

“Holly In Winter”

A Short Yuletide Fable of The Second Six from The Chronicles of Xanadu

Author: D. Sanders

I - Tiniest of Angels

Roger and Tobiah had been out late, later than usual and the streets were practically empty of everyone except those, like Roger and Tobiah, who had spent the late hours at the pub. They weren't drunk; far from it actually, they rarely drank to inebriation. It had just been the atmosphere that was so warm and alive with singing and merry making that neither had wanted to leave.

It was the week before Christmas and everyone was in high spirits. Tobiah and Roger were on holiday. The Royal Philharmonic was on a six week hiatus as Eran decided what show he wanted to put on next and he gave everyone time off, with pay, for the holidays until February the first.

This was their fifth Christmas in Number Four Le Faye Lane and the first one they hadn't been giving performances right up until and through the holidays. It was nice to have a vacation from work, even work they loved, to spend it as a family.

Yorinda was baking morning, noon and night. Since Roger had totally renovated the entire house and turned it into a fully functional human technological wonder, Yorinda hardly ever came out of her kitchen. She had every gadget and gizmo Roger could buy for her and she was a cooking fanatic, every night was something new and exciting from her vast array of cook books Candace kept sending her.

Tori had taken to technology like a fish to water. Her bedroom was always full of her friends from school as they watched disk movies on her plasma screen.

They couldn't actually get human television stations in Xanadu, but everything was eventually on disk to watch recorded and Roger spoiled Tori more than Tobiah did. He made a trip to the human realm at least once a month and came back loaded with purchases for her. She had an entire bookcase full of movie disks that she and her friends watched after school.

She had her own computer which Roger had taught her how to use and she carried it with her everywhere she went. It was hardly larger than a piece of parchment folded in half and she did everything on it. From her homework, to just writing stories. She loved to write and Roger encouraged her. Which was why he bought her the state of the art computer so the budding storyteller could type down her thoughts at any given moment, or just plug in a set of tiny wireless earphones and listen to music Roger continuously loaded into it with smart cards he had shipped to her regularly. He'd bought her a subscription to a music service and every month they sent her a list and she'd check off what she wanted

and sent it back. They in turn sent her music requests all loaded on a card so thin you could see light through it and no bigger than a fingernail. Each disk could hold up to a thousand songs and she had quite a vast and assorted array of music.

From Roger and Tobiah and the rest of the Royal Philharmonic Troupe's soundtrack recordings from their shows to absolutely everything Eran and Narrish had ever recorded in the human realm included. Tori was Narrish's biggest fan. She thought he hung the moon and the stars and whenever he had his guitar out in their parlor, Tori sat in bliss and listened. She was headlong into a star struck teenage crush and Narrish played along and catered to her whims, he never came over without his guitar just for her, she was a sweet girl and there was no harm in giving a bright girl a smile with a song occasionally.

Number Four Le Faye Lane was always full of joy. Yorinda had made several friends among the ladies up and down the street they lived on and there were always several of them over with her during the day. Usually all of them in her fancy kitchen cooking away and chattering like hens over coffee and playing cards at the table.

Tori had more friends than Tobiah could count. Mostly the neighbor girls from Number Three. She was very close with the Weathering girls from next door and they had their own entourage of mates from school. Not to mention Roger loved to throw dinner parties.

Dancing and singing in the ballroom or board games or charades in the parlor. Tobiah often wondered if there was a person left in Xanadu or the Human Realm that hadn't had a good time at a party in his house at one point or another.

Naturally this sort of activity wasn't every night. Most evenings after work he and Roger spent together in the living room. Either watching movies with Tori and Yorinda, playing cards as family or just relaxing and listening to music together curled up on the large couch.

Tobiah loved Roger more today than he had when they'd met and everyday he found something more to love about his generous and gregarious mate. Roger was kindness personified and Tobiah had half a notion Roger was his 'Santa Claus' in a past life. Roger gave just for the joy of giving all year round and at Christmastime he was a hundred times more apt to shower people with lavish presents just because he wanted to and for no other reason.

Every year he had Rocky make sure to tell him how many children were in the hospital and stuck there over the holidays. He then went and bought each and every child a present, hand picked himself and then he'd cart them all over in a big sack on Christmas Eve, dressed like Santa Claus, complete with Calum's help to make his beard grow abnormally long and then turned white with an

illusionary magic. He'd "Ho-Ho-Ho" throughout the pediatric wing handing out presents and singing songs and telling stories about his reindeer up at the north pole and just giving very sick little children smiles and presents to make them forget for a few hours how ill they were.

This one act alone Roger did every year made Tobiah insanely in love with his big hearted mate. "Santa Claus" always had a special treatment that night afterwards. Which usually involved Santa's Head Elf being stark naked as Santa got taken "good care" of and sent off to sleep quite sated and blissfully passed out cold.

Tobiah also loved the fact that activity took place before Roger trimmed his beard back the following morning. The white vanished on it's own, but the growth was real and last year Roger had awakened with a long brown beard braided in red and green bows.

He hadn't noticed until he'd gone into the bathroom and Tobiah was howling with laughter in their bed when he heard Roger swear at him from the bathroom when he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

Tobiah suspected "Santa" was going to trim his beard short again BEFORE falling asleep Christmas Eve this year. If not, Tobiah had plans for an encore performance if he could get away with it again without waking Roger up. He loved Roger's beard short, but long like that was just asking for Tobiah to be a naughty elf!

Tobiah was chuckling to himself at the memory as they walked home and Roger quirked an eyebrow. "What's so funny?"

"You dearest. I am just remembering happy moments is all."

"You've a shit eating grin on your face Toby. I know better. You're remembering one of your practical jokes on me."

"Aye." Tobiah grinned as he paused, his face taking on a strained look and his ears were twitching. "Do you hear that?" Tobiah asked standing very still.

The night was very quiet and very cold, the snow on the ground creaked under their feet as they walked and as they stopped they could hear a strange cry that had been covered up by their footsteps a minute before.

"That's a baby crying is all, probably inside somewhere."

"No, it sounds different. It's outside. Who would have a child out this late at night when it is so cold?" Tobiah asked following the noise.

Both men picking up their pace as the cry got louder and confirmed it was indeed a very small child in distress somewhere close.

They were in the lower districts of the city, their preferred destination when out to just enjoy a down to earth pub. This was no place for a child.

