

WONDERWORKER

“The Saint who became Santa has a lot to explain!”

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FADE IN:

INT. SANTA'S GROTTO, TOY SECTION OF A CHRISTMAS-DECORATED, BRITISH DEPARTMENT STORE. EVENING.

The store's STAFF are packing up to leave.

In the grotto, FATHER CHRISTMAS is saying goodbye to his LAST CHILD of the day. His beard is real and his old-fashioned, hand-stitched clothes look weathered - like his tanned skin. He's not the media's typical ruddy faced fat man, but ruggedly built.

FATHER CHRISTMAS

-And remember, I bring *one* present if you're being nice. The other gifts are from the people who love you. So thank them for whatever they were *able to* give.

He taps his nose conspiratorially.

FATHER CHRISTMAS (CONT'D)

-also gives you a head start onto next year's Nice list!

The Last Child beams joyously and runs to their smiling PARENTS to leave. Father Christmas starts gathering up his things.

A teenager, URI, is mopping the floor nearby.

URI

(muttering Cynically)
'Santa'! Yeah, right! The court *finds* me just for-
(mocking)
'anti-social behaviour',
while this old duffer's *paid* way more each day to lie to kids. Now *that's* criminal!

Father Christmas peers surprised over the top of his half-moon glasses at Uri.

FATHER CHRISTMAS

'Lie'? I may be old, but my hearing's fine. Father Christmas is real - for I am he!

URI

I ain't one of your dumb brats. How could Saint Nicholas, who died hundreds of years ago, become a kinda magic grandad with flying reindeers!?

Father Christmas looks at a peculiar pocket watch.

FATHER CHRISTMAS

You cynics and your 'reasoning'! But I have all the time in the world. Are you open to hear the whole truth, Uri?

URI

How'd you know my na-? Course, you got it off the manager.

The store has now closed and lights are being dimmed.

Uri puts up his mop and takes an antagonistic pose in the chair opposite Father Christmas's throne.

URI

S'better'n working. Go on. Try'n prove it!

Father Christmas returns to his throne.

FATHER CHRISTMAS

Well. As I learned much later: Fate played a hand in my life long before I was even born -

FADE TO.

EXT. PINE FOREST. NEAR AN ISOLATED FARM. MOONLESS NIGHT.

NOTE: THE DIALOGUE IN THIS SCENE IS SPOKEN IN PROTO-GERMANIC AND SUBTITLED IN ENGLISH.

On screen we read, 'Germania. Last Century B.C.'.

A HOLY WOMAN is performing an exorcism over a herd of goats. She has a broad face, white hair and striking night-blue eyes. A scared youth, the GOAT HERDER looks on:

HOLY WOMAN

Reveal your true name, demon! I demand it in the name of the Good Gods.

One of the goats starts to writhe its neck unnaturally. Its bleating sounds like a guttural voice fighting *not* to say:

GOAT

The - Clawed - One.

HOLY WOMAN

by that name, Clawed One, I draw you out!

The goat collapses. A shadow climbs out of its body, as if digging its way out, but the goat is unharmed.

The blurry shadow is tall and man-shaped, with glowing eyes.

The goat gets up and walks away unaffected, as The Clawed One cowers under the Holy Woman's gaze.

THE CLAWED ONE

I act only as I am made! Mercy! I beg you, I *must* be in something living!

HOLY WOMAN

(Thoughtful)
True, abomination, you do only as the Gods made you. *Why* they did so is not mine to query. I drive you, then, into this tree.

She points her staff at a birch sapling's roots.

HOLY WOMAN (CONT'D)

In that tree you shall be imprisoned until its fall. Remember, I could have destroyed you. Use that time to *change* your nature.

The shadow of The Clawed One wisps away, sucked into the tree.

THE CLAWED ONE (FADING)

(raving between unctuous and hateful)
I shall remember - with eternal thanks -
that I hate you - your kindness!

As the Holy Woman turns away, the Goat Herder bows his thanks. Behind her back he looks irritably at the birch so close to his shack.

FADE TO.

EXT. A SEAPORT IN ANCIENT TURKEY. DAY.

On screen we read, 'Patara, Anatolia. Fourth Century A.D.'

The harbour, of classical architecture, bustles with merchant sailing-barges and a few Roman war galleys.

NICHOLAS - sturdy, late-teens, with Mediterranean colour and the beginnings of a beard - sits on the harbour wall, whittling with a small, distinctive silver-handled knife. His strikingly pretty sweetheart, GULYA, leans against his back.

GULYA

Isn't it finished yet, Neeko?

NICHOLAS

(chuckling indulgently)
Nearly, Gulya, nearly. It must be perfect for you.

GULYA

I'll love it anyway - because you made it.

NICHOLAS

I'd know I could have done better.

GULYA

Always the perfectionist!

NICHOLAS

Give me wood, the right tools, and time enough and I'd raise you a civilisation!
(beat)
Anyway, this *is* as good as I can get it. Go on then!

Gulya turns and Nicholas hands her a beautifully carved lioness.

GULYA

It's so beautiful. A lion. My family Crest.

NICHOLAS

That too, but look closer, a lion-ess. She stands for your courage to love me.

They sit hand-in-hand gazing out at the ships.

NICHOLAS

I want to go out into the world and see all of it! I hope you will be with me.

GULYA

I hope for that too.

They spot a young man, ZEKI, rowing towards them.

NICHOLAS

Zeki, my good friend!

GULYA

His face! Something's very wrong!

Zeki ties off his boat, stony faced, before turning a faltering smile to them.

NICHOLAS

What's wrong? What's happened to you?

ZEKI

Nothing - to me. Came by boat - streets blocked - people panicking. Wanted you to hear from a friend first. So sudden! So sudden! The plague that took your mother, Johanna - it's returned Nicholas!

GULYA

(Terrified)
My family!

ZEKI

All well when I saw them. I checked everyone we know. Some are already taking to their death-beds.
(beat)
Nicholas, your - your father, Epiphanius-

NICHOLAS

This morning he had a cough - just a cough!

ZEKI

He wouldn't let me in. Said he was resigned to be with his Johanna.

Nicholas runs for the boat. Zeki and Gulya give chase and hold him back, shouting over each other.

ZEKI.

He *told* me not to let you come!

GULYA.

Please! No! I can't lose you!

Zeki gets ahead of Nicholas and snatches the oars out of his hands.

ZEKI
There's nothing you can do!
(shouting)
MY FRIEND! LISTEN TO ME!

Nicholas stops struggling.

ZEKI (CONT'D)
If you go to him, it's about what you want. You've seen this before. Once the plague gets you, you have a week - maybe. I'm sorry for my hard words. But your father said you're all he leaves behind. Go to him? -and you die too! There's nothing you can do, but to live on - for him.

NICHOLAS
There *is* something I can do, I can pray with him. He shan't die alone.

Nicholas takes hold of the oars. Zeki releases them resignedly.

ZEKI
Then at least, when he dies-

NICHOLAS
IF he dies.

ZEKI
False hope will only hurt you.

NICHOLAS
This is not a time for your rationalist philosophy, Zeki, this is a time for faith.

GULYA
IF he dies then - before the plague takes you too, go away from here, my love.

NICHOLAS
Then, you *will* defy your father and be my bride?

GULYA
I do love you Neeko, but this is not the time for romance.

NICHOLAS
Do you know the last thing my mother gasped, even in her agony?

Gulya and Zeki look blankly back.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
'love and hope get us through evil days when other measures fail.' Gulya, *now* is when we *most* need romance, faith and hope!

FADE TO:

INT. NICHOLAS'S FATHER'S FINELY FURNISHED BEDROOM. PRE-DAWN.

Nicholas is kneeling at the end of a bed, where Epiphanius lies ravaged and pockmarked by the plague. They are praying. Nicholas must wait between Epiphanius's wheezing coughs.

NICHOLAS AND EPIPHANIUS IN UNISON
- For thine is the ... kingdom, the power and
the glory ... for ever and ... ever. Amen.

EPIPHANIUS
(delirious)
Johanna? Very soon, my love!
(his expression clears)
Nicholas, son?

NICHOLAS
I'm here, Baba.

Nicholas starts to rise.

EPIPHANIUS
NO! I said no nearer!

NICHOLAS
Even now?

EPIPHANIUS
(breathless)
Especially now. You have kept vigil with me
these last days. I will that you go on to
live many, many more.
(chuckles painfully)
You look more in need of rest than I! Soon
what a carefree sleep *I* shall enter! Then,
you can rest. After? Go into the world
without sorrow, I will only be - *elsewhere*.

NICHOLAS
How *can* I live, without your guidance?

EPIPHANIUS
You have the best of my fortitude and of
your mother's wisdom. So listen, I must
tell you, while I still can.
(wheezes painfully)
Take up the family trade if you can, but-

NICHOLAS
I think - it would be too painful. All I
would see is you, not there in your shop.
But, what else do I know?

EPIPHANIUS (CONT'D)
- *but* - if not, fret not. Follow your
heart. Your mother used to say, 'If the
world tastes bitter, make it better!' Find
what *you're* good at, then *make it better*
with that.

Nicholas looks confused.

EPIPHANIUS (CONT'D)

Live a large life!

(taking a rasping breath)

Listen, be a beacon! The purpose of a life is just this; do what's *right* with who you are. You have the courage to show others how. I have seen this in you. I have seen -

The rising sun breaks through the open shutter onto the bed. Epiphanius turns his face to it.

EPIPHANIUS

I see - you at last - my - love!

Epiphanius exhales painlessly. He does not inhale again.

Nicholas's head droops. His shoulders shake in silent sobs.

EXT. MERCHANT GALLEY. 2 MILES OFF ANATOLIAN COAST. DAY.

Nicholas, looking haggard and sad, stands astern, watching Patara harbour recede over the horizon.

A CREW MAN

We got out just in time.
Did you lose many?

NICHOLAS

The last of my family - and the girl I love to her father's prejudice.

CREWMAN

Ah well. Life is hard. At least you still *have* life. Where will it take you now?
There's always a *new horizon* for me.

NICHOLAS

I have vowed to seek a cure for the plague, for all. If any land can teach me that alchemy, Egypt's magic will.

CREWMAN

I've travelled and seen many wonders. I don't believe there is such powerful magic. What if you find no cure?

NICHOLAS

I'll still learn all the magic I can, for some *other* good.

SERIES OF SHOTS.

On screen we read, 'Alexandria, Egypt'.

- A) Ext. Morning. A noisy market. Nicholas trying to hear directions from an impatient SELLER OF IDOLS.
- B) Ext. Noon. Outside a small, run-down, Egyptian-style temple, Nicholas is talking with an EGYPTIAN PRIEST. The Priest writes some Hieratic symbols on a scrap of papyrus he hands Nicholas.

C) Ext. Afternoon. Shadowy side street. Nicholas knocks on a door with mystic sigils around it. He shows the papyrus to the FORTUNE TELLER who opens, whose expression darkens. He shoos Nicholas away with curses and rude gestures.

Hiding on the rooftop of the building opposite, several brown, child-sized, elven figures watch with interest as Nicholas trudge away. One elbows another and gestures 'let's go' with his thumb.

EXT. QUIET AMPHITHEATRE. EVENING.

Small groups sit chatting together in the evening sun. Nicholas sits alone in shadow. The papyrus scrap hangs from one limp hand.

A small, middle-aged woman, in plain robes, PAPHNUTIA, comes and sits to one side in the row below him.

PAPHNUTIA
(without looking back)
I hear you're looking for me.

NICHOLAS
I'm looking for a teacher with - a -
specific type of knowing. But no one dares
give me a name.

Paphnutia turns her coal-black eyes on him.

PAPHNUTIA
I will: Paphnutia. *My* name. You are looking
for an adept Alchemist. I am that:
Sorceress, healer *and* alchemist.

NICHOLAS
A sorceress you must be - to know what a
stranger seeks!

PAPHNUTIA
Oh, you know -
(beat)
- how word gets around when a stranger asks
odd questions. Perhaps a djinni told me!
(laughs strangely)
Your arrival *is* auspicious, for I happen to
be seeking an apprentice.

NICHOLAS
Did your last one complete his studies?

PAPHNUTIA
His? Never had one. Never got round to a
husband either. *Sorcery* fulfils *my* soul.
But it occurred to me that my discoveries
will be lost when I die. They cannot just
be put in writing.

NICHOLAS
But, a *woman* teacher?

PAPHNUTIA

Unless you're a demon, was your mother not a woman!? You respect what *she* taught you?

Nicholas nods his assent.

PAPHNUTIA (CONT'D)

It is well. It's clear you must *un-learn* some things first. If you dare face notions that take apart everything you believed, walk with me - out of your own shadow.

INT. PAPHNUTIA'S STUDY. OVERLOOKING THE CITY LIBRARY. DAY.

The study is above street-level and airy. One wall holds racks of neatly labelled papyri. Another holds shelves with phials of dried plants and powdered minerals. A gigantic wooden sextant hangs in the largest window. Beneath it stands a globe of the then known world¹. The organised desk holds alembics, crucibles, a map of the heavens, astrolabe and charting instruments.

Entering behind Paphnutia, Nicholas looks surprised, she notices.

PAPHNUTIA

Not enough skulls or underworld idols for you? Perhaps I keep *them* in my dungeon?

NICHOLAS

No doubt.
(beat)
-Along with your shackled demons?

PAPHNUTIA

(sudden barking laugh)
Hah! You'll do all right! Magic is too serious a business for folk who take *themselves* seriously.

SERIES OF SHOTS. ALEXANDRIA.

- A) Ext. Night. Full moon. Nicholas - fidgeting and shivering - and Paphnutia - calm and still - sit meditating atop a windy tower overlooking the Nile delta in full flood.
- B) Int. Night. Paphnutia's study. New moon seen through window. Nicholas - in between clumsily adding ingredients to a pestle and mortar - looks at a scroll, red-eyed. The contents catch fire. Paphnutia shakes her head at his panic.
- C) Ext. / Int. Dawn. Moon $\frac{3}{4}$ full. The Egyptian Priest lets Paphnutia and Nicholas into his temple. Nicholas looks reticent at Paphnutia laying offerings on the altar.
- D) Ext. Night. Moon waning crescent. Banks of the Nile. The floods are gone and the fields behind are ripe. Nicholas and Paphnutia walk along the bank, in heated argument.

¹ Only Europe, Asia, Africa and the east coast of northernmost America.

E) Ext. Morning. Door of a humble converted dwelling, sporting a discreet Christian cross and iconography. A CHRISTIAN PRIEST, looking furtively around, welcomes Nicholas in like an old friend. Paphnutia, carrying a basket of fresh food past, spots Nicholas as he enters. She looks angry.

INT. PAPHNUTIA'S STUDY. DAY.

Nicholas arrives in a sweat, to find Paphnutia looking stony.

PAPHNUTIA
I can't teach you.

NICHOLAS
(defensive)
I know it's been slow, but-

PAPHNUTIA (INTERRUPTING)
- Because you stand in your own way.

NICHOLAS
I'm really trying. But- but I just can't concentrate in this furnace of a land! I thought Anatolia was hot-

PAPHNUTIA
Excuses! And by *that* way; you won't find whatever cure there is for the Anatolian Plague. Your heart isn't in it.

NICHOLAS
Isn't!? It's my chosen purpose!

PAPHNUTIA
Find another! You hid that you are Christian from me.

NICHOLAS
What! What's that got to do with it? If you must know; I hid it because I feared you wouldn't teach me.

PAPHNUTIA
And you were right.

Nicholas looks like thunder.

PAPHNUTIA (CONT'D)
(growing angry)
You think pagans hate your god? PAH! What is one more god here or there among the many? No, I can't teach you because you - *Christian* - look down on an Egyptian woman with her many gods and say she is deceived by demons!

NICHOLAS
I have never said that.

PAPHNUTIA

But *your priests* say it. And you're a *good* disciple. That is why you cannot summon magic. In your back-mind you resist what you have judged wicked. But I tell you; djinn, angel, wight or deity - yes even your Jehovah - *and Satan* - are all just knowable parts of the Order and Chaos behind Life's Power. It is neither good nor evil but your thinking makes it so. Call magic 'miracles' if it please you. Call yet upon Jehovah if it works, but know that *all peoples* call upon that same Great Spirit. To believe that doesn't diminish your Jehovah; it broadens His scope!
(beat, calmly)
Can you accept *that*?

Nicholas slumps into a chair, looking contrite.

NICHOLAS

You are right about me. But yes, I can accept it.

Paphnutia points at the wall of scrolls.

PAPHNUTIA

It is well. At last our work proper begins!
Well? That cure won't find itself!

SERIES OF SHOTS.

