike and Scott’s party is still in full swing.” She could hear the music playing next door.



But Finn was staring past her, his mouth slack. She twisted to see.  
Golden threads shimmered. The air seemed to boil right in front of the wall,  
distorting part of the window.

*Oh shit.*

*The Veil. Parting.*

She made a grab for her blades, which lay on her bedside table.

Finn caught her arm, keeping her there. Pale light rose from his skin like mist and silver flames burned in his eyes. He was fighting the threads, pulling them back together. A thin trail of blood trickled over his mouth.

The threads oscillated, quivered and faded, plunging the room into darkness.

“Ella,” he whispered, and something in his voice made her hug him tight.

“It’s all right,” she said against his shoulder, “it’ll be okay, you’ll see.”

He pressed his mouth to her cheek, then found her lips. She tasted blood. He fumbled with her pajamas, muttering something that sounded like a curse perhaps, and crushed their bodies together.

She ran her hands over his chest, slipped the sweatpants off his slim hips. They rubbed together like cats, pressing and stroking, the tension stringing them higher, making every touch electric.

She pushed him on his back and kissed him thoroughly, tangling her fingers in his shorter hair, tucking it behind his ears.

“*Fridha*,” he whispered, his voice rumbling in his chest and she drew back, trying to read his expression. She kissed his jaw and he shivered. “I don’t have anything to give you.”

“What?” She stilled, then sat up, trying to understand. “What are you on about?”

“Christmas.” He sounded frustrated, and his eyes looked uncertain. “I don’t have presents.”

*Oh for Chrissakes.* “Who cares about presents? God knows you’ve got enough on your hands as it is.”

He stroked her hips and a corner of his mouth lifted. “I’ve got *you* on my hands.”

“That’s right. And you’ll be *my* present.” She grinned down at him.

“Mm.” Finn’s eyes were heavy-lidded, his hair fanning around his head, soft and bright.

“I’ll wrap you with a big red bow,” Ella went on, “and I’ll unwrap you in the night.”

His cheekbones reddened. She loved it when he flushed like that. God, she could spend days looking at him. A velvet sofa, flames in a fireplace, a rug and Finn laid out before her like an exotic animal, some sort of arctic lion, magnificent, muscles straining in each limb as he stretched...

Finn twisted and flipped her on her back. He leaned over her before she caught her breath, his arms solid barriers on either side of her head, the ends of his hair teasing her skin. A wicked gleam entered his eyes as he tugged the hem of her top up, exposing her bellybutton. “Like this?”

What, was she supposed to achieve coherent thought and speech at this point? She moaned softly, reaching for him.

*Yes, she thought. Just like this.*

## Part Two

Flashes of darkness. Tall evergreens, weighed with snow. Flutter of bird wings and chirping.

Finn crouched in the snow, blinking at nothing.

“Finn?” She approached cautiously, her steps crunching. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered, his voice ragged and thin. He ran his hands through his long hair, tugged on it. “I need your help.”

The landscape was changing, and although she knew what was coming, she still flinched when the cave solidified around them and Finn hung over the stone table, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he whispered and she felt the pain that burned in his every limb. “I can’t remember. Help me.”

Distant detonations made her jerk. *Gunshots!*

Ella opened her eyes, her heart thumping against her breastbone, trying to drill a hole through it.

Again she knew before even looking up that Finn wasn’t there.

She swung her legs off the bed and sat for a moment, reality fuzzy at the edges. Could things get any more complicated?

And, for a change, where the hell was Finn?

The detonations sounded again. No, not gunshots. *Fireworks*. It was Christmas Eve.

Throwing on her old cardigan, she went to look. He wasn’t in the other bedroom, or the bathroom. The living-room was quiet and empty, as was the kitchen.

*Okay*. It wasn’t like they lived in a mansion or anything. Space was limited.

Fear started her pulse pounding in her temples. Fine, so Finn wasn’t inside the apartment. No problem. He’d probably popped over to Mike’s. Who was having a party, the music beat audible through the wall.

*Why would Finn go to Mike’s?* a little voice screeched inside her mind. Especially now — after a nightmare, with a crowd in Mike’s hall?