Tobiah gasped as they turned a corner and saw a little girl, no more than two if she was even that old. Sobbing hysterically and pacing in a circle. She was frantic and freezing to death. Roger was tearing off his coat and he wrapped her up immediately in it as she screamed and wailed and clung to him the minute he picked her up.

“Hush now baby. Dear God. Toby, take her to Rocky now. She’s blue with cold and God knows how long she’s been out here! I’ll look for her parents if I can find them, they may be hurt.” Roger said handing the tiny girl to Toby who nodded and held her tightly to his chest as he raced to the castle on foot.

Tobiah was immediately recognized as he approached in haste by the guards who let him past the gates without fuss seeing what he carried. She was shivering so badly, Tobiah could feel it through the thick coat that was wrapped around her like swaddling to keep her warm.

He raced right to the apartments the Triad shared and he pounded on the door. “Rocky! Rocky I need help hurry!” Tobiah called and Calum threw open the door, his eyes widening as he saw what Tobiah held.

“Oh Maker, HURRY!” Calum said dragging Tobiah inside. Rocky was just crawling out of bed and then his eyes took a turn to widen with fear as he saw what Tobiah held as Calum threw up mage lights to light the room.

“Oh Maker, give her to me!” Rocky said taking the toddler who had stopped crying and seemed to have gone into a state of shock. “Hushaby little angel. That’s it, sleep sweetness, you’re safe now.” Rocky cooed, moving over to the rocking chair in their rooms, holding her against him and rocking her as his hands glowed a bright healing green against Roger’s bright red coat.

“What happened?” Abaisha asked, quickly going over to a chest and digging out Rhain’s old sipper cups and sending Calum off to fetch milk from the kitchens. Calum never even bothered leaving, he transported a pitcher of milk right from the kitchens into their rooms.

“I wish I knew. Roger and I were just walking home when we found her out in the middle of Bender’s Street by the rubbish bins. Roger is looking for her parents right now. We didn’t waste time; we wanted to get her to you as fast as possible. She was blue with cold, the poor little angel.”

“Bender’s street! That is no place for a baby!” Calum gasped and Tobiah nodded.

“Aye, when we heard her crying I think we both went most frantic trying to find her. Not a soul in sight either and she is too little to wander far by herself. She’s got no shoes even!” Tobiah sobbed and Rocky unwrapped the coat a little and ran warm hands over her little feet.

“Frostbite on her toes and fingers. She’s been outside far too long. Ah Mercy, who would leave something so precious outside in this weather?” Rocky asked as Abaisha handed Calum a sipper cup filled.

“Warm that please love. I’m going to go dig out Kaisha’s old baby washing tub and get that filled and ready and then find her some of Kaisha’s old clothes. She’s filthy and frozen, a warm bath will make her feel better.”

“Aye, good idea love. I can heal her while I wash her.” Rocky said as the toddler just sucked her cup while sitting on Rocky’s lap. She was so sleepy and exhausted from crying.

Tobiah sat at Rocky’s feet and finger combed her dark blond almost brown curls. “Little angel, it’s alright precious, you can sleep you’re safe little one.” Tobiah sang in a lullaby, his gifts full force and the girl sighed and shut her eyes.

“What’s this?” Tobiah asked no one in particular as he saw a scrap of paper sticking out of the top of her ratty and torn jumper. He pulled it out and unfolded it and gasped.

“Oh Maker mercy, no.” Tobiah said as he read.

“What does it say?” Rocky asked as Calum came over curious.

“It says that her name is Holly and she is half human and mother cannot afford to feed her. She’s been abandoned!” Tobiah wept turning eyes to the beautiful little toddler.

“How can one do this? Look at her! She’s the most darling little thing. How can a mother give up her baby like this?” Tobiah asked in tears running his finger along her little arm tenderly.

“When the babe is unplanned and the break up with father very bitter, if she even knew who the father was, or when all she can see in the babe is the man that hurt her. It’s sadly all too common. I can sense the human in her, she’s a half breed and her ears are obviously Enf’ Tuvalu, that’s a trait that usually always surfaces in a mix breed. I should know I am one.” Rocky said as Abaisha came back in with the tub and filled it with water that Calum warmed as Rocky and Tobiah undressed her and sat her in the tub. She awoke long enough for her

bath which she seemed to enjoy as she splashed in the water smiling at Tobiah who splashed with her.

“You like the water honey?” Tobiah asked grinning at her.

“Aye.” She said in a little voice that had four men melting into smiles.

“Can you tell us your name?” Rocky asked sweetly as he ran a wash rag over her back and wondering how developed she was. If she was two, she was awfully small for a two year old.

“Haawee.”

“Holly, what a pretty name for such a pretty little girl.” Tobiah said pushing her nose with his finger and she smiled sweetly.

Roger chose that moment to arrive and Calum brought him over to the bath happening on the table. “Not a sign of them anywhere.” Roger said rubbing his arms for warmth. Calum stood behind him and rubbed for him adding warmth to frozen skin. Roger had given his coat to the baby after all.

“Aye love. We found a note on her, she’s been abandoned.” Tobiah said. His eyes riddled with pain for her.

“Bloody hell. No.” Roger said and Tobiah nodded.

Roger frowned but then softened as he watched the toddler playing with Tobiah’s fingers. “She’s so little. She can’t be two yet.” Roger said leaning over to smile at the baby. “Hello Angel. How old are you sweetness?” Roger asked and she held up a single finger pressed against her forehead and between her eyes smiling.

“One? My goodness such a big girl.” Roger smiled and the toddler giggled.

“She’s closer to two. Judging from the growth of her internal organs, her musculature development and her speaking skills, she’s probably twenty-one or twenty-two months old. She is however very small for almost two. She’s half starved to death.” Rocky said going to work on her snarled and dirty curls.

“Her name is Holly.” Tobiah said and Roger smiled.

“Holly. What a pretty name and what a pretty girl you are.” Roger said looking up at Rocky.

“Is she alright though?” He asked genuinely concerned.

“She is now, or will be. Had you two not found her, she would have been dead by morning from exposure. All she needs now is to keep warm, a good night’s sleep, and some warm food in her belly, as much as she can hold, with just good old fashioned tender loving care in addition and she’ll be fine. As darling as she is, it won’t take long to get her adopted.” Rocky said and Roger smiled.