- A) Int. Evening. Nicholas in the City Library, scowling over his wax-tablet notes, taken from a scroll of arcane lettering. A cloud moves from a high window. A golden shaft of sunlight strikes him. He smiles and picks up his stylus.
- B) Ext. Day. Paphnutia and Nicholas walking past an old temple. She points at an obscure inscription. Nicholas reads it aloud straight off. She nods approval.
- C) Ext. Night. Nicholas sitting immobile, calm atop the tower overlooking the delta. A gust of wind extinguishes his lamp. He frowns with concentration. Nothing happens. Then, smiling, he taps his nose. The lamp reignites itself.

INT. EVENING. PAPHNUTIA'S STUDY.

Nicholas, his beard longer and fuller, angrily sweeps a great heap of scrolls off the desk. He shakes his head at Paphnutia.

NICHOLAS

(depressed)
That's it! There's nothing, Nuti! Not here, the Library or even your Priest's private collection. We've tried every alchemic combination, every esoteric charm! A bitter defeat, not for me, but all those who must still die! I've failed them.

PAPHNUTIA

Not so. You have mastered all Egypt can teach. What cannot be changed *must* be endured. But learning has no end. Leave it to future minds. Seems to me that you have acquitted *yourself* fairly of that obligation. So what will you do now?

NICHOLAS

(confused)
I thought I was keeping my promise to my father, but I was wrong. I must look elsewhere still to find my purpose.

PAPHNUTIA

Then go into the World and put your learning to good use.
(bittersweet)
Nicholas. It would do me honour to send you away as the son I never bore!

Nicholas gathers her into a hug.

NICHOLAS

It would honour me more. Would you settle for, 'Aunt Nuti'?

Paphnutia smiles, tearfully.

NIGHTFALL.

Nicholas sits alone by lamp light at the study's desk, finishing a letter on a papyrus scroll. He reads it back to himself.

NICHOLAS (VOICE OVER)

'Dear Uncle,
'It has been a long time since my last letter, but there has been nothing to report -
(beat)
- of interest to you. I only hope this reaches you before I do.
'Because my money is all but gone so I must work my passage home, first to see old friends in Patara, then on to you at Myra, where I hope to take up Father's silk trade near you; the only family I have left -'.

He nods, satisfied, then cuts the written part off the roll with his familiar silver-handled knife.

FADE TO:

EXT. ROMAN GRAIN SHIP ROLLING IN HEAVY SEAS. EVENING.

INT. BELOW DECKS.

Under the stern gaze of the FIRST MATE, Nicholas and other CARGO-CREW are re-placing loose grain sacks whose shifting is causing the ship to heel. They can barely stay ahead of the chaos.

NICHOLAS
(to first mate)
Shouldn't these have been lashed down in
dock? If they *all* slide we're sunk!

Nicholas nods towards oar-ports through which the wave-crests can
be seen.

FIRST MATE
I know that! The *Captain* thinks it's a
waste of cordage.
(cynical)
Rich merchant buys a ship, hires a crew and
that makes him a captain? But, he pays
well. So *you'll* do what you're told!

The First Mate gestures to the lash hanging at his belt.

EXT. STERN DECK.

The CAPTAIN looks abeam, worried by a storm front sweeping in
from the horizon, until a burly deck-crewman, KHUFU looks at him
and the Captain feigns confidence.

CAPTAIN
More sail! Can't you see there's a storm to
outrun! You!
(shouting to the STEER-BOARD-MAN)
-Use your oar thing to point the boat away
from the wind!

The crew set too, raising the sail, but with surly looks.

KHUFU
(Muttering)
More sail? He'll have the mast off!

The oldest crewman, PORTIUS, letting out rope, glances at the
storm, then up at the Captain.

PORTIUS
(openly)
And we'll never out-run that! Whatever gods
you cleave to lads, pray hard!

BELOW DECKS.

Wave-tops are beginning to lap through the oar-ports.

NICHOLAS (TO FIRST MATE)
Surely sealing the oar-ports-

FIRST MATE
When the captain says!

Some amphorae of drinking water break loose of their ties,
smashing. The First Mate comes to his senses.

FIRST MATE
Nah! Curse the Captain's grain! Secure
those jars! If we don't drown, worse later
to die mid ocean of the parch!

The ship lurches as a large wave swamps the oar-ports. The hold is suddenly awash. Loose items swill back and forth.

Several heavy oars fall from a rack, knocking the First Mate cold. The Cargo-Crew look at each other, unsure what to do.

Nicholas checks the First Mate is breathing and shouts to them.

NICHOLAS

Get this man up before he drowns! *Seal the oar-ports!* Think for yourselves! To live - not for fear of the lash.

Nicholas snatches the First Mate's lash off his belt and casts it aside. The Cargo-Crew comes to life, wrapping the oar-port covers in empty sacks and hammering them shut. They throw the First Mate carelessly on top of the cargo. Nicholas hurries above deck-

EXT. ON DECK.

- and to be heard over the now howling wind, Nicholas seizes the Captain by the shoulders and shouts in his face.

NICHOLAS

For God's sake. We're taking on water! Let these experienced men do as they know best!

Only Khufu is close enough to overhear this.

The Captain throws Nicholas off.

CAPTAIN

That you dare! I'm in charge here!
(Bellowing to the crew)
Throw this mutineer in the sea!

Khufu beckons a pair of his crewmates to join him, walks up to Nicholas and the Captain - and punches the Captain in the gut.

KHUFU

No one's going in the sea today.

He prods the floored Captain with his toe.

KHUFU (CONT'D)

Not even you.
(to his stunned crewmates)
Well? Put him out of harms way then!

His Shipmates carry away the Captain and lock him in his cabin.

KHUFU (CONT'D)

(to Nicholas)
You just made Captain.

NICHOLAS

But, Khufu, *you* just-

KHUFU

If we get out of this, I'll take my lashing
- and not my first - for striking an
officer. I don't fancy being crucified for
losing a whole cargo of Rome's precious
grain though. So-
(shrewdly)
What now - Captain?

NICHOLAS

(rallying. Shouting to the crew)
Who's the longest serving man here?

Several crewmen point out Portius.

NICHOLAS

Portius isn't it? What would you do?

Portius points at the storm-front's wall of rain that's nearly
upon them.

PORTIUS

Can't out-run *that*. Gotta get *through* it,
dead quick. Drop all canvas. Rig a small
sail astern. turn her head *into* it. If it
o'eretakes us a-broadside, Neptune's own
horses will trample us under. And bail,
lads! - like their hooves already cut yer
backs!

NICHOLAS,

(Shouting, to the crew)
Listen to Portius! Those who know how, act!
Those who know not, pray with me!

Most of the crew leap to action. A few younger crewmen kneel
around Nicholas, who clings to the mast to stay on his feet and
be clearly seen by all. He lifts an arm and shouts:

NICHOLAS

Great God-
(beat)
-whom these men know by other names. Save
Us! Not because we fear greatly, but so no
man is his child's grief, nor his widow's.

A SCRAWNY CREWMAN

(panicked)
Prayer ain't enough! The captain's pride
brought this 'pon us. Throw *him* in the sea
- a sacrifice to Neptune!

NICHOLAS

Do you really think one life - a worthless
one it seems to you - will appease *this*!?
And Khufu said not to. Would you cross *him*?

SCRAWNY CREWMAN

Well- I-
(accusative)
well I heard you're a proper learned
sorcerer. You save us!

NICHOLAS

I'm trying to! If you won't pray, work! God aids those who aid themselves!

The Scrawny Crewman nods and leaps to his crewmates' aid. Nicholas continues praying, now completely inaudible over the storm. He notices, with a knowing smile, that the other praying crewmen leave off, one-by-one, to help their shipmates.

The storm front hits. Waves breach high over the bows. The mast crashes to the deck.

Before it keels the ship over, Nicholas grabs an axe and cuts the rigging free. As the mast slides overboard, Nicholas ties himself to the broken remaining stump and continues shouting prayers, alone, into the gale.

The lashing rain and HOWL of the storm abates a tiny amount -

FADE TO:

EXT. SEA PORT ON A SMALL, ISOLATED GREEK ISLAND. DAY.

Bright sunlight shines on a calm sea where the battered, mast-less ship is rowing into port.

INT. SHIP'S HOLD.

An exhausted crew - which includes the Captain and the bandaged First Mate- rows in fair but ragged time.

The Captain struggles up on deck -

EXT. ON DECK.

- where Nicholas is at the steering board.

CAPTAIN

I have learned much from the crew this past week -
(penitent)
-mostly about myself.

NICHOLAS

Good.
(shouts down to the crew)
Ship Oars!

INT. SHIP'S HOLD.

The parched crew gladly comply. They collapse where they sit. The ship coasts up to the stone jetty.

EXT. ON DECK.

NICHOLAS (TO THE CAPTAIN)

Then, I gladly relinquish captaincy. There's a forest in those hills; you can make repairs. My final order is to first find the crew fresh water and rest.

The Captain and Nicholas stumble ashore with the hawsers and tie off the ship. No Harbour Master comes to greet them. They peer inland. No one is about.

Nicholas and the Captain walk warily into the shuttered and deserted town and knock at the Harbour Master's door. The emaciated HARBOUR MASTER answers, coughing. His little DAUGHTER, behind, looks just as ill.

NICHOLAS

Please God. Not the plague again.

HARBOUR MASTER

There is no plague here. Our crops were ruined by the same unseasonal storms that drove off all ships. You are the first in a whole moon. We have eaten even the last mule a week ago. For pity's sake, does your ship have food? We have gold enough.

Nicholas looks expectantly at the Captain.

CAPTAIN

(rueful)

I wish truly that I could sell you my grain, but-

NICHOLAS

Sell?

CAPTAIN (CONT'D)

(doggedly)

-but, when we return to Rome, it will be hard enough to excuse the sodden grain and its lateness. But if I cannot account for every sextarius-

(beat)

-Emperor Diocletian has declared the theft from the Empire is treason against himself. Nicholas, don't look at me so! Would you save us from Neptune only to have us crucified in Rome?

NICHOLAS

No, but there *must* be a way.

CAPTAIN

I must even feed the crew out of what I was paid. The grain is untouchable!

NICHOLAS

Then feed it to crew and town alike and a curse on Diocletian! His empire is vast, lose yourselves upon its seas. Rome will find more grain.

CAPTAIN

And have the crew's families outlawed, for anyone to enslave?

HARBOUR MASTER

So, the gods have deemed we die. I curse them instead then, for whatever *my* transgressions, my child has not earned this fate!

NICHOLAS

(to the Captain)

Wait! If - you fed everyone, but keep back grain enough to plant! Then - of that harvest - these people will surely give back in kind?

The Harbour Master nods encouragingly.

CAPTAIN

The next crop is not guaranteed. And nigh a year's delay! I will be fined heavily!

NICHOLAS

But *everyone* lives.

CAPTAIN

I will think on it. But first-
(to the Harbour Master)
-water for my crew?

The Harbour Master points towards the town square.

HARBOUR MASTER

The well at least never failed us.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE. AT THE WELL. AFTERNOON.

Nicholas, the Captain, First Mate, Portius, Khufu and Scrawny Crewman work together to draw water, refill the ship's amphorae, and load them on a hand cart. EMACIATED TOWNSFOLK look on from their doors and windows.

NICHOLAS

(To the Captain)

-and compassion is the measure of a man's worth, not Rome's grain-scales! Fate has spared our lives. Give thanks with largesse - and *willingly*.

The Captain looks at the suffering around him, smiles, and shakes Nicholas by the hand:

CAPTAIN

It was you, Wonderworker, who wrought this! Not for myself then, or heaven's credit, but for these and for you.

(to his crew)

You there: When the water's aboard and every man has had his fill, have them bring back all the grain they can haul.

(shouting to the Town Square)

Today, we bake bread!

The Townsfolk cheer.

EVENING.

Crewmen and Townsfolk are gathered round small fires. Some crewmen are distributing fresh bread, giving extra to families with children. Nicholas is whittling small animals and giving them to children.

He notices TWO COUPLES searching from group to group. Before he can find out for what, a woman, THE BUTCHER, approaches from the shadows. She looks well and overfed.

BUTCHER
Greetings, merchants.

NICHOLAS
Greetings. It heartens me to see someone who has not suffered this famine. How?

BUTCHER
I am the butcher. I had plenty of pickled pork see. Which I can tell you I had to guard with my life. I yet have three barrels left.

The Captain joins them.

CAPTAIN
Three barrels, that you would not share with starving children?

BUTCHER
These folk had only to give the fair price.

CAPTAIN
Fair... to your mind... in these circumstances. Show me these barrels. Perhaps *I* can match your price - for everyone Nicholas.

The Butcher avariciously beckons them to follow.

INT. THE BUTCHER'S STORE ROOM.

Salt sacks, bare smoking racks and empty meat barrels fill the space. There is a bench with coopering tools. The Butcher shows The Captain and Nicholas to three sealed barrels in the darkest corner.

NICHOLAS
You make your own barrels I see.

BUTCHER
Every skill is a saving.

CAPTAIN
I would like to know the meat's quality.

BUTCHER
Oh no, no, no. You know well enough not to break the seal 'til the meat's to be eaten. It won't keep if you don't then buy. But a merchant like you can feel the weight and tell there's flesh within.

The Captain tips one of the barrels and rolls it a few feet. We hear the THUDS of something resilient moving inside.

CAPTAIN
It seems as it should.

The Captain rights the barrel. As he moves on to the next one, Nicholas thinks he sees the first move slightly on its own.

He taps it. There's a weak but definite SCRATCHING sound from inside.

NICHOLAS
This meat is very fresh. What's really in there?

BUTCHER
(trying not to sound anxious)
Just pork! It's - that - was just the contents settling.

Nicholas strides to the workbench and picks up an axe. The Butcher tries to get between him and the barrel, sees Nicholas's dangerous expression and thinks better of it.

CAPTAIN
If that's really pickled pork, consider *this* barrel sold.

Nicholas plants the axe in the top of the barrel, twists it to splinter the wood, and peers inside. He recoils.

NICHOLAS
Strong fumes of sour wine.

CAPTAIN
That *is* as it should be.

A FEEBLE GASP comes from inside the barrel.

Horrified, Nicholas flips the axe and uses the handle to prize the hole wider.

A child's hand reaches weakly up through the gap. Enraged, Nicholas wrenches out the rest of the lid with his bare hands.

The Captain is aghast, but reacts quickly when the Butcher makes to run, pinning her arms behind her back.

Nicholas lifts out a LITTLE BOY, dopey and covered in vinegar-burns.

The Captain frees one hand briefly, to sweep all the tools off the coopering bench.

Nicholas lays the Boy out and checks he's breathing clearly. The boy starts to cough convulsively.

NICHOLAS
(soothing)
Yes, let the fresh air clear your lungs.

Nicholas turns to the Butcher; his face cold fury.

BUTCHER

It's not how it looks! I wasn't going to eat him!

NICHOLAS

No? What *have* you been eating?

BUTCHER

Pickled pork! Honest!

NICHOLAS

And just when you had all these empty barrels, a merchant ship appears. Just a business opportunity eh? You'd sell a child as meat to cheat starving strangers - and hope the child never woke.
(to the Captain)
Let her go.

The Captain looks uncertain. Nicholas picks up the axe again.

NICHOLAS

How fast can an overfed butcher run?

The Captain grins darkly and releases the Butcher as if shaking off something repellent.

The Butcher backs away in terror as Nicholas hefts the axe. She scrambles for the door and flees. Nicholas turns suddenly and cleaves the top of the next barrel.

NICHOLAS

Open that one too. She said she had *three*.

EXT. We see the Butcher fleeing for the forested hills.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE. NIGHT.

Nicholas carries the Boy and an even SMALLER GIRL, one on each shoulder, into the crowd. The Captain leads a BIGGER GIRL, who walks with his help.

The Two Couples who were asking questions run to them overjoyed. Nicholas and the Captain pass the children to their care, getting hearty hugs and handshakes.

They then join what is becoming a fire-side party.

CAPTAIN

Nicholas, would you have actually killed the butcher?

NICHOLAS

I have never been more sorely tempted. But she'll get her punishment. It's her turn to starve - alone on the hills - until hunger brings her back to face her neighbours.

CAPTAIN

(with dark relish)

I'd like to witness *that* day.

NICHOLAS

I would not.

FADE TO:

EXT. PATARA HARBOUR. DAY.

Nicholas stands on the wharf, waving the repaired Roman Grain Ship off to sea. His clothes are tatty from his adventures. His beard is fuller and he his bearing is confident and mature.

EXT. GULYA'S FATHER'S HOUSE. DAY.