Finn was probably just confused. Ella pulled on her boots hurriedly and stepped outside. He trusted Mike. Maybe he’d woken up kinda lost and thought about finding him.

Which made as much sense as anything else at the moment.

“Hey!” She banged on Mike’s door. “Can anyone hear me?”

After a moment during which she found the time to realize she’d locked herself out of her apartment, the door opened.

A guy with long curly blond hair blinked myopically at her, an empty glass in his hand. “Mojito?” he said.

“It’s Ella, actually.” She tried to peer past him. “Where’s Mike?”

He gave her a confused look. *No humor, this one*. “In the kitchen, I think.”

“Great.” She shoved past the guy and plowed through the gyrating little crowd and the hypnotic voice of an oriental singer. “Mike!”

Scott magically appeared by her side. “Ella? I thought you couldn’t join us tonight.”

“Is Finn here?” Even as she asked, she knew the answer would be negative. Still, if anyone could open the door, maybe Finn had slipped inside.

“Haven’t seen him.”

“Help me look, please?”

“Sure. What happened?” Scott dragged her into the kitchen, where Mike was talking to a slight woman in a hoodie. “Mike, have you seen Finn?”

“Finn?” Mike looked from Scott to Ella, as if not sure he was seeing well. “What do you mean, isn’t he with you? Like, always?”

“He had a nightmare,” Ella said, aware the slim woman was staring at her from huge, dark eyes. “And I think the fireworks sent him into a flashback. When I woke up, he was gone.”

“I’ll check the bedrooms, you check the living room.” Mike headed off to do so without wasting any time, for which Ella was grateful.

“Come on,” Scott said, heading back to the hall. “If he’s here, we’ll find him.”

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Finn wasn’t in Mike’s apartment. After searching the place three times over, Ella had to accept this fact.

In Mike’s borrowed jacket, she raced down the stairs, Mike and Scott at her heels.

“Was he even dressed?” Mike asked as they reached the building entrance, panting and gasping.

“No. Just sweatpants.” Frigid air blasted on their faces as they exited into the street. A fresh layer of snow covered everything in pristine white.

“He had a flashback,” Mike muttered. “Because of the fireworks. Why?”

“They sounded like gunshots,” Ella said and saw understanding dawn on his face.

“Hell.”

*Exactly.*

“Goddamn cold,” Scott said, rubbing his arms. “I’ll take left, you take right. Let’s find elf boy before he turns into an icicle.”

Lips pressed together, Ella trudged after Mike who was jogging down the street. She was so tired the street seemed to be breathing. Maybe she was still dreaming. How could she tell what was real anymore?

She stopped, watched Mike as he checked the storefronts and driveways of the buildings lining the street.

The air rippled. Okay, so it wasn’t exhaustion that thickened the air and distorted her vision.

“Finn!” She turned in a circle. He had to be close. “Where are you?”

*What do you want for Christmas?*

*Please, dear God, some proper sleep.*

*No Gates opening.*

*Finn to be okay. Let him be okay.*

Something moved and she stepped around a dumpster, her boots crackling on the snow.

Someone was crouched behind, arms wrapped around his knees. He rocked slightly, back and forth. Silver hair shimmered; his bare chest gleamed.

“Hey.” She approached warily. “Finn.”

He kept rocking; vibrating with tension. He'd blanked out, lost in memory. The air around him seemed to boil. It glimmered as it moved, bulging and hollowing like a soap bubble.

"No," she whispered. "Finn, come on. Snap out of it." She slid her hand into the forming gate — the texture thick and slimy like oil — to touch him.

Finn jerked and muttered a word she didn't catch, his features pinched. The air rippled again, a violent wave, as if a monster had rammed into the Veil.

She had to do something. Her heart banged in her chest. She hated this, but...

"Report, Finn," she snapped. "Now. Status."

"*Visi*," he whispered, his blank gaze flicking upward.

*Commander.*

*Shit.* He hadn't had such a bad episode in a while. "Status."

"*Blod*," he whispered, lifting his hands, staring at them.

"No, there's no blood." Damn, she wanted to hug him but the Gate was still forming and he was smack in its center. If it opened...

"*Blod*," Finn muttered, his head dipping forward. "*Daudr*."