“It won’t take five minutes. Toby?” Roger asked looking at Tobiah who was playing with Holly’s toes gently and tickling her feet, making sure the frostbite had faded and she had feeling in her tiny feet. She did as she giggled at him and splashed him.

“You need not ask me dearest. You can feel in our bond how much I adore her. Aye. I want her as much as you do.” Tobiah grinned at his mate.

“How do we adopt her?” Roger asked Rocky who smiled.

“You just did. In Xanadu you just need to state your intent in front of witnesses. Who better than three lords? Done, she’s your daughter now legally.” Rocky said as he rinsed her hair and Abaisha brought over a towel.

Tobiah wrapped her up and carried her over to the rocker and sat down with her in his lap to dry her off, he thankfully had helped raise his sister and was quite sure handed with the baby. “Holly, from now on precious. I’m your Papa and I promise to take very good care of you angel.” Tobiah said smiling at her and rubbing his nose affectionately against hers as he dried her hair.

“Can you say Papa?” He asked and Holly smiled.

“PAPA!”

Tobiah melted in the chair in euphoric bliss. “Aye! Such a clever girl you are.” Tobiah said handing the damp towel to Rocky who handed him back a diaper. Thankfully they hadn’t discarded any of their children’s baby things, just in case they had more. They were considering it now that Rhain was five and starting school.

Tobiah laid her on the rug on the floor and expertly diapered her as Roger squatted beside them holding a warm little woolen dress and socks from Abaisha which he passed to Tobiah who got her dressed quickly so she wouldn’t catch a chill. “Holly, this is your Daddy. Can you say Daddy?” Tobiah said pointing to Roger who was smiling so bright it lit up the room.

“DADDY!” Holly shouted and Roger looked about to wet himself with joy.

“That’s Daddy’s girl!” Roger cried scooping her up in his arms and kissing her silly until she was laughing breathless and clinging to his neck like she’d always been his.

Tobiah smiled, he felt Roger’s joy fill him more than it had ever done before and he leaned over and kissed his cheek. “We did say we were going to adopt, we’ve been saying it for years. I think the Maker was just making us procrastinate so we could have this angel. I love her so much already I want to burst!” Tobiah said and Roger smiled as he held her close.

“God, don’t I know it!” Roger laughed as Calum and Abaisha came over with a trunk.

“There’s more diapers in here and some of Kaisha’s old baby clothes for her. It’s a start until you can get her what she needs. There are a few sipper cups and toys in here too. Word of experience, you can never have too many sippers, they lose them everywhere and you find them months later down under your old shoes in the closet with no idea how they got there. “ Abaisha said laughing leaning over to run his fingers through her soft air.

“Uncle-Aisha gets to play dress up again. I’m so excited.” He grinned and Calum laughed.

“You loon. Let’s get her bundled up for home. I don’t want to transport her so soon after her ordeal. She should be in bed as we all should be.” Calum said bringing over a thick coat in emerald green with a white fur lined hood. Holly looked absolutely adorable in her new clothes and coat. The green really setting off her tawny skin and sandy blonde tight springy curls that exploded off her head in thick ringlets.

“We’ll need to turn the room next to ours into a nursery tomorrow. I don’t want her alone in one of those big beds. She might fall, I say tonight our baby girl sleeps with her daddies.” Roger said and Tobiah nodded.

“Oh aye. Those beds are much, much too big for her. We’ll just move one up into the attic until she grows into it.” Tobiah said as they stood and Roger pulled back on his coat and propped his new daughter on his hip. He hadn’t let her go since Tobiah had finished getting her dressed. She was already “Daddy’s girl”.

“That’s actually wise on many levels. It’ll give her time to bond to you both as well as learn she’s secure now. Don’t be surprised if she’s very clingy the first few weeks, she’s probably starved for affection on top of everything else.” Rocky said pulling on a robe.

“I’ll take this trunk up to your room, it’ll be waiting for you when you both get home. Try and feed her a little first, she’s hungry.” Rocky said and vanished with the trunk, transporting it to their home.

“Goodnight, congratulations on the bundle of joy.” Calum said hugging them both goodnight and kissing Holly’s cheek with a wink. “Be a good girl and uncle Cay will come show you magic tricks.” He said pressing her nose and grinning, Children loved flashy illusions and tricks of fancy.

“I want to see ribbons in those curls Tobiah!” Abaisha grinned and Tobiah nodded.

“Oh Aye. So do I. Goodnight and thank you very much.” Tobiah said as he and Roger headed out again with a light step. Roger practically skipping to bounce Holly on his hip and she laughed as her little hands fisted into his coat.

“Face Fuzzy!” Holly said a little hand running over Roger’s beard playing with his whiskers and he chuckled.

“Aye, your papa likes your daddy’s face all fuzzy. It’s Daddy’s chin warmer.” Roger grinned at her and Tobiah chuckled.

“On nights like this, Papa wishes he could grow a chin warmer. It is most cold, let’s hurry.” Tobiah said shivering and pulling his coat tighter.

“I’ll head over to New York in the morning and pick her up a toddler bed and necessities. There’s a ton of stores for only babies and toddlers there. If you would please just clear the room in the morning. I should be back well before noon. We’ll go get her linens and things together when I get back, we’ll see what colors she gravitates to that way. Sound good?” Roger asked and Tobiah smiled.

“Aye. Don’t forget toys! Oh maker I am spending a fortune in my head already.”

“Toys come from Santa this time of year and he’s coming soon enough. I’ll grab her a few for now, but oh boy, if you think you are spending a fortune in your head I’m going into dept up to my eyeballs in mine.” Roger laughed as they climbed the stairs and Tobiah unlocked the door.

They headed straight to the kitchen and took a sleepy Holly out of Roger’s arms and took off her little coat and Roger sat with her on his knee as Tobiah warmed her some milk. He poured it into a sipper cup that immediately was in her mouth and she was sucking it dry as Tobiah mashed up some fruit in the blender for her.

The noise brought Yorinda downstairs. “Mercy! Who’s the little one?” She asked coming over to Roger and leaning over to look at the lovely little girl.

“Mama, meet your new granddaughter.” Tobiah smiled coming over with the pulverized fruit and a small spoon. He fed her in Roger’s lap as Yorinda flopped into a chair.

“How? Where on earth did she come from?” Yorinda asked and Roger smiled.