The house is grand, but run down. Nicholas knocks the door and after a short wait Gulya answers.

GULYA

Neeko!

she lowers her voice and looks warily behind her.

GULYA (CONT'D)

I thought you'd gone forever!

NICHOLAS

I too. But I had to see you again.

He moves to take her hand. She snatches it away.

GULYA

But Father-

NICHOLAS

I know. But I've changed. Has he?

GULYA

No.

(reluctantly)

But things are different anyway.

NICHOLAS

I feel that.

GULYA

I don't want to hurt you, but things have been hard here. The plague-

NICHOLAS

(alarmed)

Your sisters!?

GULYA

No, the plague is spent. But businesses everywhere fell. Father lost everything. He can't support three daughters, so -

(rueful)

Zeki asked to marry me.

NICHOLAS

Zeki! Behind my back!

GULYA

(outraged)
'Behind your back'!
He did it to save me from servitude. You know how *female* servants are treated. I don't think he loves me, but he's a kind friend. One who stayed! You 'kindly released' me from our betrothal when you ran away, *remember?* I do!

NICHOLAS

I did not 'run'. But I *had* forgotten that.
(beat)
Or I hoped you had.

GULYA

That's beside the point. Father won't let us marry *anyone*. He's ashamed because he can't provide our dowries.

NICHOLAS

(derisive)
So, if it boosted *his* status, he wouldn't care *who* you married!?

GULYA

That's cynical - for you Neeko - and untrue. His pride is all he has now.

GULYA'S FATHER, ERDEM, appears at the door and sees Nicholas.

ERDEM

Daughter, what's taking you so - YOU!
Mister self-righteous Christian!

NICHOLAS

(placatory)
Erdem Sailmaker, Sir, I was *hoping* to speak with you. I wanted to say - that is - I regret the things I said.

ERDEM

I bet you do! You insult a man's house-gods and then have the nerve to ask for his daughter's hand!

NICHOLAS

(strained)
I spoke out of ignorance back then.

ERDEM

(angry)
Look at you! *Obviously* penniless. Your great plan fails and you crawl back, begging, where you'll find a soft heart. You insult my daughter and thereby me!

NICHOLAS

(Losing his temper)
It's not I who speaks out of ignorance now!

Erdem shoves Gulya forcibly behind himself. She stumbles onto the hall floor. He snatches up a cudgel from behind the door.

ERDEM

Go, Christian, or I *will* kill you!

NICHOLAS

You have my permission to *try*!

Gulya pushes between them.

GULYA

No please don't fight!

Nicholas, fuming, clenches and unclenches his fists. Then his face clears.

NICHOLAS

(to Gulya, ignoring Erdem)
I do this because you once loved me,
because I still love you - and because you
love your father.

Nicholas turns and walks away.

EXT. A PATARA STREET.

Nicholas, stony-faced, barges through the crowd, oblivious to protests. He turns though, at Gulya's cry.

Gulya is trying to catch up, waving something.

GULYA

Nicholas! *Neeko!* Wait! It's important!

Nicholas stands rooted with conflicting hope and doubt. He starts to open his arms for her then recants as she reaches him, because her expression is all business.

GULYA

(breathless)
I'm so sorry if this gave you false hope,
Neeko, but I had promised to give you this.

She hands him a sealed, crumpled and travel-stained scroll.

GULYA (CONT'D)

It came for you over a moon ago. The sailor who gave it to me said he'd heard I'd get it to you. Said it's been passed hand-to-hand since it missed you in Egypt! It must be important, it's from Bishop Hypatius of Myra. Why would he be writing to you?

NICHOLAS

He's my uncle!
(beat)
I can't believe Erdem let you come to me.

GULYA

(cheekily)

The little girl I was still remembers how to sneak across the dairy roof to find her little adventurer, Neeko.

(fondly)

She wants to wish the fine man he became good luck. She hopes he finds love one day.

With teary eyes, she kisses Nicholas quickly on the cheek, turns and is lost to his sight in the crowd.

INT. NICHOLAS'S FATHER'S HOUSE. DARK HALLWAY. DAWN.

All the windows are shuttered. Silence and dust lies on everything. We hear a KEY IN A LATCH and the front door CREAKS stiffly inwards as Nicholas steps inside. He spends a few bittersweet moments looking around. He makes for the main room.

NICHOLAS

(to the heavens)

Baba and Mana This will never really be my house. My heart says you are still here.

He opens the shutters and sits in the bright window to read the letter.

NICHOLAS

(to himself)

Dated four moons ago!

He reads on:

BISHOP HYPATIUS (VOICE OVER)

'Dear Nicholas,

'I look forward keenly to your arrival. Come on to me as soon as you may. The years have been kind, though I am no longer in full vigour. I look forward to meeting the man who is the boy I knew.

'I was saddened to hear of my brother's passing, but know he is with God now. I am confident you bore it with fortitude. Yet the Lord gives and the Lord takes away - and Epiphanius's death is not without recompense. Before you left for Egypt you instructed me to sell your father's business - excepting the house - and invest it until your return. This I have done.

'Epiphanius's was prudent and planned for your provision. My boy, you are very rich! My agents in Patara will release to you the papers and gold. Ask to speak to-'.

Nicholas leaves off reading-

NICHOLAS

I'd rather have Baba and Mana back Uncle.

(laughs ironically)

If only I had a wife to give me daughters I could marry off, *to whomever they loved!*

EXT. BUSY MAIN HARBOUR OF THE CITY OF ROME. DAY.

The Crew of the Roman Grain Ship loads the last sacks of the cargo directly onto huge weighing scales on the dockside.

The Captain, First Mate and an OFFICIOUS EXCISE MAN look on.

The Excise Man marks tallies on a wax tablet with a stylus. As the last load balances the scales he turns to the Captain.

EXCISE MAN

It's all there. Slightly over in fact.
You'll get paid the other half of your
agreed fee - minus the late delivery fine
of course.

CAPTAIN

(trying not to look relieved)
Of course.

EXCISE MAN

'Of course'? Usually you sailors have
farfetched story to excuse their tardiness
and avoid the fine.

CAPTAIN

If it's a story you want, I have a
scorcher!

EXCISE MAN

Stories don't interest me, only facts.

FIRST MATE

Is that a fact?

EXCISE MAN

(snooty)
Yes. My factotum will issue the receipt to
yours.

The Excise man snaps his tablet shut and struts away.

FIRST MATE (TO CAPTAIN)

Here's a fact for you. The Islanders gave
all they could spare, but we were fourteen
sacks short.

CAPTAIN

Including the seven inedible sacks that got
soaked in the storm?

The First Mate looks a little uncomfortable.

FIRST MATE

I - I may have accidentally put them back
with the rest.

CAPTAIN

Had they dried out?

FIRST MATE
Still sopping when I put a hand inside, but
the *outsides* looked dry.

CAPTAIN
They'll be traced back to me!

FLASHBACK: INT. CARGO HOLD. PARTLY REPAIRED GRAIN SHIP. NIGHT.

The First Mate is alone, working the remains of semi-legible
paint out of the weave of a wet grain sack with his fingers.

FIRST MATE (CONT'D IN VOICE OVER)
--Not so Captain. I happened to notice the
seawater had washed your trading mark off
those sacks -

END FLASHBACK.

EXT. MAIN HARBOUR OF THE CITY OF ROME. DAY.

FIRST MATE (CONT'D)
- once they're in the warehouse, no-one'll
trace 'em. Besides, they'll -ah - dry out
in no time in this Roman heat. Besides -
(beat)
Romans like their bread on the salty side.

CAPTAIN
Ah. Being experienced in spotting swindles
- though I never do them of course -

FIRST MATE
Of course.

CAPTAIN
- I happen to know that wet grain weighs
about twice the dry. Seven wet you say.
Against fourteen short.

The First Mate clears his throat:

FIRST MATE
We must ask ourselves this; was it another
of Nicholas's miracles - his Jehovah
rewarding our good deed - or - are *Emperor
Diocletian's* gods laughing at him?

FADE TO:

INT. NICHOLAS'S FATHER'S OLD BEDROOM. PRE-DAWN.

Nicholas sits awake in bed, looking over the last of his father's
accounts by lamp-light. The outside MURMUR OF VOICES and RUMBLE
of an occasional cart signals that the workday already begins.

NICHOLAS
(to himself. staggered)
I'll never have to work again.
(double beat)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
I'll be bored witless. No. This isn't
right! Used wisely, *so much* money could do
great good.
(selfish chuckle)
I'll be loved by everyone!

Just then, rising sunlight breaks through the gap in the shutters
and dazzles him.

NICHOLAS
(to the heavens)
I *wouldn't* be loved would I, Mana? I'd be
despised for righteous condescension. In
that case, it must be anonymous. And I know
just where to start.

He leaps out of bed and leans out of the window.

NICHOLAS
(shouting)
A half day's pay to anyone who'll carry an
urgent message and bring its reply!

EXT. PATARA SENATE HOUSE PLAZA. SUNNY MORNING.

Nicholas is by a fountain, looking doggedly for someone.

He puts on his best smile as Zeki arrives, led by a BOY.

Nicholas gives the surprised Boy a large coin. The boy bows and
runs away happy.

ZEKI
Neeko! Rumour said you were back. What's so
important that I had to come 'urgently'?
(suddenly wary)
Have - have you spoken to Gulya?

NICHOLAS
Yes.

ZEKI
Oh. And...?

NICHOLAS
I told her I still love her.

ZEKI
And - ah - how did she respond?

NICHOLAS
She doesn't love me. At least no more than
as an old friend.

ZEKI
Neeko, I'm genuinely sorry it's come out
this way. Listen, about Gulya, there's
something I want you to underst-

NICHOLAS

I *do* understand. And I believe you are
sorry - old friend.
(pushing through internal conflict)
But, she's in trouble. Her father -

ZEKI

- Her father is a braying mule!

NICHOLAS

(trying not to laugh)
Let me finish. Her father's pride is
hurting her. Seeing that and being unable
to act, that hurts me. So I'm leaving. If
she believes I'm giving up, so be it. Zeki,
I don't know if I'll be back, ever. So-
(struggling for the right words)
-so however things turn out. Will you-
(beat)
-look out for her, like we always did?
I have no claim on her now. If some miracle
should happen and she can marry, help her
find someone kind and honourable.
(beat)
I know you will, because *you* are both those
things. I'm leaving you my house. Fill it
with a family and laughter.

ZEKI

(astonished)
I don't know what to say!

Nicholas rises to leave.

NICHOLAS

Then say that.

Zeki holds him back.

ZEKI

But, I *have to explain* something.

NICHOLAS

No you don't. I know already-
(beat)
- that whatever it is; you'll do the right
thing.

Nicholas shakes off Zeki's grip and walks away quickly. Zeki
calls after him.

ZEKI

But you've just returned! There's so much
you haven't -

Nicholas turns and calls back:

NICHOLAS

(feigning nonchalance)
You and Gulya were always my best friends.
Look after each other.

FADE TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE ERDEM'S HOUSE. MIDNIGHT.

Nicholas climbs quietly onto the dairy roof.

He takes aim and throws a hefty leather pouch at a shutter-less window high in the second story. A near miss, it THUDS back to the dairy roof with a pure JINGLE of many coins.

Wincing at the noise, he quickly throws again, but this time taps his nose. The pouch slows down in mid air and gently floats through the opening.

He climbs down from the roof and stays, listening, until he hears voices:

ERDEM (OFF SCREEN)
What is it? Burglars?

GULYA (OFF SCREEN)
The opposite! A miracle! Look father,
enough gold for my dowry!

Satisfied, Nicholas pads quietly away.

EXT. PATARA SENATE HOUSE PLAZA. RAINY OVERCAST MORNING.

A TOWN CRIER projects his voice from the Senate House's huge raised porch as Nicholas, cloaked and hooded, watches from a column's shadow.

TOWN CRIER
- therefore iron-rimmed wheels are banned
from cobbled streets in the hours of
darkness.
(beat)
Society Events: Zeliha, the oldest daughter
of Erdem Sailmaker, is betrothed to Akdogan
Farrier. The wedding will be on the morning
after the next full moon.

NICHOLAS
(to himself)
I should have expected this. there's
nothing for it: the happiness of Gulya's
sisters is hers also. So...

FADE TO:

EXT. MIDNIGHT. ON DAIRY ROOF OF ERDEM'S HOUSE.

Nicholas taps his nose as a second pouch of coins floats through the high window.

EXT. PATARA SENATE HOUSE PLAZA. WINDY AUTUMNAL MORNING.

In the shadows again, Nicholas listens to the Town Crier. Both are in winter clothes.

TOWN CRIER

-nor beyond the harbour wall without a licence.

(beat)

Society News: Seren, the second daughter of Erdem Sailmaker, is betrothed to Bayram Weaver. The marriage takes place at the vernal equinox.

Nicholas smiles wryly to himself.

NICHOLAS

The old man expects much from his miracles!

FADE TO:

INT. THE FOOT OF THE STAIRWELL IN ERDEM'S HOUSE. MIDNIGHT.

Erdem, standing to stay alert, suddenly looks up.

A third money pouch hovers in through the high window.

Before it lands Erdem is running for the front door.

EXT. BESIDE THE DAIRY.

Nicholas jumps down off the roof into shadow.

ERDEM (OFF SCREEN)

I thank you, stranger.

Nicholas turns towards Erdem's voice, and out of the shadow.

ERDEM (CONT'D)

The *Christian!* I heard - *hoped* - that you were long gone!

NICHOLAS

No, just keeping to myself.

Erdem's face changes from gratitude, through confusion to anger.

ERDEM

Gulya told you I was impoverished and you - you did this - to - *humiliate me!*

NICHOLAS

Such a conceited niggardly heart! If I *wanted* to humiliate you, I have the means to now. You won't comprehend this, but it's *not about you.*

(beat)

But to ensure Gulya is cared for by a better man than you!

ERDEM

How dare you -

NICHOLAS

- tell you a truth even your own daughters fear to? Your pride is a poison.

Erdem bows his head.

ERDEM

By all the Gods, Christian, I wanted -

NICHOLAS

I *have* a name.

ERDEM

Nicholas. I *wanted* to hate you. Do you know why?

NICHOLAS

I spoke rashly, for which I am sorry.

ERDEM

No, not that.

(beat)

You lived as you preached. That is how you humiliated me.

(penitent)

I do thank you. Not just for saving the honour of my daughters, but for showing me what I am not: generous, with love as much as with money.

(optimistic)

Come in, my boy. If I tell Gulya of your largesse, perhaps she will-

NICHOLAS

NO! She shall not feel *beholden* to marry me. She has chosen freely.

ERDEM

Again, you ring true! But I must tell-

NICHOLAS

Tell *no-one*! I'll not risk gratitude that could sour to resentment. Swear it! - also - let Gulya choose her own husband.

ERDEM

It would be churlish to do otherwise if you can let her go. And what of you, Nicholas? Your hopes are ruined again.

NICHOLAS

Me? I have one promise to fulfil yet.

EXT. DECK OF A SMALL CARGO GALLEY. SUNSET.

The ship is sailing west along the Anatolian south coast.

Nicholas has a satchel over his shoulder. A strong, wintery wind whips his beard and clothes. He looks astern as Patara is hidden round a headland. He sighs and turns to face his future.

INT. NICHOLAS'S FATHER'S HOUSE. BRIGHT HALLWAY. AFTERNOON.

Though some of the furniture remains, the dust and cobwebs are gone, as are all Nicholas's and his parent's personal affects.

The door opens and Zeki carries his new bride, Gulya, over the threshold and sets her down. Her gaiety falters. Zeki frowns.

ZEKI
He's still here, isn't he?

GULYA
Yes, but we *all* had good times here, before it got - muddled. And what's wrong with remembering an old *friend* - who asked us both to fill an old house with a new story.

Zeki brightens.

ZEKI
Yes, darling wife. Let's get started!

FADE TO:

INT. THE GRAND BASILICA CHURCH OF MYRA, ANATOLIA. PRE-DAWN.

BISHOP HYPATIUS, a very elderly man, in episcopal robes, is knelt alone in candlelight, deep in prayer before an icon of Jesus.

Suddenly he looks rapturously up into the face on the icon, apparently listening to something, he crosses himself.

BISHOP HYPATIUS
Thank you! Thank you Lord!
(calling to someone off screen)
Brother Ozgur! Fetch a Scribe! My old prayer has been answered!

A young man in monk's habit, BROTHER OZGUR, comes and helps Bishop Hypatius slowly to his feet and through a side door.

INT. BISHOP HYPATIUS'S SPARSE PRIVATE APARTMENT. DAWN.