"No, Finn, you're safe. It's me, Ella." She wasn't getting through, dammit. This was scaring her more than she wanted to admit. Where the hell was Mike? "Come on. Say something." Aware he could deck her easily, she crouched down and caught his face in her hands, stroked her thumbs over his cheekbones. "Finn..."

He caught her hands in his cold ones and lowered them; stood and took a few steps back.

The air was stilling, returning to normal.

*God.* She tried to breathe through her nose, tried to calm down. That had been close. Too damn close.

She reached out for Finn and he didn't back away. He waited and she wrapped herself around him. Tears burned behind her brow.

"God, you have to stop doing this." His skin was ice cold. She rubbed up and down his bare back. Dammit, he was barefoot in the snow. "Let's get back inside, quickly. You're freezing."

He glanced around, his eyes widening, and he staggered in the circle of her arms. "*Faen*."

Mike was running toward them, the thumping of his boots loud in the still air. "You found him!"

"I'll get him inside, you go get Scott." Ella guided Finn toward their building. "I've got you."

And that was all that mattered.

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Mike had a spare key to Ella's apartment. He let them inside and insisted on staying until he was sure they were all right.

The Christmas tree lights were on. They flashed in the dark apartment like a heartbeat.

Finn swayed on his feet. She grabbed hold of his arm and steered him to the sofa, threw a blanket over him. “Hey, Mike, could you get Finn some coffee? There’s that instant stuff in the cupboard.”

“Sure.” Mike slipped into the kitchen. “Coming right up.”

Finn closed his eyes.

“Throw in some sugar,” Ella called out. “Hey.” She gave Finn a small shake.

“Don’t pass out, okay?”

“I’m all right.” He didn’t look it though.

Mike returned with the coffee, and Ella pushed it into Finn’s hands. “Drink.”

He did, and some color returned to his cheeks. He avoided her gaze. “Thanks.”

“Hey, man.” Mike sat on the armrest, his eyes worried. “You gave us a scare. Glad you’re okay.”

Finn nodded. His face looked grey and the air around him still shimmered.

*Why?*

Ella opened her mouth to ask when Scott came in, bearing a bottle and shot glasses.

“I think we all need a stiff drink,” he announced and poured amber liquid.

That was god’s honest truth. Her hands shook with reaction.

“To Christmas,” Mike said, raising his shot glass.

“Christmas,” Ella echoed and sniffed her drink. “What’s this stuff?”

“It’s alcohol, woman.” Scott saluted her. “Who cares what it is?”

Whiskey, as it turned out. Ella coughed. It warmed her nicely, stopped the shakes.

Finn was staring into the distance, the coffee mug steaming in his hands. “What’s Christmas about?” he muttered.

“You don’t know the story?” Mike’s face was flushed from the cold and the whiskey. “It’s about this little boy born in a cave where animals were kept, because nobody knew he was going to be so powerful. Then strange things started happening, and shepherds and wizards came from afar to see him.”

“And then he died,” Finn said.

The words rang like stones falling in a well.

“So you do know the story,” Mike said.

Finn shrugged. “No. But it always ends that way.”

Mike opened his mouth and closed it, eyes round with shock.

Ella, who didn’t like the obvious parallelism between one powerful boy and the other, put down her glass. “Shouldn’t you guys go back to your party?”

“Nah.” Scott waved a hand. “Nobody will miss us.”

“They’re all skunk drunk,” Mike confirmed.

“You’re our family.” Scott raised the bottle. “And family is what Christmas is all about.”

Ella thought about this - about past Christmases with her parents. During her childhood, it had been a season of plenty, loads of toys and new clothes and huge meals. But the memories had a bitter taste, carrying an echo of angry voices over a decorated table, frosty silences over dessert, muttered curses on a background of holiday carols.

Christmas with Simon had been fun. It had nothing to do with religion, since Simon wasn’t a believer and didn’t care about going with any tradition — but they’d gone out, eaten and drunk and danced, and she’d had so much fun.

Presents, food and sweets, snow, trees and tinsel...

*Facades.* It wasn’t even about light, the solstice and the invincible sun. No, it was about hope. And Finn seemed to have given up. He had that thousand-yard stare soldiers had after leaving the battle field. In a sense, he fought a war every night, went through

torture and mind-numbing fear and pain only to wake up in the morning and keep going as if nothing had happened.