“Heaven she did my little angel face. We found her abandoned on the way home and took her right to Rocky. She’s going to need all our love, but she’ll be fine. We adopted her straight away. It’s not every day God sends one of his cherubs down from heaven.” Roger said his eyes alive with love for the little girl falling asleep between bites.

“Come on precious. We’ll let you sleep in a minute my love. You need to eat some first my dearest.” Tobiah said feeding her bites and he had to keep her awake long enough to chew.

“She is the most darling little thing I have ever laid my eyes on. Grandmama is going to teach you all sorts of things while fathers are at work I am! Oh those curls, I will have so much fun with those curls alone!” Yorinda said running her fingers through them.

“She does have great curls.” Roger chuckled. “Want to hold her?” He asked Yorinda who didn’t need to be asked twice.

She took over feeding her and bouncing her on her knee to keep her semi-alert. “What is her name?”

“Holly.” Tobiah said dreamily watching his mother feed his new daughter.

“Appropriate seeing as it is almost Christmas.” Yorinda said and Roger nodded.

“Nothing I could have wanted more for Christmas either.” Roger said just staring a hole in her.

“She’s too tired to eat anymore. She’s sleeping with you yes?” Yorinda asked and Roger nodded.

“Aye. For tonight at least. We’ll get the room next to your and ours cleared out tomorrow. I’m off bright and early to get her what she needs.” Roger said standing with Holly’s head on his shoulder, limp and fast asleep.

“Does she have a night gown and nappies?” Yorinda asked and Roger nodded.

“Aye. Rocky brought over a trunk until we can all go shopping for her tomorrow afternoon.” Tobiah grinned and Yorinda beamed.

“Family outing I hope. Grandmama wants to shop for baby too.”

“Naturally.” Roger said as they said their goodnights and early mornings and separated to their rooms.

Roger laid Holly in the middle of the bed as Tobiah changed her out of her dress and into a sleeper gown without disturbing her.

“You’re awfully good at that.”

“I had practice with Tori. I was old enough to be her papa when she was born. Besides, babies sleep hard. You could have a whole marching band in here and not have her wake she’s so tired.” Tobiah grinned checking her nappies, which were still dry before shifting her between their pillows as he got changed into a nightshirt and Roger threw on his favorite pair of pajama bottoms, he rarely slept in a shirt even in the dead of winter.

Tobiah teased it was because he already had a nice fur-skin to keep him warm.

They crawled into bed on either side of her and just gazed at her a while. “She’s so adorable. I could look at her sleeping all night.” Tobiah said happily and Roger smiled.

“Our Tiniest Angel. I feel so blessed right now I could cry.” Roger said tearing up and kissing her little fingers as he held her hand in his large fingers. She was so small against him, so fragile, with the softest skin he’d ever felt.

“I could watch you with her forever. You were made to be a father. You light up the whole room right now Roger love.” Tobiah smiled with his head on the pillow beside Holly’s.

“I’m not surprised. You of all people know how much kids mean to me. Especially this one. She’s ours now and there’s not a darn thing in this world I wouldn’t do for her right at this moment. I’m gonna go a little early to the hospital this year so I can play Santa for her too before the white fades out of my beard and before bedtime.” Roger grinned and Tobiah chuckled.

“Aye, you may just fool her this year. Next year she’ll know it’s daddy.” Tobiah grinned and Roger nodded.

“Yup. So we make Willem do it, he’s a Santa devotee too you realize. When they adopted Gunter last year, who was it trying to climb down a chimney for a ten month old baby? Willem is just as insane as I am.” Roger grinned and Tobiah laughed.

“Aye, most true. Holly is about the same age; they will have fun playing I think much. Eran and Willem are coming over with Gunter for Christmas dinner. I am so happy I can’t sleep.” Tobiah chuckled and Roger leaned over their daughter to kiss him.

“Angel, so am I. But we should try; big day tomorrow and two-year olds are exhausting. I am so glad we have five weeks of vacation left to spend with her.”

“Oh, Aye. Goodnight dearest.”

“Goodnight Angel.” Roger said kissing Tobiah once more and then his daughter before they settled in to sleep for the night.

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Author: D. Sanders

II - A Family Blessed

Tobiah awoke and just stared with joy at the scene in his bed. During the night Holly had cuddled up against Roger. He was holding her close with one arm wrapped around her. She was using his nicely honed bicep as a pillow, her cheek against his chest and her little hand was fisted in the small thatch of thick hair in the middle of his chest. If she moved, Roger was going to be in pain as a two year old ripped out his chest hair with her death grip on him. Tobiah gently reached over and tried sticking his finger in her hand to get her to loosen her grip.

“It’s alright love. She’s not pulling. She just moved over here a few minutes ago. She half woke up and was whimpering a little, she calmed right down and fell right back asleep as soon as I held her. She just needed a little comfort, she can pull all the chest hair she wants to.” Roger said softly and Tobiah smiled.

“Aye, but it will still hurt love.” Tobiah said freeing little fingers from chest hair gently. “Where is your camera?” Tobiah asked and Roger smiled.

“In the dresser. Aye, I want a picture of this too.” Roger said unmoving as Tobiah carefully crawled out of bed and found the digi-cam that Roger always had ready and charged. Tobiah took a dozen pictures of Roger holding their daughter in bed before he came over to collect her.

She never woke as Tobiah laid her on his shoulder. “She needs changing. Will you find me diapers in that trunk please and see if they put powder in there please.” Tobiah said going into the bathroom and coming out with a warm washrag in one hand as he laid her down on her back and removed the soiled diaper before washing her with the warm rag.

There was indeed powder and Tobiah powdered her little bottom before pinning a fresh diaper on her.

“How do you do that without waking her up?” Roger asked and Tobiah shrugged.

“Practice. Tori was a messy baby, Mama and I had to take turns with her, once learned never forgotten.” Tobiah grinned settling Holly back on his shoulder. “I’ll take her downstairs while you get ready. She should probably be bright eyed for you, I’m going to try and get her to eat more. I’m sure Mama is already up and making baby food if I know her. We’ll see you in a few minutes, Daddy.” Tobiah smiled and Roger returned the smile as he headed into the shower and Tobiah carried Holly downstairs.