The wheezing Bishop half-lays in the one grandiose furnishing, a wing-backed, padded, throne.

A SCRIBE sits at a sloped writing desk, taking dictation.

Brother Ozgur, sad, kneels devotedly beside Bishop Hypatius.

BISHOP HYPATIUS
(to the scribe)
-And, having served this church faithfully since my youth, God has rewarded me with a sign: That I will go to him this day-
(to Brother Ozgur)
Be not sorrowful, my good Ozgur, it is a joyous thing!
(to the scribe)
-and that my work will not be undone.
As it was revealed to me, this will be the sign: Upon my death, the first man of faith to lay hand upon the basilica door, he is God's chosen successor to the See of Myra.
Now, bring me the document, scribe.
Brother Ozgur? - the wax if you please.

Brother Ozgur fetches a small oil burner over which a tiny cup of sealing wax is smoking.

The scribe holds the document for Bishop Hypatius as Brother Ozgur pours a small blob of wax onto its parchment.

Bishop Hypatius presses his signet ring into the wax and hands Brother Ozgur an ornate key.

BISHOP HYPATIUS

It is done.

Brother Ozgur and the Scribe turn away to a fancy casket, busy with the key, locking the document inside.

When Brother Ozgur returns to Bishop Hypatius, he has stopped breathing, and has a cherubic smile.

The sound of a HEFTY DOORKNOCKER reverberates through from the Basilica beyond.

EXT. THE WEST DOOR OF THE BASILICA. DAWN.

Nicholas reaches for the enormous ring hanging from the door.

Before he can knock, Brother Ozgur opens it from within.

NICHOLAS

So someone *is* in!

BROTHER OZGUR

God's blessings pilgrim. How may I be of serv-
(uncertain)
Nicholas?

NICHOLAS

You know me, Reverend Father?

BROTHER OZGUR

'Brother' only. Ozgur. You won't remember me, you were a small boy on your last visit, but you resemble your uncle as I recall him in his prime.

NICHOLAS

And is Uncle Hypatius home?

Brother Ozgur's face drops.

BROTHER OZGUR

Are you still a Christian, Nicholas? If so, I have *some* good news at least.

INT. MORNING. THE BASILICA.

Ozgur and Nicholas stand alone in the centre of the dark, church's empty stone floor (churches were pew-less then).

NICHOLAS

(Baffled)

I still don't understand why he'd chose me?
I'm not even ordained! Do you think his
mind was clear - at the end?

BROTHER OZGUR

Most definitely. I explained already - *He*
did not chose, God did.

NICHOLAS

Then, I have the exact same question for
God!

BROTHER OZGUR

Then, *ask Him*, in prayer.

FADE TO:

INT. BASILICA. DAY.

Sunlight streams in through the east window, over the reredos,
and strikes Hypatius' open casket where he lies in state.
Sorrowful mourners file past, each touch the hem of his cope as
they pass.

Nicholas and Brother Ozgur look on, touched, from a side aisle.

NICHOLAS

He was much loved. I don't know that I
could live up to that. Nor am I comfortable
with that much attention.

BROTHER OZGUR

He told me that, when he was invested, he
said much the same thing, Nicholas. But he
learned the role by *doing* the work. You
will too, if you are anything like him.
(beat)

Have you made a decision?

NICHOLAS

I *did* pray. I could discern no answer.

Nicholas, looks to the west end of the church:

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

-But when I knocked on that door, I had no
purpose - and little will to find one. It
seems Uncle - or God - or Fate, has given
me one where I *may* do good. But will your
Council of Elders accept me?

BROTHER OZGUR

Let God - and me - worry about that!

FADE TO:

INT. TOY DEPARTMENT SANTA'S GROTTO. PRESENT DAY. NIGHT.

URI

Nah! They'd never let someone be a bishop,
just like that!

FATHER CHRISTMAS

Things were a lot different back then.
People *listened* to their gods. But it
wasn't without strong opposition.
Especially from one.

FADE TO:

EXT. NOON. A LARGE, STONE-BUILT PORCH / ANTEROOM.

Nicholas, un-bothered by the cold weather, paces slowly back and forth. Behind a solid oaken door we hear OZGUR'S RAISED VOICE, recognisable but indistinct.

INT. A STONE-BUILT, CIRCULAR MEETING ROOM.

On the other side of the oaken door; the room is plain, with simple wooden benches around the walls. By contrast, the CHURCH ELDERS, a dozen late-middle-aged men sat therein, are in fine raiment. Brother Ozgur stands in the centre addressing this Council. He is holding the document dictated by Bishop Hypatius.

BROTHER OZGUR

-And I testify by my oath before God, and
before this witness-

Brother Ozgur crosses himself as the same Scribe we saw earlier nods his assent.

BROTHER OZGUR (CONT'D)

-that those were the whole of the last
words and deeds of Bishop Hypatius.

The youngest looking of the Elders, Arch Deacon SCAEVIO stands to speak. He has a pinched, pedantic looking face.

SCAEVIO

A divine vision is a rare thing. How can
you be sure that Hypatius-?

BROTHER OZGUR

-*Bishop* Hypatius.

SCAEVIO

-'*Bishop*' Hypatius - of course - as was.
How can you be sure he was not age-addled -
or - let us be kind - merely wishing for
something long yearned for?

BROTHER OZGUR

Well his last rulings the day before his
passing all made perfect sense. Are we to
believe that a man of fifty year's probity
would suddenly lie to himself and his flock
(beat)
- just before going to judgement?

The other Elders nod with understanding to each other.

BROTHER OZGUR (CONT'D)

-And if we are to question visions because they are uncommon, then no divine inspiration can be trusted!

(beat)

You did not see his face. I did. He was tranfigured.

Scaevio ignores this and produces a parchment.

SCAEVIO

This document - entrusted to me by *his Grace the Bishop Hypatius* - *also* bears the Episcopal seal. It predates yours and names an experienced member of this council as his successor.

BROTHER OZGUR

Does it name you, perchance?

SCAEVIO

That - is beside the point.

SCAEVIO (CONTD)

Answer me this: Why - by all that's holy - should we accept an *un-ordained stranger* instead of a known Elder.

BROTHER OZGUR

Because it is the will of God and the *last* will and testament of a beloved and trusted churchman. I cannot say it simpler.

The MOST VENERABLE ELDER raises his hand for silence.

MOST VENERABLE ELDER

Brother Ozgur. We *all* loved our spiritual father. And we all know you to be a man of equally steady heart. Tell us then; why would you have this Nicholas as the spiritual example for a whole province? Why not yourself for that matter?

Ozgur makes pointed eye-contact with Scaevio.

BROTHER OZGUR

Me? I know that I would be much tempted by the power that comes with authority.

(beat)

But this Nicholas, I know something of his deeds *from* his uncle. He is honest even when it costs him. He longs for purpose. Moreover - and this I think counts above all else - he doesn't *want* the prominence of episcopal office. The responsibility frightens him. It will make him both humble and conscientious.

SCAEVIO

But he's not ordained!

MOST VENERABLE ELDER
That can be remedied!
(to all the Elders)
I will have *all* your thoughts, gentlemen,
before we decide.

EXT. STONE-BUILT ANTEROOM. LATE EVENING.

Nicholas has propped himself in a corner of the floor and is half asleep. He springs up expectantly, as the oaken door clanks open.

Brother Ozgur steps through with a broad grin and shakes Nicholas's hand vigorously.

BROTHER OZGUR
After all that - you had better know your
Credo!

FADE TO:

EXT. MORNING. THE WEST FRONT GARDEN OF THE BASILICA.

Spring growth and budding flowers are bathed in raking yellow light.

INT. THE BASILICA CHURCH OF MYRA.

The Elders and their retinues of clergy gather in full regalia.

The Most Venerable Elder stands with his back to the altar watching as, Nicholas, dressed in lowly monastic habit, walks up the aisle and prostrates himself, face down, arms outstretched, before the altar. The Most Venerable Elder raises a hand in benediction.

MOST VENERABLE ELDER
Nicholas, this day, you humble yourself
before the Lord to make a vow of -

FADE TO:

LATER.

The investment ceremony nears its close. Nicholas stands bemused before the altar, looking up at the east window.

Two priests enrobe him with his Bishop's Chasuble. It is deep red with a snowy white border and collar. He turns to the congregation of clerics, who cross themselves or clap politely.

Scaevio, stood at the back of the church, does neither.

FADE TO:

EXT. THE WEST FRONT GARDEN OF THE BASILICA. AFTERNOON.

Fruit-laden trees and parching grass in amber, near vertical, sunlight.

INT. BISHOP HYPATIUS'S (NOW NICHOLAS'S) PRIVATE APARTMENT.

The apartment is less sparse, with keepsakes, books and 'philosophical instruments' from Nicholas's travels. The shelves of a tall cupboard hold many of Nicholas whittled animal figures.

In a quiet corner Nicholas and a handsome young Roman Optio (Lieutenant rank officer) IGNATIUS, kneel in quiet conversation.

OPTIO IGNATIUS

-and I confess these things - which I do regret - safe in the knowledge you will not repeat them. And now I seek your absolution, Father.

NICHOLAS

Not mine, but God's.
(beat)
Ignatius, you do understand the purpose of the confessional? Do you regret only because you fear your Centurion, because you dishonoured his daughter, or because she is with child and you have not offered her marriage?

OPTIO IGNATIUS

All these things, truthfully, Father!

NICHOLAS

Your penance then is to find the courage to ask her father for her betrothal.

OPTIO IGNATIUS

He would kill me!

NICHOLAS

You must face that possibility, otherwise he will cast her out to starve. Do not compound your wickedness with inaction.

OPTIO IGNATIUS

May I not instead say prayers and give money to the poor?

NICHOLAS

You may, if you wish-
(beat)
- *as well as* doing right by the girl.

OPTIO IGNATIUS

(resigned)
To save my soul, I will do all I can.

Nicholas makes the sign of the cross over Ignatius.

NICHOLAS

In that case, I hold you to your word in Jesus' name, then he will absolve you of all your sins. Go in peace.

OPTIO IGNATIUS

(triumphant)
Amen!

Ignatius kisses Nicholas's ring, and walks away looking smug.

Nicholas's dubious gaze follows him out of the basilica.

FADE TO:

INT. DAY. THE COURT CHAMBER OF MYRA.

In the centre of the floor, three, blooded, bruised and chained MUNIFEX LEGIONARIES (Roman foot soldiers) stand guarded by four armed, stern, beefy COHORTES URBANAE (military police).

The only other people present are ranked OFFICERS, including Optio Ignatius, a vengeful-looking, bull-necked CENTURION and A MAGISTRATE, who looks down on the Munifexi from a high throne.

MAGISTRATE

This is your last chance. We have proof all of you were patrolling your Centurion's street on the night he was away; the night his daughter was dishonoured in her own home. You say you saw no-one else. Thus it must be that one of you committed this crime and the other two are giving false alibis. In my view that makes them as guilty as the molester.

FIRST MUNIFEX

Sir, I tell you again, we are not covering for each other.

MAGISTRATE

Then what explanation do you give? The attacker was a spirit no doubt!

The Munifexi exchange a confederate look and say nothing.

MAGISTRATE

None of you will confess, but I can tell you are withholding something. This is too serious a crime to go unpunished.

(double beat)

Then I sentence you all - as the law demands - to be beheaded by the sword at dawn.

Beyond the chamber doors Nicholas starts SHOUTING.

NICHOLAS (OFF SCREEN)

Let me pass I say! I *will* give testimony!

The doors burst open and Nicholas, in his bishop's robes, strides in. Behind him a CLERK OF THE COURT is picking himself up from the floor, rubbing his jaw.

MAGISTRATE

This is outrageous! Bishop Nichol-

NICHOLAS

What is outrageous is these men being tried without a spokesman for their innocence!

Nicholas notices how bloodied the Munifexi are.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Where is justice when men are beaten in secret to confess?

MAGISTRATE

There is justice enough. These men are the only suspects and they act as if they hide something. They must be guilty!

Nicholas positions himself between the Munifexi and the magistrate.

NICHOLAS

Have you tried to find out *what* they are hiding? Because I happen to know!

In the gallery Optio Ignatius quails, then looks furious. He opens his mouth to speak, then thinks better of it. If he accuses Nicholas of breaching the confessional, he as good as admits he is the perpetrator. He waits to hear Nicholas's words.

NICHOLAS

As I arrived, one of these men said they are not covering for each other. He does not lie. They are covering for a fourth. Someone who, no doubt, told them if they do not give him away, he has the power to preserve their record for honourable discharges. If they die disgraced, their families won't get their army pensions. This you know.

(beat)

Your Honour, three men offer their lives for their families while one officer gives up their lives for himself!

MAGISTRATE

This is a serious turn of events. I will hear you, your Grace. Who is this officer?

Nicholas looks conflicted.

NICHOLAS

That - I cannot say.

MAGISTRATE

I demand it, by the authority of this court!

NICHOLAS

I have given my oath of silence to a higher authority. And it is for Him to judge this at *The Appointed Day*.

Only Nicholas sees Optio Ignatius's look of relief and in return shoots him a hidden look of suppressed fury.

MAGISTRATE

You ask me to release these men on your word alone, yet give me no one to take their place? Justice must be seen to be done. Someone must suffer!

The Centurion grins his agreement.

NICHOLAS

Your Honour, there *will* be punishment in this life - or the next. I swear before this court and by my faith, I *will* breach the confessional if the guilty man does not keep his word to God. For *No one* may use a veil of religion to cover their misdeeds.

MAGISTRATE

Be that as it may, how does that help this loyal Centurion so shamed?

NICHOLAS

(Turning to the Centurion)
This Centurion? How exactly is *he* shamed? Unless by his own failure to teach and *loyally* protect his daughter from seducers.

The Centurion flushes crimson with anger and places his hand on his gladius.

Nicholas meets his gaze levelly.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Perhaps it is time to consider the real victims; a young woman - not given a voice here - cast out of her home with a baby labelled 'sinful' merely for being born.

(beat)

Centurion, if it is really justice you want, put aside vengeance and help your daughter raise *your* grandchild!

(to the room in general)

As to the child's father, if he will not marry the girl, he *must provide* for his firstborn. Then I will keep his secret. His punishment? Watching from afar - never knowing fatherhood's joys.

MAGISTRATE

Bishop Nicholas, your wisdom outmatches your years. Given what I have heard, I cannot sentence these men. Their silence commends not condemns them.

(to the Munifexi)

You have the full pardon of this court.

The Cohortes Urbanae unshackle their prisoners and slap their backs with nervous smiles as if to imply 'no hard feelings?'

MAGISTRATE (CONT'D)

These three men have a just grievance against someone in this room. I speak now to you: Should these men soon appear before me again on a charge of assaulting an officer, I shall look askance at *the officer*.

You may find assuaging their wrath has cost you far more than supporting one child. If you flee your duty, one which *you* have created, it will identify you - and you will be hunted.

(to Nicholas)

Now, justice has been served!

Only Nicholas notices, because he is watching for it, that all the colour has drained from Optio Ignatius's face.

EXT. OUTSIDE A RUN DOWN CLASSICAL BUILDING. DAY.

Ozgur is helping Nicholas to put up a plaque of Greek lettering.

OZGUR

-in short, you giving half of the outlay swayed the Elders to agree. Every Myra child can now get free reading lessons at this new, 'Hypatius Memorial Library'.

(beat)

Since the court case, they've really accepted you. Except Scaevio. They'd probably eject him from the Council if you asked it, now.

NICHOLAS

Never. I need at least one critical voice to curb any conceit this job breeds.

Nicholas looks wistfully at an attractive woman walking past.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Speaking of breeding; this is not the life I pictured. I had hoped to have my own family - children to teach kindness to.

OZGUR

You still may.

NICHOLAS

'Bishop's wife' is as demanding a vocation as Bishop, and less lauded. Few women want it.

OZGUR

I mean that you are already Father to a whole diocese.

Nicholas strokes his beard thoughtfully.

NICHOLAS

Yes, my duty now is to teach by example.

INT. CHRISTMAS EVE. THE BASILICA CHURCH OF MYRA.

The church is decorated with evergreen garlands and bright ribbons.

Scaevio enters and - scandalised - turns to a VERGER.

SCAEVIO
Who authorised this frivolity?

VERGER
Why, his Grace the Bishop, Reverend Archdeacon.

At that moment Nicholas arrives carrying a wooden chest.

NICHOLAS
(breezy)
Ah, Scaevio! After mass I will call up the children. You will give each one of these.

Scaevio looks in the chest, and is scandalised again.