“You all went looking for me,” he said, his voice hushed.

“Well, duh.” Mike winked. “Of course we did. What did you think?”

“You’re one of us,” Scott said, grinning. “Too late to escape us now.”

“We love you,” Ella whispered and bumped shoulders with him.

Finn forgot all too often he was important to them. Perhaps he didn’t believe it. He put his mug on the table. “I want to show you something.”

“Show?” Mike glanced at Scott. “Like what?”

“You an exhibitionist?” Scott made a face. “Man, it’s tough but we’ll still love you.”

Ella raised her hand. “Shut it, guys. Finn... What do you mean?” A bad feeling was taking residence in her insides. “Please don’t tell me it’s what I think you mean.”

“It’s Christmas,” Finn said, his voice serious. “And this is my present to you.”

“Finn, no, dammit.”

“No what?” Mike looked baffled. “Anyone care to explain?”

“It’s okay,” Finn said. “I can control it.”

Ella shook her head. “What if you can’t? You’re tired.”

“It’s all I have to give,” Finn whispered and damn, it broke her heart.

“We don’t want anything. Just... stay alive, that’s all I’m asking.” She grabbed his cold hand. “You’re half frozen, still shaking, and have just been through hell and back. Don’t ask me to be fine with putting yourself through more. Why should I?”

“Because I want to. Because you love me.” Said in all seriousness.

“Damn right I do. So just—”

The air burst into liquid flame, bubbling upward like a sheet of quicksilver. Mike’s yelp and Scott’s gasp drowned in the hissing that filled the room.

The Gate stretched up to the ceiling, a fluid mirror, shiny but opaque.

“The hell is this?” Scott demanded to know, pressing back in the armchair as if trying to disappear.

“A Gate,” Mike breathed, dark eyes round. “He’s opening a Gate.”

The surface of the mirror wrinkled, then swelled and again smoothed out. Ella realized she was gripping the armrest so hard her nails were digging into the worn velvet.

*Christ.*

An image formed in the Gate — white-blue mountains and alabaster plains. A bird-eye view of a frozen world.

The image shifted to a wide valley stitched with tall, conical trees. Pines, Ella thought, or fir trees, although they glowed like Will-o’-the-wisp; a ghostly, pale green. Stars seemed to glide on the wind currents, twirling and twinkling.

“What are they?” Mike asked breathlessly, leaning forward in his chair, eager like a child. “Those flying lights?”

“Spiders,” Finn said, his eyes closed, his hands turned palms up, glowing, too.

They zoomed in, as if they were flying themselves on their sofa. Ella could see now the star-like spiders tumbling on the air currents, trailing their glittering threads, forming clusters — diamonds and hexagons — and separating again.

The conical trees rose higher and higher as they approached, huge like towers. Webs billowed out like sails from their branches and eyes watched, yellow and bright, from the darkness between them. Ribbons undulated, moving sinuously, hanging from the end of each up-curving branch.

“Snakes,” Finn said, and the ribbons coiled and uncoiled, ruby tongues tasting the air.

Ella flinched backward. God, she hated snakes.

The spider webs had gems caught in them — crystals of various shapes that pulsed at different times.

“They gather jewels?” Scott whispered, the glow of the Gate reflected on his lean face.

“They’re seeds,” Finn said.

“Seeds of what?”

“*Fuglar*,” Finn muttered.

*Birds?* “Birds come from seeds?” Ella whispered.

Finn’s fingers twitched and the gate widened into a landscape view. *Neat trick*. Ella realized she perched on the edge of her seat, her hands clutching her knees.

Iridescent creatures flew around the trees in dizzying circles — were those the birds? They looked like confetti, tiny specs of color. Star blossoms twined around the branches, giving off their faint white light. Shadows slithered upward, along the trunk, and they clacked with the gusts of wind like bone rattles. Monkey-like, but with body armor like armadillos, the creatures climbed higher and higher, up where a blinding sun crowned each tree, its rays illuminating the canopy of the wood and the surrounding mountain slopes.

“Whoa.” Scott rubbed a hand over his face. “Christmas trees. A forest of them. How can that be?”