By the time Roger came down the stairs, Holly was indeed brightly awake and sitting on Tobiah's lap at the kitchen table feeding herself cereal that was spread in the table before her. Roger's favorite oat circles, perfect for little fingers and little teeth.

Yorinda looked to have been up a long time and several jars were on the counter of what looked like pureed vegetables and fruit. She was making baby food just as Tobiah had predicted and there was a tell tale smudge of purple on the napkin tucked around Holly's neck like a makeshift bib.

"Either grapes or blueberries." Roger said pointing at the smudge.

"Both mixed. She loved it." Tobiah grinned as Holly squirmed out of his lap and over to Roger.

"Daddy!" She beamed and Roger didn't think his insides could take the constant melting in her presence as he picked her up.

"Good morning Sunshine. Did Papa feed you a good breakfast?"

"Aye! Papa Yummy!"

"Aye, Papa is yummy." Roger winked and Tobiah chuckled.

"I'm positive she meant breakfast. No double entendres first thing in the morning Daddy." Tobiah chuckled and sat amazed at how quickly Holly had latched on to Roger. It was almost as if she were his own and not his adopted daughter.

In the daylight it was easy to see the human blood in her. Her hair was a dark blonde, darker than the usual Enf' Tuvalu shades. It was very close to light brown and her eyes, her intriguing and beguiling, large hazel eyes were definitely a human hue. No pure blooded elf had brown in their eyes. Her actual sire, whomever he was, had to have been a darkly sable colored man like Roger.

Tobiah knew it had to be the sire that was the human parent. Male Enf' Tuvalu were infertile unless bonded and no bonded elf would abandon his offspring, no shacah pair would ever discard their offspring. It went against biological instincts. Tobiah was already fiercely protective of her and would rip a man to shreds for threatening her without blinking twice. She was his. Elves were very possessive over their families, especially the males.

The mother had to be Enf' Tuvalu and not bonded, female Enf' Tuvalu were always fertile once they reached womanhood, but usually did not have children with anyone but their mates. It was very rare for a female Enf' Tuvalu to have a child un-bonded.

They did occasionally if they mated outside their race. Faes and Dryads were fertile men whether bonded or not. Same for humans. Holly had either been a mistake, an accident, or a desperate attempt to keep a lover, or worse things that Tobiah didn't want to think about.

Rape was a distinct possibility and what woman would want to raise a child conceived in hate? Tobiah couldn't think of a single reason but could think of several alternatives than abandoning an innocent life to die in the streets.

As Tobiah pondered her parentage, he came to the logical conclusion, that on second thought mother probably had been raped or made her living as a prostitute. They were often raped as part of their business and seeing a child every day would make even an elf's instincts to nurture difficult. Holly was fairly healthy and almost two, the mother, whomever she was, had at least kept her healthy and alive until she just could not go on caring for her.

Regardless the truth, Holly was with them now and they loved her and that was all that mattered as Roger bounced her on his knee and sung a song about a small spider and a waterspout that had Holly clapping, remarkably in time to the tune, as Roger's coffee grew stone cold on the table. He was teaching her some odd little hand gesture that apparently went along with the song and both Yorinda and Tobiah were watching with smiles as Tori shuffled in with the dog.

"A baby! Where did she come from?" A lovely and seventeen year old Tori asked gasping and then grinning and cooing at the toddler.

"From heaven. Meet your niece, your brother and I adopted her last night." Roger said and Tori squealed.

"NO way! Really?" She asked and Tobiah nodded.

The dog was bouncing at Roger's feet, excitedly trying to get at the baby.

"PUPPY!" Holly squalled with delight and Roger set her on the floor. The dog, all seven pounds of white fluff, was all over the baby with her tongue going a mile a minute and her tail even faster.

Holly was hiccupping she was giggling so hard. It was safe to assume Holly wasn't afraid of dogs and Aleah loved everybody, especially children. Tobiah had never known a more affectionate animal and when Gunter came over daily for Yorinda to baby-sit during working hours, the dog was glued to the tot until he went home covered in dog slobber and white hair.

It was convenient that Number Five Le Faye Lane had come up for sale two years prior and Eran had bought it for He and Willem immediately. Their apartments in the palace were lovely but limited. Eran turned the attic of Number

Five into a fully functional recording studio and sound proofed it so he could play long, late and as loud as wished without disturbing anyone. It was also closer to the Concert Hall. Narrish had moved in with them not long after, he was still unbonded himself and spent most of his time in the attic anyway. You hardly knew he was there half the time until he came downstairs when he got hungry or to play with his nephew so his brothers could have a little private time away from a baby.

Having them as next door neighbors was nice and made it easy for day care when they adopted Gunter.

Another half breed child and his circumstances were a little more tragic. His father had been Enf' Tuvalu and his mother human living in the human realm. They had died in a car crash while Gunter was still just a few weeks old. He too had almost died in the crash and he still had burn mark scars on his arms that would never fade entirely.

He'd been rushed to the hospital in Xanadu since Rocky was an expert healer with children and he'd tended the infant while Helen and her trauma team kept him alive.

The minute Eran saw the tiny newborn babe in the bassinet in the hospital he'd been lost. He so needed someone to love him and it took all of five seconds for Eran to fall head over heels for him.

The adoption had been immediate, the child had no other living relatives to claim him and Eran and Willem were in the hospital everyday helping until Rocky and Helen gave Gunter a clean bill of health and sent him home with his new fathers.

They named him after Willem's great-grandfather and the almost two year old was already well into his terrible-tuos. Eran and Willem looked harried on a daily basis and Yorinda often said the child had ants in his wee-pants.

He was quite an active and curious little boy. A blond and green eyed ball of endless energy.

Once Holly got her full strength back, she'd probably become just as hard to keep up with.

For now, she was content to play with the dog, who was all scrunched up with canine excitement over a new baby to play with on the floor.

Roger managed to finish his coffee and reluctantly tear himself away to go shopping.

Holly began crying the minute she realized Roger wasn't in the room and Tobiah picked her up and cuddled her. "It's alright precious. Daddy will be back I promise. He's not gone forever, he'll be back." Tobiah reassured and rocked her as huge crocodile tears tumbled out of her eyes. She had really bonded with Roger and Tobiah smiled warmly as he comforted her.

Soon he had her calm by singing to her an old lullaby he used to sing to Tori and she sniffed and just curled up against Tobiah's chest sucking her thumb.