SCAEVIO
I know I urged you to get rid of your carvings, but not by giving these graven pagan gods to children. *At Christmas*, the solemn feast of our Lord's birth!?

Nicholas holds up a wooden jackal.

NICHOLAS
Scaevio, Scaevio! Solemn only to you. Your over-vigilant eyes see Anubis - to you, a demon. Do you know what a child sees?

SCAEVIO
(ironic)
Enlighten me my *Lord* Bishop.

NICHOLAS
A nice doggy! And so it becomes!
Christmas is not just about the God Child, it's about all children. We show them the example of generosity. And *that* includes generosity of spirit. Do allow *yourself* some. You may even find a smile!

LATER.

Mass is under way and Nicholas is winding up his sermon from the pulpit. The congregation hangs on his words.

NICHOLAS
-this then is the deeper truth of the Nativity: When we *freely* give whatever we can to raise up another - be it great sacrifice or small token of love, we echo God's greatest gift to all humanity: We *become* someone's Christmas saviour - by our deeds throughout the year.

EXT. THE WEST DOOR OF THE BASILICA.

Mass is ended. As the congregation files out, Nicholas makes the benediction sign over the adults and places an affectionate hand on the head of each child.

One HAPPY GIRL, clutching the jackal figure, shows it proudly to Nicholas.

HAPPY GIRL

I forgot to say 'thank you' to the
beacon for my Foxy! Will you say it him?

The GIRL'S MOTHER looks embarrassed;

GIRL'S MOTHER

(to Nicholas)
She means the Arch Deacon, your Grace.
(to the Girl)
I said to call the bishop 'your Grace'.

NICHOLAS

'Father' is fine.
(to the Girl)
I'll be sure to remind him he's a beacon. I
hope it will make him smile.

SMALL GIRL

I like smiling! Thank you Father - uhm -
Father Christmas!

EXT. CHRISTMAS MORNING. JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT. A SHABBY STREET IN
THE POOR QUARTER OF MYRA.

Shoes have been left on windowsills to air. Nicholas creeps from house to house, carrying a large leather bag.

NICHOLAS

(to himself)
Let's make an old custom a new tradition.

From the bag, he puts a coin in one shoe of each pair.

One, especially lowly-looking house has a pair that is almost falling apart. He puts a coin in both shoes.

SERIES OF SHOTS. MYRA.

Nicholas ages from shot to shot.

- A) Ext. Morning. Summer. A Myra market. Nicholas, forcing himself between two squabbling traders and restoring order with a few kind words.
- B) Int. Late evening. The circular meeting room. Winter seen through windows. The weary Council of Elders endure Nicholas and Scaevio in heated debate.
- C) Int. Summer Day. The now fully stocked Library. Nicholas, laughing with and teaching young children to read. Watching from the shadowy rafters is a smiling, child-like figure with pointed ears.

- D) Ext. Spring Day. Myra Main street. Nicholas, leading an Easter procession. Town's people bowing, clapping and smiling as he passes. Nicholas looks embarrassed. Scaevio, behind him, looks bitter.
- E) Ext. Winter Night. Nicholas, secretly placing coins in shoes on a different Myra street to before.
- F) Ext. Autumn Sunrise. Forested hills behind Myra. Nicholas walking, now in his late thirties, stops to look over his beloved city.

INT. THE BASILICA. CHRISTMAS EVE.

This year a whole pine tree, decorated with ribbons, stands in a great pot in the nave. Nicholas is again preaching from the pulpit to enrapt families.

NICHOLAS

-and you need not consult me or any cleric,
for your heart *knows* what sin is; any word,
deed or inaction meant to hurt another.
Jesus didn't avoid sinners, he sought to-

The west doors burst violently open.

Ignatius, now a Centurion, strides in, leading a band of armed soldiers. He points his gladius at Nicholas.

IGNATIUS

Arrest that dissident!

Nicholas glares at Ignatius.

NICHOLAS

Is this how you return to the House of
Peace after so long, Ignatius - with
weapons?

IGNATIUS

(shouting to the congregation)
The Emperor decrees that all who will not
name him supreme god among the many, are
traitors to Rome.

Ignatius points his gladius at Nicholas again.

IGNATIUS (CONT'D)

This man has lied, many times, that *his* god
is the greatest of all.

(beat)

But Diocletian is a *merciful* god! All who
leave this place of dissent, never to
return, will be spared the sword!

Pandemonium as terrified families flee the basilica. Scaevio is among the first to get through the nearest door.

Only a few older people and clergy remain.

IGNATIUS

Seize the rest!

The soldiers roughly pull Nicholas straight from the pulpit as the remaining faithful are herded away at sword-point.

INT. DAY. THE COURT CHAMBER OF MYRA.

Nicholas, cut and bruised, stands chained between two burly soldiers on the spot he freed the three Munifexi from years ago.

Scaevio and Ignatius sit together at the magistrate's bench in the otherwise locked and empty courtroom.

IGNATIUS

Nicholas. So-called Bishop. You stand accused of inciting treason against the laws of Rome and of her supreme god, Diocletian. Do you understand the charges against you?

NICHOLAS

(icily)
I *understand* them, yes, and your low motives for making them, but I do not recognise their authority!

IGNATIUS

(to Scaevio)
Propraetor Scaev-

NICHOLAS

(mocking being impressed)
'Propraetor' Scaevio, *so-called*, I see now how you fit into all this. You *have* gone up in worldly power! But down in honour!

IGNATIUS (CONT'D)

(doggedly)
- Propraetor Scaevio, do you hear how this godless degenerate,

Nicholas snorts derision.

IGNATIUS (CONT'D)

-*degenerate*, dismisses the authority of his Emperor's duly appointed officers?
Do we need any further proof of guilt?

NICHOLAS

You'd know all about guilt Ignatius.

Scaevio looks uncomfortably at Ignatius's gladius and the two guards spears, but he's in too deep now to back out safely.

SCAEVIO

(mendacious)
Centurion Ignatius. Let us be in no doubt. Let us follow the Emperor's laws and put the question clearly and directly.
(to Nicholas)
Do you recognise Diocletian as supreme god of this World?

NICHOLAS

As a god? Never! As a *tyrant* of this World, yes! I would defy *anyone* with power enough to raise up the lowly yet instead raises himself. I mean you too, Scaevio.

(pleading)

Scaevio, please: We disagreed often, but I respected your rigid faith. In betraying it, you betray yourself!

This is too much for Scaevio. His bitter jealousy of Nicholas's easy popularity flashes in his eyes.

SCAEVIO

(murderous)

'rigid'? I'll show you just how much!

Ignatius, his own words are your proof.

(beat)

As Propraetor it is my duty to sentence any traitor to death.

SCAEVIO

(to Nicholas, coldly)

You are a Roman citizen; I extend you then the one courtesy of a clean beheading by the sword. Your wealth will be seized and put to good use.

NICHOLAS

(sarcastic)

By you of course! First, find it!

SCAEVIO

(gloating)

In addition, your seditious library will be torn down, its scrolls sold as kindling. Good riddance to it and to you.

The guards start to bundle Nicholas away.

NICHOLAS

Not the Library! You'd take learning from your own diocese's children?

SCAEVIO

(Vengeful. To the guards)

Execute him at dawn.

INT. DARK PRISON CELL. NIGHT.

Nicholas kneels, shackled, on the dank, bare stones, praying in the moonlight streaming through one high, small, barred window that looks out on street-level.

NICHOLAS

- not just for myself, but also for Scaevio. I pray that even now he may be turned from self-destruction.

The cell is flooded with golden light and a VOICE - like a man and woman speaking in exact unison - comes from everywhere;

THE VOICE (OFF SCREEN)

Nicholas.

NICHOLAS

Who's there?

THE VOICE (OFF SCREEN)

You have already learned some of my names.
You know who. I am who I Am. And *I know*
you, Nicholas. Your wonderworking is barely
begun. I release you to that work.

The shackles spring apart. The cell door swings open silently.

Nicholas is awestruck;

NICHOLAS

But, the Emperor, his soldiers, there is no
place where-

THE VOICE

Follow your heart *beyond* the reach of
worldly emperors. you shall live on to
bring your child-like wonder to far lands.
None shall hinder you this night if you
take courage: A safe way is laid before
you. Fairwell.
(fading)
Fair - well...

Nicholas edges out of his cell and up the steps to -

A GROUND LEVEL PRISON YARD.

Nicholas sees the GUARDS are gambling round a brazier.

Across the prison yard, ANOTHER GUARD steps in from the street.
He closes the iron door, but fumbles and drops his keys.

The door swings silently open behind the bending guard.

Nicholas dashes across the prison yard for freedom. At that exact
moment a guard reaches for a hunk of meat from the brazier. His
hand's shadow follows and hides Nicholas's passage exactly.

Nicholas snatches a scarlet Centurion's cloak from several on
pegs by the door as he passes through.

The Guard with the meat yelps;

GUARD WITH MEAT

YOW! That's 'ot!

His yelp exactly covers the sound of Nicholas SLAMMING the door.

FADE TO:

INT. TOY DEPARTMENT SANTA'S GROTTO. PRESENT DAY.

Uri, looking more relaxed, suddenly sits upright.

URI
(snorts derision)
You nearly had me going there for a mo,
Grandad! Well, I don't believe in miracles!

FATHER CHRISTMAS
No one can make you, Uri.
(thoughtful)
It's funny that people who do believe in
miracles mock magic, and vice-versa, But -
in my experience - if you believe in
neither, you'll never see either.

URI
Whatever. but no way was you rescued by
God.

FATHER CHRISTMAS
Yet you accept that *I* was rescued and you
do have one god in mind. Did *I* say it was
God? All I do know is life took a
significant turn from then on-

FADE TO:

EXT. MYRA HARBOUR. DEAD OF NIGHT.

Nicholas hides in the shadow of quay-side goods under the stolen
cloak, which covers his conspicuous robes. Under his arm is a
shallow, but hefty, iron casket.

One of the docked ships is the grain-ship he served on. He runs
to it, and up the gang-plank. As he touches the gunwale a figure
bars his way with a raised, khopesh sword.

KHUFU
One more step - thief - and you loose a
hand!
(amazed)
Ni - Nicholas? Here?

NICHOLAS
Khufu! Hide me! Explanations later!

KHUFU
None needed my old friend!

INT. CAPTAIN'S CABIN.

Nicholas, Khufu and the Captain huddle at a table, round a single
candle.

CAPTAIN
- but your whole library! All that
knowledge lost. Be he a god, then the
Emperor's a mad one!

KHUFU
What'll you do now?

Nicholas pats the grimy casket.

NICHOLAS

The same as before, in a new way. I'll still use my gold to encourage generosity. The future lies in children. Show *them* right from wrong and the rest will follow.

The Captain 's eyes rest on the casket.

CAPTAIN

I wager *that's* what it was about for this Scaevio character. Where did you hide it?

NICHOLAS

In the false bottom of the toy chest he mocked.
(beat)
It's no coincidence you docked in Myra this night.

KHUFU

The gods move in mysterious ways.
Captain, we know lumbermen from Germania. They could get Nicholas away to northern lands, beyond the Empire.

FADE TO:

SNOWY PASS THROUGH THE AUSTRIAN ALPS. DAY.

An ox train of half-a-dozen GERMANIC LUMBERMEN and their carts is heading north with loads of cedar and olive logs. Nicholas drives one of the carts. For warmth he is wearing his repaired red bishop's vestments over new woollen clothes. He is shouting a conversation with a rangy, ruddy-faced lumberman in the leading cart, BARDULF.

NICHOLAS

So, Bardulf, *this* is snow? It falls on Mount Ararat in my homeland I hear, but I've never seen it. I imagined it white like plaster. But this! It has its own light - like paradise!

Nicholas scoops a handful off a passing branch and tastes it.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

As invigorating as a youthful heart.

BARDULF

(Merry)
As you will. The novelty wears off. It's cold, wet and slippery under hoof.

NICHOLAS

I thought you Germans were used to such?

BARDULF

'Used to' is not the same as liking. We Germans *have* learned there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes. That red you wear now. If you were lost in the snow, there's no better colour to be found.

BARDULF (CONT'D)

(beat)
Including by bandit bowmen!

NICHOLAS
ARE there bandits in these mountains?

BARDULF
Only ox-trains and the fools who drive them
come out in this cold! A consequence of
your new trade. We transport exotic woods
to lands that cannot grow them.

NICHOLAS
Isn't one tree as good as another?

BARDULF
There is much you still do not know. You
know to carve any wood. But some trees are
strong, some are light, others don't easily
rot. Not all are safe to hold food.

NICHOLAS
Teach me then!

EXT. OUTSIDE A SNOW-COVERED VILLAGE. DEEP IN THE TALL CONIFEROUS
FORESTS OF GERMANIA. EVENING.

The ox-train nears the village, which is well made from hand-hewn
timber. It spreads in a handful of concentric semi-circles round
a green. All tracks in or out pass under a wooden archway, finely
carved with many deities. There are no gates and no stockade.
Each sturdy cabin faces in. The most central are the workshops of
a blacksmith (HERIWALD), tanner, weaver, furrier, carpenter,
candle-maker and all the other craftspeople of a self-reliant
community. Behind every home is a winter-fallow garden.

Beyond the green is a processional way to the largest building, a
communal mead hall at the far end from the archway, with its back
(north) wall to the forest, where a large tree looms over.

At the heart of the green is a 50 foot, well tended holly tree,
hung with ribbons and straw figures. To one side is a well. To
the other a stone altar upon which clay and wood idols stand.

A stately, open-faced, blonde woman, SOLRUNA, is placing an
offering of meat and bread on the altar.

Bardulf shouts proudly over his shoulder to Nicholas.

BARDULF
That strong beauty is my wife, Solruna, the
Holy-Woman, and this is my home, Wulpuzhof!
We're not the barbarians that Rome must
'civilize' after all, eh Nicholas?

NICHOLAS
I don't doubt you ask of your gods the same
as every people; food enough, healthy
children and peace.

The ox-train pulls up to happy SHOUTS and affectionate reunions of the VILLAGERS. Children run to the carts and throw themselves into the arms of fathers. Women kiss their men.

Nicholas smiles patiently on Bardulf and his shapely wife's passionate reunion kiss.

When Solruna lets Bardulf up for air, he indicates Nicholas:

BARDULF

Solruna, beloved wife, this exotic import is what a Holy *Man* of Anatolian looks like. Romans call him Sanctus Nicholas, Nicholas the Wonderworker. Treat him as my brother.

Solruna takes a long shrewd look at Nicholas, who looks back placidly. She smiles.

SOLRUNA

(with a strong Germanic accent)
Yes, I see into his heart. You have found a true friend, husband.

Solruna raises a hand. The villagers fall silent.

SOLRUNA (CONT'D)

This is, 'Sankt-oos Ne-klaws' - a holyman.
(beat)
To which gods, matters not. My husband welcomes him to our hearth. You will also. I, the Holy-Woman, have said it.

The whole of Wulpuzhof calls welcomes, mispronouncing Sanctus Nicholas in various ways,

VILLAGERS

'My hearth will warm you, Sankt-anee-klus'.
'Eat at our table, Sannu-kloos'.
'Our roof is your shelter, Santu-kuh-las'.

Bardulf laughs good-naturedly along with Nicholas.

BARDULF

They do not travel and haven't grown my ear for tongues. No disrespect is meant.

NICHOLAS

- and none is imagined.
(beat)
I came here for a new life. So why *not* a new name?

SOLRUNA

Santu Klaas is easy to say. Close enough?

NICHOLAS

Klaas enough!

INT. THE MEAD HALL. NIGHT.

Villagers feast at long trestle-tables and benches that run the length of the hall. Carved and gilded columns and rafters glitter in the light of a line of cooking-fires and many torches.

In two wooden thrones on a low dais sit the Blacksmith, HERIWALD, who is also the Earl and - at his elbow - sits his trusted advisor, Solruna.

At the top of the table, among the RETAINERS (Heriwald's ceremonial body-guards) Bardulf raises a mead-horn to Nicholas, sat in the 'honoured guest' seat opposite.

BARDULF

Skål to the gods for our safe return - and
our out-landish cargo, Santu Klaas!

Everyone raises their mead-horns with a rousing shout;

VILLAGERS

Skål!

Heriwald leans toward Nicholas;

HERIWALD

Bardulf tells me you carve well? But you'll
need a more practical profession too.
(thoughtful)
The crafts-folk always need fire wood a-
plenty. If one man were to save them
fetching their own... any good with an axe?

NICHOLAS

I have had -
(beat)
- occasion - to discovered a natural
aptitude, Earl Heriwald.

HERIWALD

Show me tomorrow. Chop down a grisly old
tree for me - before it falls on this hall.
Do that and you have earned your place.