Ella blinked. “Amazing,” she whispered, unable to summon more breath. The trees scintillated and seemed to dance, their cobwebbed ballerina-dress cones swirling in her drunken eyes. So much light. So many colors. Like a picture from a fairytale.

The image jerked, zooming down.

Someone was climbing the tree. Ella’s fingers dug into the sofa cushion as she watched the dark form lift itself up on a massive branch and stand precariously, swaying a little. Lithe, the legs kinda knobbly, the arms long and thin. The person stood like an acrobat on the wooden perch, at least fifty feet above ground if not more.

Dammit, she hated heights, and she felt as if she was standing up there, the wind whipping her, staring down at the distant ground.

Then the creature shook out wings. Bat-like, leathery but pale, shot with black.

“What the hell?” Mike hissed.

The wings stretched wide, large like a hang-glider, and Ella was suddenly glad she wasn’t a believer because this was a vision from hell. A demon, lifting his flat face, the nose consisting of two holes over the slash of its mouth, the widely set eyes dark with a rim of yellow.

“Oh god.” She pushed back against the sofa. “A dark elf.”

The elf shook its wings, as if to test them, and on the branches around more dark elves emerged, their wings spread.

*Dark cherubs*. They flew out and up, a swarm of black butterflies, rising higher, toward the top of the tree. They hovered over the star crowning the tree, fiddling with it.

“What are they doing?” Mike asked, his voice strangled.

The elves buzzed around the star like flies over a piece of rotten meat, then moved to the next tree. The light of the crowning star had dimmed.

“Fixing their machinery,” Finn said, wiping at the blood dripping from his nose. Ella frowned; she hadn’t even noticed, so caught up in the images.

“Finn, stop.” She caught his ice-cold hand. “Enough.”

“Machinery?” Mike gaped. “But it’s a tree, how...?”

“It’s not a tree,” Finn said, as the image dimmed and the Gate flickered. “It’s an observation tower, growing out of their caves, taken over by animals and plants because it’s warm.”

The trees were fading, along with their demonic cherubs and the ghostly lights, plunging the living-room into shadow. Finn still glowed, lines flashing on his blood-smearred face and his hands.

“You hate those trees,” Mike said finally and glanced at the tree twinkling in the corner with its fake snow, its dead jewels and the artificial lights. “I’ll take it down.”

“No.” Finn shook his head. “Leave it.”

“But they use them to... to keep tabs on you and make your life hard,” Mike snapped, obviously upset. “I’m an idiot, I should’ve thought that symbols aren’t the same for everyone, that they mean something else in every culture. How basic is that? Goddammit.”

“No, I...” Finn passed a hand over his mouth. Fresh blood had trickled down his chin and his voice cracked. “I didn’t mean for you to see the *Dokkaelfar*. I only wanted to show you something beautiful, something for Christmas.”

His words hung in the quiet. This was Finn’s present. He’d risked himself to offer them a sight unlike anything they’d ever seen.

Ella bit the inside of her cheek. Damn elf, he always managed to catch her off guard.

She nodded and put an arm around his back. “Thank you. It was beautiful.”

Finn glanced at her sideways, his shoulders relaxing. “You liked it?”

“You kidding me?” She grinned. “It was fantastic.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it!” Mike clapped Finn on the back, and the shine in his eyes wasn’t faked. “You’re the man, Finn. Best Christmas present ever.”

“It was fucking amazing,” Scott agreed.

Ella looked at them, her friends, her family, her chest too tight. This was real. This was no illusion. This was home. “Merry Christmas.”

THE END



**Author note:**

I hope you have enjoyed **Illusions** (Christmas Interlude, a Boreal and John Grey short story).

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**About the Author:**



Greek Cypriot with a penchant for dark myths, good food, and a tendency to settle down anywhere but at home, Chrystalla likes to write about fantastical creatures, crazy adventures, and family bonds. She lives in Cyprus with her husband and her vast herds of books. She writes mainly fantasy and science fiction. Her dystopian YA science fiction series “Elei’s Chronicles” (*Rex Rising*, *Rex Cresting*, *Rex Equilibrium*, *Rex Aftermath*) is available on Kindle and in print. Shorter stories set in that world are also available, and a Companion to the series is also in the plans.

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