Rocky turned up at the door about fifteen minutes later. "How is she this morning?" He asked as Tori led him into the kitchen.

"Has Roger wrapped around her little finger already and equally bonded to her daddy. You just missed the first round of separation anxiety." Tobiah said as Roger sat with him at the table.

"I'm not surprised. She's going to be highly attached to you both for security right now. Let's have a check up and see if I got all the frostbite." Rocky said as Tobiah handed him Holly and he bounced her on his knee while his hands glowed.

"Perfect, just a little underfed which I'm sure from the looks of this kitchen will be cured in no time." Rocky grinned noticing Yorinda making up batches of food soft enough and easy enough for a baby's sensitive digestive system.

He handed her back to Tobiah who settled her on his hip. "Can I help move the heavy stuff out of her room?" Rocky asked and Tobiah nodded gratefully.

"Aye, I'd be much obliged with your help." Tobiah said honestly as they headed upstairs and Rocky levitated the large furniture up into the attic and they finished just as Roger arrived home a few hours later with crates of purchases.

Holly was all over him as Rocky helped get the crates upstairs and helped Roger assemble the new toddler bed and guard rails so she wouldn't roll out of bed.

Tori kept her occupied with a new ball as the men set up her room. Roger had hit a toy store too while he'd been out and there were also a few new toys to play with in addition to the Rocking chair, bed, dresser, toy box and changing table.

He had also purchased several sipper cups, a pacifier, diapers, powders, baby wipes, a vast array of mundane baby clothes and fuzzy footed pajama sleepers and all manner of baby necessities that came in handy immediately as Tobiah christened the new changing table and changed a full diaper while she sucked on her new pacifier rather than her thumb.

They were finished in time for lunch and Yorinda had it ready and Rocky joined them for a meal before heading back to the palace pleased that Holly was in infinitely good hands.

After lunch they got her bundled up and into the new stroller and headed out into the city.

First stop was for new bedding and after showing Holly several items they learned she gravitated towards pastel blues, greens and yellows. Her new bedding was a rainbow pallet of colors in a whimsical pattern of teddy bears and daisies which matched her new curtains.

Her sheets were soft as lambskin fleece in a mint green to match and once Roger made the purchase and had a delivery time set up they hit Maevryn's shop.

She gushed over the baby as they bought her a completely new wardrobe of ready made clothes she'd grow out of in no time.

The top of the stroller was loaded with her items as they hit up the tanner's store for shoes.

He tickled her little feet as he pulled out boxes and boxes of tiny shoes and tried them on her.

They bought every pair that fit before they all headed home out of the cold and got her established in their household in lightening speed.

Yorinda was fixing dinner when word reached the neighbors there was a new resident next door and Willem and Eran brought Gunter over to play and see the new baby.

The toddlers were happily surrounded with blocks on the living room floor when the Weatherings joined them too meet Holly.

She was surrounded with warmth and security and was being passed hand to hand for inspection.

She ended up in her favorite place in Roger's lap after everyone went home again and after such a busy day in general she soon fell asleep curled against his broad chest as he rocked her by the fire.

"God she has me wrapped around that little finger already." Roger chuckled and Tobiah smiled as he picked up blocks off the floor.

“Aye. She’s her Daddy’s little girl indeed.” Tobiah replied kissing the top of Roger’s head as he passed the chair to dump the blocks into a basket in the corner.

Neither of them had ever been so happy now that Holly had come into their lives.

Roger carried her upstairs and Tobiah supervised as Roger changed his very first diaper. Thankfully he’d purchased the human style disposable kind since he was petrified of pins near tender skin and his big hands.

He even managed not to wake her like Tobiah who grinned at him. “See, I told you, sleep like logs they do at her age.” He said pulling back her covers as Roger laid her to bed and tucked her in.

“So I see.” Roger chuckled turning on the brand new baby monitor by her bed. The receivers in several rooms around the house. One on Roger’s nightstand, one in the living room, one in the kitchen and one in Yorinda’s room that she’d switch off while they were home, so she said. Hers was on and she chuckled listening to Roger and Tobiah in the room with her getting her ready for bed.

Roger tucked a soft teddy bear in bed with her and left a little night light on for her before kissing her brow and wishing her sweet dreams.

He and Tobiah tip-toed out and quietly shut the door behind them as they went back downstairs a while. It was still far to early for grown up bedtimes.

They had just made it down the stairs when the monitor in the living room went off. Roger chuckled. “Round one, I’ll go.” He said turning around and marching up the stairs again.

Tobiah sat in the chair by the fire listening to Roger comfort and reassure her and sing her back to sleep with a gentle rendition of “Silent Night.”

Roger was smiling as he came back down the stairs again. “She’ll get used to it here eventually. Life is upside-down for her at the moment. Strange Bed, Strange House, Strange People on top of trying to recover from last night. Poor Angel.” Roger said sitting next to Tobiah on the couch.

“Aye. You should have heard her after you left this morning. Broke my heart she did wanting you. Cried great buckets of dragon’s tears she did. She will have a lot of separation anxiety to overcome. Her Mama did leave her after all. She must be much confused. Right now Roger she needs you most. Latched onto you greatly she has.” Tobiah said cuddling up under Roger’s arm.

“I’m big and ‘safe’ feeling is all. I always tend to attract kids just because I’m a big old bear.” Roger grinned and Tobiah smiled.

“Aye. Every little girl’s dream to have a big strong daddy lap to live in. Daddy’s lap is almost big enough for Papa to curl up in.” Tobiah chuckled and Roger winked.

“I thought you did use my lap for sport.”

“Oh Aye. Daddy’s lap is a wonderful place for little ones and big ones.” Tobiah laughed.

“Good. Care to sit in it later?” Roger waggled his eyebrows and Tobiah grinned right back.

“Oh aye. You need never ask me twice, my answer is always yes.” Tobiah said as Yorinda came back downstairs in her robe and slippers.

“I’m exhausted. Just came down to wish you goodnight loves.” She said and kissed both their brows before heading back to her room to sleep.

Roger just smiled at Tobiah and pinned him to the couch for a long while kissing him breathless before they headed upstairs to finish their play in privacy.

They had just finished a wonderful round of love making when Holly woke up again and this time Tobiah pulled on a robe and went to take care of her.