NICHOLAS

That enormous birch by the north wall? I've
never seen the like. The knots should make
for some fine carvings.

HERIWALD

If I were you I wouldn't make anything from
that old brute. Grandfather said it had a
Goblin's curse. It certainly has a curséd
habit of dropping limbs. Just make it gone.

EXT. NORTH SIDE OF THE MEAD HALL. MORNING.

The wind-swept birch evokes a giant clawed hand. Rooted way from the hall, its branches yet loom over the northern gable. It has few leaves. One healthy mistletoe grows on a high branch.

Nicholas is high in the tree, tying off a doubled, strong rope. He climbs down and ties the free ends round a boulder, further from the hall. To ensure the birch falls away from the hall, he 'tourniquets' the rope, cable-tight, with a fallen birch-branch - which breaks, so he fetches an iron bar from the smithy instead.

As high as he can reach on the hall side of the trunk, he chops half way through.

He chops a deep notch lower down on the opposite side. The ropes twang under enormous strain as if the birch is determined to fall on the hall regardless.

Unseen by Nicholas, two elvish figures, HOLLY and MISTLETOE, twitch their pointed ears and watch from bushes nearby. They wear irregular, pointy felt hats and home-spun clothes whose dark greens and browns disguise their silhouettes as sapling pines.

Just as the tree begins to CRACK, the rope - uncannily - snaps. Nicholas throws himself to the ground as the iron bar catapults through the space he just occupied and the birch lurches towards the hall.

MISTLETOE
(whispering emphatically)
If anyone's felling *my* tree, Holly, it's
gonna be me!

Lightning-quick, Mistletoe springs out and drop-kicks the tree above the higher cut. Tiny though he is, the tree sways back. With a BANSHEE CRY of tearing fibres, it CRASHES safely into the forest, crushing only a large holly bush.

Mistletoe looks mortified to Holly as he dodges back into hiding. Nicholas turns as he catches something in the corner of his eye.

HOLLY
Oh no! My holly, my home tree!
(beat)
I think it saw you, Mistletoe!

Mistletoe shakes his head haughtily.

MISTLETOE
Nonsense, Holly! Bigfolk can't see Goodfolk
unless we let them.

HOLLY
well - maybe *it's* also a Goodfolk - but a
big one? It *is* from far off lands.

MISTLETOE
Whoever heard of a *giant* Goodfolk?

Nicholas looks right at their hiding place.

NICHOLAS
I don't know about 'Goodfolk', but I try to
be a good man.

The bushes shiver. The fading sound of RUNNING FOOTSTEPS and Holly's voice;

HOLLY (OFF SCREEN)
It has magic to hear us too!

Heriwald ambles over from the Smithy.

HERIWALD
The birch protested loud enough!
(beat)
Who were you talking to?

NICHOLAS
I'm not sure -

EXT. NORTH WALL OF THE MEAD HALL. DEAD OF NIGHT.

All is quiet. We see the last lamp being extinguished within a cabin window. A creepy VOICE (The Clawed One) echoes from deep in the rotted core of the birch stump.

THE CLAWED ONE
Santu Klaas, you released me. Our fates are linked now - like it or not, I have a new purpose. I'm no more The Clawed One.
(agonised)
OH - cramped for hundreds of years!
Krampus, that's me now!

One clawed hand signals its painful climb out of the stump.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING OVERLOOKING DISTANT WULPUZHOF. DUSK.

Holly and Mistletoe sit with a circle of OTHER ELVES.

MISTLETOE
It was never easy tending a plant on a tree with that *thing* in it, but I've lost my purpose and my home.

HOLLY
And I. Mistie, I'm sorry about your tree but - well - I'm glad we're free of the creature.

AN OTHER ELF
Traditionally you should find new name-sake saplings to tend.

HOLLY
Don't know about you, Mistie, but it's been a *long* time since we had a holiday!

MISTLETOE
Aye, Holls, and -
(coy)
- well - let's not split up. Let's find a young holly tree *with* mistletoe on it.

HOLLY
Could take a while. I have a mind to watch that Bigfolk first. Do - do you think - it's the One - in the old tales?

MISTLETOE

Holly Goatfold, just because it shares your name, doesn't mean everything holly-related you see is about the Holly King prophecy!

Holly looks hurt.

SERIES OF SHOTS. WULFUZHOF.

- A) Ext. Day. Bardulf and some of the Lumbermen helping Nicholas fix up an abandoned cabin at the village outskirts. Nicholas's red robe is hanging on a peg inside the front door.
- B) Ext. Dusk. Deep in the forest. Nicholas - unbothered by the rain - neatly lops side branches from a felled tree. Hiding under a huge bracket mushroom, Mistletoe and Holly look on. Mistletoe shudders, holds a finger to his lips and points to the shadow of a giant ant hill, where the unclear silhouette of a shaggy man-shape is also watching Nicholas, all the while flicking out a long tongue to feast on the ants.

INT. BARDULF AND SOLRUNA'S CABIN. EVENING.

In the corbeled, river-stone, inglenook fireplace, Solruna turns a joint of meat on an iron spit. Bardulf adds root vegetables to a hanging stew pot. With his silver knife, Nicholas peels and hands him vegetables at the scoured wooden table. The spacious cabin's few furnishings are well made to use the space and decorated with bright, floral designs reminiscent of narrowboats and gypsy caravans. Blues and yellows dominate. There's a sleep platform in the loft space.

BARDULF

So, have any local women caught your eye, Santu?

SOLRUNA

He's not been here one moon husband. Let the man settle in!

NICHOLAS

I haven't really been looking. I'm content as I am for now. Though I haven't given up on a family yet.

BARDULF

Content, really? It's a big step down from Head Holyman to humble woodsman.

NICHOLAS

-Says the content lumberman! Besides, these folk already have their holy-woman. I won't tread on others' toes.

Nicholas bows his head to Solruna.

BARDULF

Aye, I'm a content and humble lumberman. But my status comes from having such a good and respected wife.

SOLRUNA

And we endeavour *passionately* towards
getting our first child.

She winks at Bardulf, who blows her a kiss.

BARDULF

But seriously, Santu, life isn't all work.
Even if you don't miss your old status, a
man's got to have a passion. Mine's
travelling. What's yours?

Nicholas, pulls a carving of an elk from his tunic.

NICHOLAS

These.

SOLRUNA

Elk?

NICHOLAS

Carving. When I have enough, I'll do as I
did before and give them to all the local
children, at Christmas - which you call
Midwinter Night.

SOLRUNA

They're very good. We Germans love our
totem animals. You could sell them to hang
on the Irminsul, the Grandmother Tree, when
we leave offerings for the Elves.

NICHOLAS

The Elves? What you call the little people
who tend the trees and animals?

Solruna nods.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Thanks, but if I did what I love for money,
I might stop loving it.

EXT. BARDULF AND SOLRUNA'S CABIN DOOR. DUSK.

Bardulf and Solruna bid Nicholas farewell.

Nicholas starts to cross the green to his cabin. Ahead he sees a
fox sneaking meat off the Grandmother Tree's altar.

NICHOLAS

(bemused, to himself)
As good a way as any for nature-gods to
accept an offering.

To his surprise, he sees a small hand rise from behind the altar
to snatch a loaf.

NICHOLAS

What child goes there so late? If you are
hungry, let me help!

Behind the altar Holly and Mistletoe stiffen.

MISTLETOE

(whispering)
I thought you said no one's about at night!?

HOLLY

I thought you said it couldn't see us!?

NICHOLAS

And hear you! Who *is* that, why aren't you safe at home with your parents?

Holly shoots Mistletoe a wilful look and steps out into the open.

HOLLY

(a carrying whisper)
We are not children, but Elves. My name is Holly Goatfold.
(beat)
Ah-ummm, how do you do?

Mistletoe makes frantic, 'come back! - shut up!' gestures.

Holly beckons Mistletoe to show himself.

HOLLY (CONT'D)

And this is my companion, Mistletoe Shadowhang.

Mistletoe looks horrified.

Nicholas looks conspiratorially left and right.

NICHOLAS

(Also whispering)
I assure you, your secret is safe.

HOLLY

Bigfolk are usually afraid of us Goodfolk, but you're not. Why?

NICHOLAS

I learned to see your kindred in Egypt. Why should any man fear the agents of Nature?

HOLLY

Is that all your reason? We have a legend about-

Mistletoe leaps out from hiding to grab Holly's arm.

MISTLETOE

(loud)
Holly! -

Mistletoe -realising he shouted - looks anxiously about.

MISTLETOE

(continues in a whisper)
- You've said enough!

NICHOLAS

Mistletoe Shadowhang I presume. Hello! I know that voice! You saved the hall from the tree. Now I can thank you properly.

Mistletoe, dumbstruck, realises he's holding the snatched loaf and tosses it very un-nonchalantly into a snow drift.

NICHOLAS

(chuckling good-naturedly)
Have you forgotten that was meant for you?

MISTLETOE

(bashful)
Oh - I - that is -

He scrabbles in the snow after the loaf.

NICHOLAS

Why not leave that for the mice? I have stew at home. Quickly warmed. Join me?

INT. NICHOLAS'S FIXED-UP CABIN.

The interior is similar to Bardulf and Solruna's, though the colour scheme is mostly bare pine with hints of earthy reds and greens. A lot of wall-space is given to empty shelves. A few hold Nicholas's new carvings.

The front door opens and Nicholas steps in. Behind him, Holly and Mistletoe hesitate.

NICHOLAS

Does some magic bar elves from crossing human thresholds?

Mistletoe gives Nicholas a withering look.

MISTLETOE

(Carping)
We just don't like Bigfolks' unnatural houses!

NICHOLAS

Do you live entirely out in the open?

MISTLETOE

Of course not! We live under *living* trees.
(beat)
And not like a smelly badger sett either!
We make furniture and fireplaces and -
baths - and - everything!

HOLLY

At least it's *made* from trees. I think it's nice, Mistie.

Holly takes Mistletoe's hand and gently leads him inside.

LATER.

At the dining-table, Nicholas has a steaming flagon of some beverage in hand. The elves sit cross-legged on the table, finishing wooden bowls of stew on their laps. Holly is gabbling between big mouthfuls as Mistletoe looks on disapprovingly.

HOLLY

-So, the oldest tree of a species in any woods is the home of the elf - or elves - who then share its name and tend its brethren. In big forests like this, there can be many such Grandparent trees. We take our surnames from our trees' terrains.

NICHOLAS

Fascinating. So why were you - Holly - tending that warped old birch?

HOLLY

(sad)

I wasn't. Its roots were strangling my sweet holly bush, and it finally crushed it, but I hadn't wanted to leave Mistie - (bashful)

- all alone with that accursed birch. We thought he might roam for a while. When a tree dies its elf doesn't *always* adopt a namesake sapling, because, if it's left uninhabited, a new elf is born from it.

NICHOLAS

Amazing! And the other - ah - 'Goodfolk' that humans believe in, are they real too?

HOLLY

Oh yes! There are Goodfolk for every type of tree and its dependent plants. You Bigfolk call the new elflings 'fairies', but they're just mischievous, young elves. Animals also have their *own* Goodfolk. Bigfolk call *them* Brownies.

NICHOLAS

And gnomes, are they real?

HOLLY

They're the Goodfolk who tend the soil and living rock.

NICHOLAS

So have you, Holly, moved into the Grandmother Tree here?

HOLLY

Not for good. Its prior elf is letting me stay until I find my own tree.

Increasingly agitated, Mistletoe slams his bowl down on the table, slopping stew.

MISTLETOE

Enough Holly! You're telling all our secrets!

Why not just tell the Bigfolk *exactly* where we live so they can dig us out, thinking they can steal our magic. As you're so keen on the old tales, you know it's happened before!

NICHOLAS

By all I hold holy - trust me that nothing said tonight will go any further.

MISTLETOE

Exactly the sort of thing Bigfolk say before they force us into hiding!

HOLLY

Mistletoe! Have you forgotten; 'etiquette is Elf-hood'. You're being rude to our host! But I trust him. I really think he's the one who the legends-

Mistletoe leaps up and dances about enraged.

MISTLETOE

(Louder and LOUDER)
shut up! *shut up!* SHUT UP!

Holly and Nicholas are aghast.

Mistletoe suddenly sits down, fighting to stay calm.

MISTLETOE

Actually, Holly, I think you may be right-

Before Holly or Nicholas can say anything, Mistletoe presses on;

MISTLETOE (CONT'D)

-But - and this is *important* - if we *tell* him, and don't just let it unfold as foretold - we'll never know if we didn't just *make* it happen!

Holly's mouth snaps shut as understanding dawns.

NICHOLAS

What Legend? Tell me what?

Holly shakes her head.

HOLLY

Mmm - mmm!

Mistletoe calmly holds out his bowl to Nicholas.

MISTLETOE

Least said the better! To quote you; 'Trust me'! Now, more stew please?

NICHOLAS

But-?

Mistletoe looks around the cabin, pointedly.

MISTLETOE

I like your carvings. Tell me about *those*.

SERIES OF SHOTS. WULFUZHOF.

Nicholas ages from shot to shot.

- A) Ext. / Int. Winter. Nicholas, forging his own carving tools at the smithy under the guidance of Heriwald.
- B) Ext. Summer. The Green. Nicholas, playing tag with village children.
- C) Int. Nicholas's cabin. Nicholas, fitting some of his carvings with iron springs to make them jump. Holly and other elves look on, clapping with delight.
- D) Ext. Winter. At the Grandmother tree. Solruna and Bardulf, looking older, presenting thanks offerings on the altar. Bardulf turns and lifts a well swaddled baby, OÐILA², to show the gathered Villager, who cheer. The baby resembles Solruna, but with red hair eyes. Nicholas, is among those cheering most.

EXT. THE GREEN. LATE AUTUMN. AFTERNOON.

The first snows have already fallen.

Nicholas, is sitting in Bardulf's porch, whittling. He looks mid forties now, with salt-and-pepper hair and a strong grey beard. His skin tone has changed from sun-browned to darkly ruddy with laughter lines round his eyes. He's dressed in a tunic much like the villagers, but his is red and white.

A girl of about five years old, recognisable as Oðila, comes out of the house to sit by his side and watch. They cuddle.

OÐILA

Uncle Santu, why do you *always* wear red and white?

NICHOLAS

To remind me to always set a good example.

Oðila looks puzzled.

NICHOLAS

It was what I wore in my old life. When I was a holy man.

She nods. After a minute of comfortable silence, she looks up and points out a distant, small wagon - like a hut on wheels - on the track into town. The driver, TORTILUS PIETUS, is in monastic garb.

² The Ð (lower-case = ð) is pronounced like, TH, in 'bathe'.

NICHOLAS

Fetch Mama and Papa please, Oðila. Let's give our stranger a proper welcome.

Oðila skips back into the house as Nicholas makes for the village archway, smiling.

EXT. MIDDEN-HEAP BEYOND THE ARCHWAY.

As the new wagon rumbles past, something big is rummaging under a pile of cooked animal bones and food scraps. The pile bulges up as a concealed head rises - furtively - and it sniffs the air.

KRAMPUS

The smell of punishment. A kindred spirit to feed off at last! Soon I walk abroad.

EXT. AT WULPUZHOF'S ARCHWAY.

A small crowd has gathered to welcome the stranger, who pulls up his wagon. Nicholas, the first on the scene, gets to speak for all:

NICHOLAS

Welcome traveller! I am Nic-
(beat)
Santu. If you are weary, here you will find rest, if hungry; food. If you come to trade, we gladly barter for exotic wares.

TORTILUS PIETUS

No -
(beat)
Thank you.
For me, Tortilus Pietus, *God's work* is my rest, my sustenance and my living - for I come with a free gift! His holy truth.

Solruna, Bardulf and Oðila have just joined the gathering.

SOLRUNA

We will gladly hear of new gods and - if worthy - add them to ours.

TORTILUS

Worthy? Add! My god is the one true god! He shares his throne with no *pretenders*.

BARDULF

You have a Roman name. Santu here has told us of your emperor's claim. But he rules not here, as god or man. If you come in peace you may go in peace -
(darkly)
-friend.

TORTILUS

Diocletian is dead. He was nothing to my God.

BARDULF

Mortal men often aren't to *any* god.

Nicholas steps in before the antagonism escalates.

NICHOLAS

Tortilus Pietus, I know your God, the Father of Jesus. I preached him here a while.

Nicholas indicates the beautiful Grandmother Tree;

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

But these *good* people know the divine in their way. You will be welcomed as a traveller or trader, but not a preacher.

Tortilus scowls at the tree.

TORTILUS

The cross upon which Christ died is the only tree of truth.