He rocked her in the rocker a while, singing her songs of lush forests and babbling brooks and little children playing under the stars. His bard’s gift full of serenity and comfort and even through the baby monitor Roger could feel the empathy projection. It put him to sleep as much as it did Holly, which was what Tobiah intended as he tucked Holly back to sleep sucking on her pacifier and he returned to his room chuckling.

He hadn’t expected to put Roger to sleep too. He pulled the covers up over his handsome husband and switched off the lights as he crawled into bed beside his mate and let sleep carry him away too.

Candace arrived the next morning bright and early. She was barely in the door and never even bothered taking off her coat as she went immediately to her granddaughter and gushed over her.

“Oh granny is just over the moon! Goodness but you’re such a little looker! Roger will be out of his mind when you grow into a young lady. I see it already!” Candace laughed and Roger groaned.

“Bite your tongue Mom! She’s not allowed to date until she’s a hundred!” Roger said and Tobiah chuckled.

“Famous last words Roger.” Tobiah winked bringing in Candace’s luggage and taking it up to the room across from Holly’s. All the rooms on the third floor delightfully full of the extended family for Christmas.

Candace always stayed three full weeks every year. From the Week before Christmas to the Week after New Years. This year they’d get to spend every moment with her and the new baby.

This was by far and away the best Christmas season ever for everyone.

Muffin was chasing Aleah around the tree and who was chasing Holly, who was laughing as squealing as her curls bounced with every step.

Tori was out with her friends last minute shopping as usual while the remaining adults chatted over coffee in the living room watching Holly and the dogs play. Tobiah had bits of soft cheese and crackers sitting on the coffee table for Holly who nibbled as she played her bright neon green sipper cup continually being knocked off the table by little hands.

“Thank goodness they don’t leak eh?” Roger said picking it up again as it fell on his feet for the third time in as many minutes. Just as he set it back on the table, Holly knocked it back off again with a wicked grin on her face.

“You little stinker, you’re doing it on purpose.” Roger laughed picking her up to tickle her sides. Her screech of laughter music to his ears.

“I was beginning to wonder when you’d notice Daddy.” Tobiah laughed, loving the fact that Holly’s personality was beginning to show as she got used to her surroundings. She had a devilish and impish smile that made her eyes gleam with mischief. Thankfully children as young as Holly had very short memories and adapted quickly. She’d all but forgotten that two days ago she was hungry, filthy and cold. Now she had on a fluffy woolen lime green dress, she looked best in green with her coloring, with a ruffled petticoat over white knitted tights to keep her legs warm. She had on little white buckle shoes and a lacy white wide ribbon bow taming and threading through her curls like a little headband of delicate snowy patterned lace. She was a little princess in frills and lace. All the while eating handfuls of small bite sized pieces of cheese and making a mess with cracker crumbs on the table, as she decided to be ornery to get Roger’s attention.

Her life before almost a distant memory, soon to be forgotten forever as she began her new life as Holly Wrensong-Winters. Only daughter of two of the city’s wealthiest and most socially popular gentlemen. They were the nobility of the upper middle class and Kings of Le Faye Lane. The only thing separating them

from actual nobility were titles and lands, things neither man needed or wanted. They were more than content with all the fortunate blessings in their lives.

Holly by far and away the most precious of those blessings.

She'd never want for another thing for the rest of her life.

“Holly In Winter”

A Short Yuletide Fable of The Second Six from The Chronicles of Xanadu

Author: D. Sanders

III - Santa Claus Comes to Town

The week flew by and by Christmas Eve morning Holly was running through the living room stark naked from her waist down laughing as Tobiah chased her with a diaper. “Come back here missy! Papa’s not done with you booger!” Tobiah laughed, scooping her up mid run and flinging her over his shoulder as he brought her back over the blanket on the floor to finish changing her diapers.

She was now totally adjusted to life in Number Four Le Faye Lane and beginning to assert herself and she had Roger and Tobiah exhausted by the end of the evening trying to keep up with her. She had a vibrant personality and she was quick to learn and even quicker to learn how far she could push a boundary.

She, like Gunter was in the throws of the ‘terrible twos’ while not even technically aged two yet. She wasn’t disposed to throw a tantrum, but she did pout like a perfect little diva when Roger or Tobiah told her ‘no’. It was very hard not to cave into her whims when she looked adorable with her lower lip protruding and quivering in what looked like she’d just had collagen injections in her bottom lip. They knew in the end caving would do her no service and just turn her into a spoiled brat.

Spoiled she would be, but within reason, she’d have to learn “no” meant “no” and Roger and Tobiah were adamant they were not going to raise a little tyrant. They set boundaries and stuck to them, no matter how much she pouted. When she discovered pouting didn’t work to sway her father’s into pandering to her every whim, she’d stop. Bedtime was Bedtime, she could have one cookie not four, no coloring with her crayons on the floorboards or furniture, no letting the dog out the front door, she had a doggie door installed off the kitchen, no crawling out of the doggie-door after Aleah, etc...

They had their hands full of little girl whose personality was ten times as big as she was. She was very tiny for her age but small did not mean under developed. She could run faster than a greyhound and was clever as a fox and if you turned your head for a second, she was into mischief with her insatiable curiosity.

Roger had installed gates at the top and bottom of the stairs the very next day after he caught her climbing them like a jungle gym giving him premature gray hair and a coronary.

She’d only been out of his sight under five minutes.

If Gunter had ants in his wee-pants, Holly had a mice colony dancing the jitter-bug living in hers. Between the pair four men were constantly on their toes.

Tobiah finished changing her diaper and redressing her as Yorinda came down the stairs. "Give me the wee one. Daddy is dressed and you know he doesn't want her to see him dressed as you know who." Yorinda winked as she picked up Holly and took her into the kitchen out of sight.

Once the coast was clear Roger came down with Calum and Rocky looking like an old fashioned Santa Claus complete with a red suit, a pillow lashed around his middle to fill out the suit and Calum had already worked his magic on Roger's beard which was hanging down his chest and white curls. Tobiah grinned.

"You look wonderful Santa."

"Thank you my dearest Elf. Where's my sack?"

"By the front door. Thank the Maker Cay puts miniaturizing and levitating charms on it or else you'd never lift it." Tobiah chuckled as he escorted the trio to the door.

"I love that you do this Roger. It means a lot to the kids." Rocky said, dressed in brilliant green with red trim with golden bells on his shoes, Santa's helper in the flesh. Both he and Calum wore matching tunics of Red and Green.