Nicholas notices the crowd are now MUTTERING angrily.

NICHOLAS

Tortilus, I advise you. Accept the hospitality as it is *offered*.

SOLRUNA

Yes, to the mead hall, where - by custom - all may speak their truth, *and* be heard.

INT. MEAD HALL. EVENING.

Mead is flowing in a welcome feast Like Nicholas's before it.

The unmarried men arm-wrestle while maidens call flirtatious encouragement.

Tortilus, in the seat of honour, looks dourly down his nose at the gaiety. He shouts over the din to Nicholas, sat beside him;

TORTILUS

- Yet you are Christian you say? You have lived among these heathens all this time and have not opened their eyes? Have you not then joined them in the darkness?

NICHOLAS

Virtue is not measured by which altar one attends! You have travelled this far and not learned that? God works through these people well enough. Are they not joyful and child-like, like Eden before the Fall?

TORTILUS

I see only self-indulgence.

Nicholas pushes a mead-horn towards Tortilus.

NICHOLAS

A *little* indulgence does the soul good.

Tortilus pretends not to see it.

TORTILUS

But from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, you shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die!

The furious Heriwald is running at Tortilus, forge hammer in one hand, a battle axe in the other.

HERIWALD

That's the first prophecy of yours I'd gladly fulfil!

Bardulf gets to Tortilus first and rugby-tackles him right off the altar. He can hardly not beat Tortilus himself.

Solruna, tears streaming down her face, risks herself to intercept Heriwald.

SOLRUNA

NO! Human blood is never spilled in the hallowed place!

HERIWALD

The Gods punish me then, but that man dies!

The Villagers are frantically throwing snow on the tree, but the flames are already too high to reach.

Nicholas, as close to the tree as the heat allows, throws his arms wide and bellows at the bedlam:

NICHOLAS

SI-LENCE! IT'S NOT TOO LATE. LET ME CONCENTRATE.

Surprised by his uncharacteristic forcefulness, everyone freezes.

Tortilus is still ranting. Bardulf claps a hand of iron over his mouth.

Nicholas, frowning as he recalls a long unused skill, raises a hand toward the Grandmother Tree's high branches. With his other hand he taps the side of his nose as he looks at the scattered and broken idols in the snow.

The idols tremble for a moment, then shoot into the canopy. Each strikes near the root of a large branch and great flurries of snow fall off. The fire is extinguished.

Heriwald drops to his knees, amazed.

Solruna runs to the tree and turns to Bardulf.

SOLRUNA

My husband! My husband the woodsman!?

Bardulf releases Tortilus with a warning;

BARDULF

One word and I'll let the Earl have you after I'm finished with you!

Tortilus is too winded to move in any case.

Bardulf runs to inspect the charred tree bark. Some of the lower branches are burned away.

BARDULF

Grandmother's bark is not burned all the way round. Sap will flow in spring if we act quickly. Everyone! Sawdust, mixed with softened beeswax and pressed into her wounds. Bandage with wool. *Go!* - before frost does what fire did not!

The stunned villagers scurry to the sawmill and to the candle-maker's booth, all anger forgotten for now.

A NEARBY THICKET.

In hiding, the elves hug each other and quietly dance delight.

Holly, weeping with smiling relief, turns to Mistletoe.

HOLLY

Now do you believe me!?

MISTLETOE

Yes. Santu's the custodian foretold.

THE ALTAR.

Tortilus' springs up in Nicholas's face and clutches his arms.

TORTILUS

(deranged)

I have longed so to witness *any* miracle Santu, you - you are a servant of God. Show these devils more of His power. Smite them now! Do it!

NICHOLAS

(icy)

Remove those hands from my arms before I break them off yours!

Tortilus's leaps back, incredulous; equal anger and self-doubt.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

You sermonise, with scripture as your cudgel. You are *no* Christian! Have you heard of *Bishop* Nicholas of Myra, persecuted for his faith?

Tortilus nods dumbly, confused by the change of topic.

TORTILUS

I have. He - ah - he miraculously vanished right out of a prison cell.

NICHOLAS

I am he, in a new life. Heed my sermon. You call these people 'devils' while you, you worship the twin idols, 'Dogma' and 'Doctrine' yet dare look down on those who out-shine you! I tell you, devilry is born of hate. You, then, are not among the righteous.

Tortilus is aghast.

TORTILUS

I meant only to save souls -

Solruna and Bardulf lead Tortilus's wagon up. They have hitched it to his horse.

SOLRUNA

Save *yourself*, 'holy man'. Go - now - or be a corpse by daybreak.

TORTILUS

You threaten a minister of God!

BARDULF

(to Nicholas)
This 'holy man' is a simpleton!

NICHOLAS

Every faith has its share!

Bardulf shoves Tortilus onto his wagon and hands him the reins.

SOLRUNA

I threaten no one, Priest. Among us the deeds of each are for *their* conscience only. And I will not guide my *Earl's* one again. Be glad I do even this:

Solruna slaps the horse's rump and it moves off.

EXT. MIDDEN-HEAP.

Krampus's voice comes from within, as Tortilus's hurries his wagon out of town.

KRAMPUS

I liked feasting on that one's hate. Never mind. I am strong now to take its place.

FADE TO:

INT. NICHOLAS'S CABIN. NIGHT.

Nicholas is whittling quietly beside his cosy fire.

There's a rap at the back window. He lets in Holly and Mistletoe and is surprised as many more elves follow in their wake.

NICHOLAS

I knew you were many, but never expected to meet you all!

MISTLETOE
Oh, we're just the delegation!

NICHOLAS
I haven't food for you all.

HOLLY
We're not here for your famed generosity,
but to offer ours.

MISTLETOE
Do you remember - long ago - we mentioned a
legend?

Nicholas nods.

MISTLETOE (CONT'D)
We wouldn't tell you what it was because -
well - because we thought it might be about
you - and we - we didn't want to, uhm -

NICHOLAS
- to make it go wrong by trying too hard to
make it go right? So I gathered.
But - a myth actually about *me*?

HOLLY
Yes! *The Prophecy of the Holly King*. Though
he has other names in other places.

The other elves chime in as they settle on chairs, tables,
shelves and the mantelpiece;

OTHER ELVES
The Kind Woodsman.
Robin Good-fellow.
The Jolly Giant.
The Green Wilds-man.

NICHOLAS
I *can* be wild, but I'm not green!

HOLLY
'Green' as in, 'of Nature', like us. We've
had this legend for a *long* time. No one
knows how long. I grew up hearing it. Older
elves told me when I first budded - and we
live longer than trees!

MISTLETOE
Yes, you tell it best, Holly. It's always
been your special interest.

HOLLY
Well then. It goes like this:
(SUNG, solemnly)
When the Bigfolk towns grow wide,
Spend the soil with iron hand,
One of them will turn aside,
And lead us to The Untouched Land.

MISTLETOE (CONT'D)

When the 'larm of engines deafen,
Man-made lights blot out the stars,
Holly King will gently beckon
Elves to dwellings ever ours.
There, a purpose new and child-like,
He will find, to waken joy.
Using woodland know-how wisely,
Elves will aid him in this ploy.
How then shall we know this Bigfolk,
Who, like us, is Nature's child?
- Knowing us, in our true fashion,
Fearless still, he treats us mild.
Other omens clear to witness;
He shall save Old Mother Holly,
When she's threatened by dire fire,
Lit in ire, fuelled by folly.
And like us he masters magic,
Powers rarely understood,
lest with wisdom used for service
- not for gain - but others' good.
(beat)
(spoken. matter of fact)
So, you're it and will you be our king
please?

An expectant silence falls.

NICHOLAS

This is very flattering, but - no wait! Why
would you want a 'Bigfolk' to lead you -
with your balanced, unhurried way of life,
where everyone is heard. We humans are
fallible and needy!

HOLLY

Not you Santu Klaas, not you.

MISTLETOE

Holly just gave you the relevant verses for
now. There's loads more! I've watched you,
Santu - sceptically at first - and the bit
about you being a good leader because you
don't want to lead fits too!

NICHOLAS

What does this 'Holly King' do for you?

HOLLY

We can't tell you yet. You'll just know.

NICHOLAS

You're putting too much trust in me!
(double beat)
- or - it's your prophesy again; if you
tell me - then you're not letting it
unfold?

MISTLETOE

I knew you'd get it!

Nicholas frowns and strokes his beard in frustration.

NICHOLAS

I can't win. Seems to me you'll interpret everything as you wish.

HOLLY

Seems to *me* that the only way to know is accept - and see what happens.

MISTLETOE

You'll not have to give up your current life. And we'll lend you all our skills.

HOLLY

More of our trees are felled than ever. A homeless elf loses their purpose. All we want you to do is decide how to put our skills to a new one.

NICHOLAS

(wary)
Will there be a coronation ceremony and oath-making and all the pomp?

MISTLETOE

Would you *like* that?

NICHOLAS

Absolutely not!

HOLLY

Spot on again!

Nicholas groans;

NICHOLAS

The Legend?

HOLLY

Yup!

HOLLY

If You don't want ceremony, as king, that's exactly what you don't get!

Mistletoe bows low.

MISTLETOE

(comic-ironic)
- Your Majesty.

NICHOLAS

You can cut *that* out right now!

Holly, Mistletoe and the other elves exchange looks.

Mistletoe, starts counting things off on his fingers,

MISTLETOE

(muttering to himself)
Magical, open, determined, forgiving,
creative, humble-
Holly, was that all of them?

HOLLY

You're gonna hate this, Santu!
You just passed the final test.

The elves CHEER and throw their hats in the air. Nicholas shrugs then grins benevolently.

A comic scuffle ensues as the elves retrieve hats snagged on fittings and furniture or tussle over which hat is whose.

Nicholas, breaks into a huge, rolling, belly-laugh;

NICHOLAS

Ho - ho - ho!

INT. NICHOLAS'S CABIN. MORNING.

Nicholas is painting one of his carved animals. He's worked out a way to give them articulated limbs.

Other toys stand on display on the table, as a dozen elves sit cross-legged, wherever there's space, whittling copies with nimble speed.

NICHOLAS

My friends, with your help we'll make toys
for every child in every village in the
forest!

HOLLY

When do we give them out?

NICHOLAS

Round here they hold a feast on Midwinter
Night, to cheer themselves up in the
darkest days. It's near Jesus's Birthday in
my tradition. Doubly appropriate.

HOLLY

The children'll love you for it!

NICHOLAS

It's not about gratitude. It's teaching
them to count their blessings. So we'll
make it a secret surprise.

HOLLY

Better make sure no one's left out then!

NICHOLAS

If you'll be my scouts, I'll make a list,
and keep track of who gets what.

Nicholas gets a roll of parchment and goose quill and starts to write a list in Proto-Germanic runes.

HOLLY

You've learned our writing well!

NICHOLAS

Egypt taught me I had a knack for
languages.

EXT. NICHOLAS'S CABIN. REAR.

The Krampus, in shadow, listens at the window.

KRAMPUS

No-no-no, horrid children getting rewards!?
Punishment! That's what *mortals* understand.

FADE TO:

EXT. THE FOREST. EVENING.

Nicholas is chopping lumber alone. As he levers a trunk onto his horse-drawn lumber-sled, he notices odd tracks in the snow.

We see parallel tracks of one elongated human foot-print and one cloven hoof-print.

NICHOLAS

A one-legged man with a one-legged goat!?
Or something uncanny walks here like a man.

EXT. THE VILLAGE ARCHWAY. EVENING.

Nicholas, leading his lumber-sled in through the archway, passes Heriwald, heading out to the forest.

NICHOLAS

Good evening, Earl Heriwald.

HERIWALD

And to you. Brisk enough for you?

NICHOLAS

I *prefer* this cold to my sweltering
homeland now.
(beat)
Earl Heriwald, you hear all news of
importance. Do you know of mixed tracks;
man and goat. I saw such not an hour ago.

Heriwald blanches and turns back.

HERIWALD

I thought it mead-fuelled gossip or fire-
side ghost-tales in the long darkness. But
if you - steady Santu - have seen it too -
I know not what this means, but that
something profane is abroad.

EXT. FOREST. MIDNIGHT.

It's a beautiful moon-lit night. Through the trees, Nicholas is driving his lumber-sled toward a darkened village different to Wulpuzhof.

Tonight's sled is laden only with deep baskets full of his carved toys. Mistletoe and Holly sit atop the load, holding pine branches. Nicholas speaks to them over his shoulder.

NICHOLAS

You're sure this will work from a sled?

MISTLETOE

Don't see why not. It's how we hide our
foot tracks from humans.

HOLLY

It saves us wasting our magic.

Nicholas drives on. The elves start swishing the branches with
superhuman speed in the sled's wake. The snow rises in a silent
cloud and settles back to hide their tracks.

NEARBY.

Lurking in sharp shadows, Krampus follows, snuffing the air.

KRAMPUS

(muttering to itself)
Clever, Human. But not clever enough. I
still *smell* you.

VILLAGE BORDER.

Nicholas pulls up the sled, climbs down and identifies a
particular basket. The Elves jump down and follow him into the
shuttered and silent village.

As Nicholas moves from house to house, putting one toy or more on
each doorstep, the Elves sweep away their tracks.

NICHOLAS

Well, this is a fun way to spread some joy
at Midwinter's Eve!

The elves nod and smile.

EXT. AT THE WULPUZHOF ALTAR. EARLY NEXT MORNING.

Villagers are joining Heriwald and Solruna to see what's up.

SOLRUNA

Someone has defiled the altar!

HERIWALD

(darkly)
That buffoon Tortilus has returned!

The altar is piled high with Nicholas's toys, all ruined.

Heriwald picks one up.

HERIWALD

These are Santu's! But look, *bite-marks!*
Not the Preacher then.

Solruna points at tracks in the snow.

SOLRUNA.

Something, Half-human, half-goat.

She points at the forest.

SOLRUNA (CONT'D)

They come from the forest to each door,
getting deeper, until here. Then the tracks
away are light again.

FIRST VILLAGER

Didn't I tell you over mead, My lord? It's
one of Hel's³ servant.

SECOND VILLAGER

Aye, the underworld goddess sends her
profane offspring to curse us all.

HERIWALD

We don't know that.

SOLRUNA

If it's a curse on us all, why has only
Santu's work been ruined?

The Second Villager points to Nicholas, approaching.

SECOND VILLAGER

He is not *like* us. Let us ask *him!*

SOLRUNA

(to Nicholas)
Do you know who - or what - did this?

NICHOLAS

My first Christmas, ruined! Those tracks
match a goblin no human has seen. The elves
told -

Nicholas flushes with realisation he's given away a secret.

SOLRUNA

You speak with elves, that is more than
ever I could! How, teach me!

FIRST VILLAGER

Never mind that, *woman!* Santu admits he
communes with spirits. Are we sure he
didn't cause their displeasure?

NICHOLAS

Are You saying I set a goblin to *destroy my
own work?*

FIRST VILLAGER

Well - I mean -

HERIWALD

Enough! This is how it starts; goblins sow
discord.

Solruna nods her agreement and casts a stern eye over the
gathering.

³ The E is pronounced long.

SOLRUNA

Correct, My lord. We should find and banish the real culprit, not invent one to suit our superstitions or suspicions.

HERIWALD

And how will we do that?

NICHOLAS

(theatrical)

I have no idea!

(lowering his voice to a whisper)

It may be listening even now. We lay a trap!

SECOND VILLAGER

I say we leave offerings to placate the beast, before it does worse!

HERIWALD

Each must do by his heart, but have a care it *is* your heart you heed, not a missing spine! I know Santu innocent. I will follow *his* plan. I, the Earl, have said it.

Bardulf sprints up to them, panicked, holding a torn scrap.

BARDULF

Oðila's not in her bed! This bit of her night shift was snagged on her open window! *She* left no tracks only -

Bardulf notices and points at the footprints,

BARDULF (CONT'D)

- These! misshapen tracks like these! Gods! We must find her!

Solruna starts to run back to their house and Bardulf makes to follow.

Heriwald grabs Solruna's arm as Nicholas intercepts Bardulf.

HERIWALD

Trust that Bardulf has looked as carefully as would you, Solruna.

NICHOLAS

It's madness to re-do what has achieved nothing, Bardulf.

HERIWALD

Aye! Fresh tactics!

(to the villagers)

Everyone will spread out and search the forest for Oðila! Bardulf, you're our best tracker, so follow the tracks!

Heriwald points at the First and Second Villager.

HERIWALD

You! Do something useful! Go with him!
Whatever can bear away a child with ease
may be too much for one man.

The First and Second Villager exchange fearful looks.