"It means a lot to me. When I was five I had to spend Christmas in the hospital, I had pneumonia and no Santa came for me that year, it was devastating. Mom reassured me Santa had come to the apartment and my presents were waiting at home but it wasn't the same ya know? I had nothing on the actual day and it was depressing. When you're a kid, Christmas is the most magical day of the year, spending it sick and stuck in bed is bad enough. No Santa and you've got a heart sick child on top of everything else. I've been doing this for kids since I was in High School, I don't plan on stopping now, or ever until I drop." Roger said hefting the bag onto his shoulder.

"I will miss not seeing you do it this year as your helper but Holly just won't understand yet if we're both gone." Tobiah said adjusting Roger's beard lovingly.

"Aye. She's still too fragile yet." Roger said and Rocky held up a digital recorder.

"Never fear, I'm going to record it for you Toby." Roger grinned as they headed out to the hospital at just past lunchtime.

They were back around dinner with a magically refilled sack. In actuality it was two sacks. Calum had transported into Roger's bedroom from the doorstep and switched sacks and handed Roger the one with the presents for Holly and Gunter in them. Both unsuspecting children playing in the living room.

“Right you know the drill. Rocky will go inside first and set the stage and be my conduit link. I’m going to transport you inside in front of the fireplace on Rocky’s mental cue. He’ll make the fireplace dance and shimmer with really flashy tricks and then out you come of the fireplace, or at least it will look like it to babies. You ready?” Calum asked and Roger grinned.

“Oh yes.” Roger chuckled as Rocky went inside to dazzle the children and “catch” Roger when Calum transported him inside. Calum would follow via the front door.

Rocky was inside and Tobiah and Willem were filming jointly as Rocky set the stage.

The fireplace crackled like fireworks and Gunter and Holly were enthralled with dazzling lights as Santa magically appeared out of the hearth. “HO! HO! HO! MERRY CHRISTMAS!” Roger bellowed and tots squealed.

Roger sat down in a chair and had both children on his knees as he asked them both if they’d been good and what they wanted for Christmas. Gunter wanted a bike and having prepped Holly all week long who Santa Claus was she beamed and caroled out she wanted a Dolly.

Out of Santa’s magic sack came the bike Eran and Willem had picked out for Gunter. A little tricycle in brilliant red with a big green bow on it and Holly got a rag doll as big as she was.

Santa’s eyes twinkled with mirth as more toys came out of his magic sack just because they’d been extra special little children. Gunter had not only a new bike to ride; he got a wagon attachment so he could tote his toys around with him. The wagon itself filled with a plethora of stuff toys.

Holly had dolls and stuffed toys galore and that didn’t include the gifts she’s be getting from her parents Christmas morning. Roger had spent a fortune at the toy store in New York. She’d be buried in toys come morning. Everything designed to stimulate her young mind from learning toys, to toys that made music, to those to help her learn her letters and numbers, to mundane toys just to play with and stimulate her imagination.

After Santa’s visit he bid them all goodnight and vanished out the chimney with his helper elves. They just vanished upstairs where Roger raced into the bathroom to trim up his beard again and Calum made the white vanish as they changed out the their costumes into street clothes then transported to the front door and came in.

“You just missed Santa Daddy”: Tobiah cried and Roger faked shock.

"I did! OH NO! I love Santa!" Roger said as Holly raced over.

"He was here! He was here Daddy! Looky Toys!" She said holding out her rag doll.

"I told you Princess. Santa would come didn't I?" Roger said squatting and she smiled.

"AYE!" She cried dancing around the room in thrilled toddler bliss.

Gunter was already learning to ride his new bike with help from Eran and Willem who sat him on it and taught him how to work the pedals. Soon he was tearing all over the room and running into furniture and laughing gaily.

"God I love Christmas!" Roger bellowed rubbing his smashed big toe as Gunter ran over it.

"Sorry!" Eran said laughing trying to reign in the demon on three wheels.

"Don't be. Smashed toes are worth it! HA!" Roger cheered flopping into a chair a huge grin on his face. Tobiah flopping into his lap as he sat.

"You light up the whole room." Tobiah said rubbing his nose against Roger's

"I could light up the whole of New York if you plugged me in I'm so wired." Roger said as Holly crawled into the chair and onto their laps with them.

"Do you like your toys from Santa Princess?" Roger asked and Holly beamed.

"Aye." She cooed getting up close and kissing Roger's cheek that she could barely reach.

"Can papa have a kiss too?" Tobiah asked leaning down and puckering.

Holly laughed and kissed him too.

"Oh those are sweet as candy. Mmm, Mmm. I love you dearest." Tobiah said smacking his lips and making Holly laugh.

"Love Papa and Daddy too!" Holly cheered and got covered in affection from her parents who wanted to cry. It had been the first time she said she loved them in return, nothing could have make this Christmas better. She had come to them like her namesake. Holly was a winter Ivy that bore cheerful red berries in the bleakest of climes. Their Holly had come to them one winter's night and filled their lives with cheer and joy, she was more precious than any gift under the large tree in the parlor.

“Papa! Daddy! Get up! Santa came! Hurry!” Holly said rushing into her parent’s bedroom and leaping into bed with them. Her long messy curls flying wildly about her head.

At nearly five years old her world this time of year revolved around Santa Claus and just like Daddy had said he would, Santa had come while she had been sleeping. The Living room was transformed with wrapped gifts that had magically appeared under the tree. Roger and Tobiah had been up very late in order to get them under the tree from where they’d been hiding them in the attic.

Roger indulgently let Holly pull him out of bed and he piggy backed her down the stairs dressed in only his robe and pajamas. A sleepy eyed Tobiah smiling as he followed them down the stairs.

Everyone was still in their night clothes as Yorinda brought in Coffee with Candace and they watched Tori, home from the human University she was attending for the holidays and Holly tear into brightly colored paper and bows.

Another Christmas had come and gone in a blitz of wrappings and ribbons and childish shouts of joy from even the adults.

Number Four Le Faye Lane was ever a beacon of cheer and goodwill and the spirit of Christmas was alive and well year round but on Christmas day, even those without a scrap of empathy could feel the love and joy that spilled forth from the house every Christmas Season.

Especially since Holly had come one Winter and made them all whole.

END