Solruna unsheathes her belt-knife with a savage look.

NICHOLAS

Solruna, of course you want to go too, but
you'll achieve more if you help work my
trap.

EXT. THE FOREST. EVENING.

Eyes on the ground ahead, spear in hand, Bardulf lopes along,
dodging between the trees, through snow and brambles, heedless of
cold and scratches. Behind him, the First and Second Villager
match pace, with their own spears.

They almost collide with Bardulf's back as he abruptly halts in a
clearing.

BARDULF

The tracks just stop!

FIRST VILLAGER

It goes not underground.

SECOND VILLAGER

What mortal beast could just vanish?

Bardulf points at the nearest tree, thirty paces away.

BARDULF

- Or leap, laden - *from here* - into the
trees?

All three heft their spears and peer anxious into the canopy.

EXT. OUTSIDE SOLRUNA AND BARDULF'S CABIN. MOONLIT NIGHT.

Nicholas places one of his few remaining toys on the doorstep.

In the background, are mounds of food on the altar. Nicholas sees
this and shakes his head.

NICHOLAS.

(to himself)

We already know what it goes for first.

He walks away, whistling nonchalantly.

In different pockets of shadow nearby crouch Heriwald; with his
usual hammer, and his Retainers, Bardulf and Solruna, who are
holding nets and weapons.

Anxious elves in hiding look on from rooftops and chimneys.

MUCH LATER.

The moon has crossed the sky and the ambushade is growing sleepy when Krampus creeps from the woods. By the movement of its fur the wind must be at its back.

Nicholas's POINT OF VIEW: Nicholas, now in hiding with Bardulf, sees Krampus clearly. Also our first clear look at Krampus; a tall, shaggy, greasy, man-shaped beast with an elongated goat head, glowing coal-like eyes, evil leer, lolling black snake-ish tongue, long claws and a limp from its mismatched limbs. It's carrying a filthy, full sack.

Bardulf's POINT OF VIEW: Bardulf sees only footprints form in the snow.

The others' faces match his puzzlement as he nudges Nicholas.

BARDULF

(whispering)
How do I catch with a net a thing I cannot see?

NICHOLAS

(whispering)
Be *glad* you can't see it!

As Krampus reaches for the toy, Nicholas suddenly makes up his mind and steps into the open as he taps his nose.

Krampus tries to flee, but is held by some invisible force.

KRAMPUS

AHG! AKK! What's this! How? Let me go!

The others are alarmed by Krampus's rasping, disembodied voice.

Krampus flexes its claws over the sack.

KRAMPUS (CONT'D)

Release me. Or I - I'll harm the child!

Nicholas lets out a sigh of relief.

The elves do likewise.

HOLLY

(whispering)
She's alive.

NICHOLAS

Wasn't sure that'd work! No creature, you won't harm anyone - because I have you in my power. Put her down, gently!

Krampus, fighting it, is compelled to put the sack down.

The moment the sack is out of Krampus's grip it becomes visible. It rolls on its side. Oðila's limp arm flops out of its neck.

Solruna and Bardulf run to her, but stop at Nicholas's bellow;

NICHOLAS

HOLD!

You're running to danger! She's safe for now. I must deal with the beast *first*. You understand?

Solruna and Bardulf hug each other anxiously but nod agreement.

NICHOLAS

Creature, answer truthfully. Why did you take the girl?

KRAMPUS

I made it sleep to birch it later.

(beat)

Not to eat it! No, *not* to eat it.

NICHOLAS

- who are you, and - most of all - why do you obstruct kindness?

KRAMPUS

(raving)

I am bound to you. Fulfilling *your* purpose!

NICHOLAS

My purpose!? How does kidnapping a child aid me?

KRAMPUS

'Yes, yes, 'aid you'! I heard your talk. 'Reward good children'. You will reward good? I will punish the bad! I complete you! That's *my* purpose now!

(muttering to itself)

I *have* changed my nature, Holy Woman.

NICHOLAS

But you've ruined every child's night!

KRAMPUS

All children bad! All steal, lie, hurt-

NICHOLAS

That's just human nature. we *all* slip.

KRAMPUS

Easy words for you, *saint!*

NICHOLAS

A saint isn't someone who can't do wrong, just someone *trying* hard not to!

KRAMPUS

But *I* cannot change. I am goblin - since the Old Gods were young.

NICHOLAS

Given time anyone can better themselves.

KRAMPUS

Enough time? NO-O-O! Don't imprison me again! No more the crampings!

NICHOLAS

You are bound to me you say?

KRAMPUS

(resentful)
Yes!

NICHOLAS

And you must fulfil my purpose?

KRAMPUS

Yes!

NICHOLAS

I see that for now you can't help how you were made. You've actually taught me something: That rewards must be earned, not assumed.

(beat)

Well - everyone needs purpose, so I will release you to one - under a new pact.

Nicholas clenches his fist. Krampus squirms.

KRAMPUS

Anything but the crampings!

NICHOLAS

These are my conditions: There will be no more kidnappings or birchings - or any other aggression against children! You will not meddle with the gifts I leave. *Where I leave no gift, only on that night,* may you leave a token of punishment - something as black and hard as your heart-

Heriwald's forge hammer catches Nicholas's eye.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

- yes, a coal! A creature of the underworld should have no trouble finding that. And you will stay within your native German forests. That is all you may do - *nothing* else. Swear to it, all of it!

KRAMPUS

By all I hold profane.

Nicholas taps his nose again.

Freed from his ancient burden, Krampus stretches its limbs - and melts away on the wind.

KRAMPUS (OFF SCREEN) FADING)

(duplicitous)

Look for me on your darkest night, 'saint'.

NICHOLAS

It's over.

Bardulf and Solruna run to Oðila, pull her out and hold her close. She starts to wake up.

OÐILA

Mamma? Pappa? I had such a bad dream!
(beat)
What's that rotten smell?

Solruna and Bardulf start to laugh hysterically.

SOLRUNA

It's you darling! Let's get you in a nice warm bathtub.

OÐILA

Do I *have* to?

BARDULF

What does your nose say?

Oðila pouts and waggles her head in compliance.

As they carry her home, Heriwald turns to Nicholas.

HERIWALD

Who'd've thought a goblin could be more self-righteous than that Preacher!

INT. NICHOLAS'S CABIN. JUST BEFORE DAWN.

Nicholas is lying fully clothed on top of his bed. Too tired to sleep, he stares at the hearth's dying embers.

There's a gentle tapping at the rear window.

NICHOLAS

Oh just come in. I'm not getting up!

Mistletoe, Holly and several other elves, open the window and quietly clamber in.

They form a ring of concerned faces around the bed.

NICHOLAS

I'm sorry. I failed to keep your secret.

HOLLY

Oh, we're not here about that. That doesn't really matter.

MISTLETOE

Yes. As long as the other Bigfolk still can't see us, they'll just think you're a touched by magic, or possibly, in the head.

HOLLY

(mischievous)
- and in fact, as only *you* can see us, how can you be sure you're not?

NICHOLAS
I could never make all those toys alone.

MISTLETOE
True.
(beat)
A-a-nyway. We just came to say we thought
you were very brave. Goblins scare the
daylights out of us!

HOLLY
- So we made you something. To mark the
highest honour we know.

One of the other elves produces a soft, pointy, deep red felt
hat, with a white fir trim and bobble.

HOLLY
Fur from a hare that died naturally, not
hunted. It is elvish to honour the cycle of
life by harming nothing and wasting
nothing. Something you understand.

MISTLETOE
From now on you're not only the Holly King,
you're an elf! An honour never before
bestowed on Bigfolk.

HOLLY
We used your colours! Well? Put it on!

Nicholas does so. it's a perfect fit. Golden light briefly fills
the room. He shudders as a thrill passes through him. His pupils
change from deep brown to heaven blue.

NICHOLAS
I will wear this to remind myself to lead
you safely and wisely.

HOLLY
I mean - basically - you can already *do*
everything an elf can.

MISTLETOE
Except of course for being too clunky to
live under a tree, like civilised folk!

SERIES OF SHOTS.

Nicholas ages from shot to shot.

A) Int. Summer evening. Nicholas's cabin. Nicholas and the
elves making toys.

- B) Ext. Spring Day. Nicholas playing catch with Oðila - who now looks about nine - and a younger child - about five - who - by his similar looks - is her younger brother, RUNE⁴.
- C) Ext. Winter very early morning. At the far end of Nicholas's back garden, he and the elves are clearing land and raising a big outhouse with wide double doors.
- D) Int. the new outhouse. Nicholas and the elves putting the finishing touches on a fine, roomy sleigh.
- E) Ext. Winter Night. Forest. Nicholas rides the new toy-laden sleigh into one of the distant villages. Putting out gifts on doorsteps, he skips one house. As he rides away Krampus wisps into being and, almost smiling, puts a lump of coal on the missed doorstep.

FADE TO:

EXT. WULPUZHOF ARCHWAY. SUMMER DAY.

Nicholas, now with all white hair and beard, drives his horse-drawn lumber-sled of firewood into Wulpuzhof.

Sat on a tree stump nearby, nursing a baby, is a red-haired woman in her early twenties, Oðila. Next to her, her late teens brother, Rune, waves to Nicholas.

NICHOLAS

Oðila - and baby Sol - hello!
Rune, You're back! How was your first trip south? Did you get a good price?

RUNE

Pappa said I, 'acquitted myself well'. I bartered a little of my goat's wool for strong pigments for you, Uncle Santu - to brighten up your carvings.

NICHOLAS

Typical of your kindness Rune, thank you!

OÐILA

(teasing)
Seen any elves lately!

NICHOLAS

(laughing good-naturedly)
Oh, every day, Oðila, every day!

INT. NICHOLAS'S CABIN. LATER.

The back wall has been extended making an extra workshop. Holly is on her own today, writing list entries in a hefty book.

Nicholas, steps in through the front door.

⁴ Pronounced, 'roon-ehh'.

HOLLY
Santu! Greetings and blessings!

NICHOLAS
And to you too!

Holly's cheery face becomes suddenly serious.

HOLLY
Hmm, I thought as much. Santu, I have been watching for something lately, and - when I saw you just now - I was sure of it.

NICHOLAS
And what is that, good friend?

HOLLY
The final part of your transformation into the Elven King has happened.

NICHOLAS
Transformation?
(half joking - half alarmed)
I'm not getting smaller am I?

HOLLY
Nothing as obvious as that. Mistletoe noticed it first long ago - and now I'm sure too. It's good news - and bad.

NICHOLAS
(intrigued)
Well - what is it!?

HOLLY
You have stopped ageing. You have become immortal - like us.

NICHOLAS
I've seen enough to believe almost anything, but me - immortal? How even?

HOLLY
I've heard the Bigfolk talk of your loving kindness - especially in the dark season - they call you the Good Spirit of Midwinter. We elves endure because mortal's belief in us endures. You've done legendary things. The legend outgrows the person, exerts its own magic and they *become* the legend.

NICHOLAS
But if - *if* - what you say is true, I think - I think that is the proof that I'm on the right path. You recall I told you about The Voice, in the Turkish prison?

HOLLY
Yes. It said, 'you shall live on-'

NICHOLAS

'-to bring your child-like wonder to far lands'. I think it meant I should bring joy everywhere. That *would* take an eternity!

HOLLY

I agree.

(beat)

But I said it's not just good news. We elves are immortal; we love, we chose special companions, we have each other. But we don't have children like mortals. I'm afraid that you're going to have a very hard time watching everyone you love fade, one by one, into your past.

Nicholas's face drops.

NICHOLAS

The blessing becomes a curse!

HOLLY

The blessing is you! Mistletoe, says the answer is to move on to a new place every few generations and start again. I think so too. But we elves will never desert you. We'll make your life as happy as we can. You're truly one of us now.

FADE TO:

INT. TOY DEPARTMENT SANTA'S GROTTO. PRESENT DAY.

URI

(scornful)

You want me to believe you're immortal?

FATHER CHRISTMAS

Is eternal life so hard to believe? Most religions say otherwise. It was the first time I fully understood that the phrase, 'timeless legend' is literal.

URI

(sneering)

So you're like the Easter Bunny or Jack Frost I suppose!

FATHER CHRISTMAS

I can't answer for how *they* managed it. You should ask them yourself. Shall I continue my story?

Uri nods, hooked despite himself.

FADE TO:

EXT. OPEN FOREST. AUTUMN DAY.

Wide aerial shot of wild, soaring mountains covered in coniferous trees.

On screen we read, 'Scandinavia. Seven Centuries Later.'

Zoom in on a narrow track following the contour of a steep slope. On it, Nicholas drives a large green and gold, gypsy-style wagon, pulled by two horses. Sitting with him are Holly and Mistletoe. Other elves look out of the windows or sit on the roof.

NICHOLAS

- Yes, Mistie, it is a pity, but it was time to move again. We took what we could. We'll make *another* one, as always.

MISTLETOE

It just feel it's too wasteful, abandoning another sleigh.

HOLLY

(sarcastic)
Well, Mistie, next time build us a sleigh that flies!
(beat, sorrowful)
Personally, I always miss our friend elves more than our things.

MISTLETOE

Don't be sad. Many said they'd join us.

NICHOLAS

I think most will. Mortal cities keep growing. Humans felling their trees to make engines of war hardly helps elves thrive.

HOLLY

It breaks an elvish heart!

NICHOLAS

This time we won't stop 'til we find a wild place with no humans for miles and miles. Somewhere elves can be at peace.
(beat)
It's becoming a world of Man. We should put the word out as we journey, that any elf who wishes it can join us there. I, the Holly King, have said it.

EXT. A ROCKY, MOUNTAIN PASS. WINTER NIGHT.

The wagon is stuck in the deep snow. Nicholas and his elves are pushing and digging out the wheels.

Out from a rock face come some GNOMES with picks and shovels. They're stockier and paler than elves we've seen so far. They dress in greys. Instead of pointed hats they wear pointed metal helmets. Each male has a huge beard.

The Head Gnome (SOOTY PETE) gives Nicholas an appraising look then shakes a sooty hand with him.

SOOTY PETE

Bigfolk! Wears Red! Knows elves! You are the Father of Christmas - Santu Klaas. I am Pete, short for Petra, because I'm rock steady. Called 'Sooty' for my blacksmithing. You need diggers. We are miners. Stand aside!

Without waiting for permission, in a flurry of snow the gnomes dig a ramp, pack it hard and, levering the wheels with their pickaxes, soon have the wagon free.

Nicholas whips up the horses, turns and shouts,

NICHOLAS

Many thanks, Sooty Pete! If you've heard of me, perhaps you've heard of my promise?

As the wagon moves off, the gnomes bend heads together in discussion, every helmet touching.

As one gnome, they shoulder their tools and fall in behind the wagon. Sooty Pete shouts ahead;

SOOTY PETE

You go to build a place of peace for elf-kind. It will need good foundations. Gnomes know rock.

EXT. MARSH LAND. SPRING DAY.

The horizon is flat, unbroken by any tree. A sharp wind whips at the wind-stunted bushes, the reed-beds, and at Nicholas's party who are picking a path between the sinkholes.

They stop on a slight rise to huddle in the lee of the wagon.

Nicholas inspects one of his horse's forelegs.

NICHOLAS

I thought so, that last slip has made her lame. She'll have to rest; I don't know for how long though.

Carried on the wind, comes a high clear voice, (TUFTY).

TUFTY

I, Tufty Squirrelward the Brownie knows! But it would take us no time to *heal* it!

Everyone looks for the source of the voice.

As the wind whips a tussock of tall grass back and forth, right by Nicholas's feet, an elf just appears behind it. She's shorter than other elves, blonde, blue-eyed, plump and dressed in Reddish browns. Her pointed felt cap has dried flowers embedded in it.

NICHOLAS

Well hello there - Tufty! I always wanted to meet a Scandinavian Brownie! So, you're as good with animals as my elves say?

TUFTY

Your elves?

HOLLY

We're ours! Just a Bigfolk way of talking.
But we *choose* to follow him.

TUFTY

Fair enough. I'm not good with 'people,
Santa (oh yes, we've heard of you). Animals
now -

Tufty whistles loudly and a half dozen OTHER BROWNIES appear from behind tussocks and mounds. They run straight to the horse.

TUFTY (CONT'D)

We'll have him right in no time. Merry and
Bright, you know what to do.

One of them, MERRY, climbs nimbly up the harness, strokes the horse's ears and whispers, calming it.

Another, BRIGHT, produces a tiny bottle of liniment and with others starts massaging and manipulating the horse's bad leg.

The horse nickers with pleasure.

Tufty sweeps an arm to take in the landscape.

TUFTY (CONT'D)

This desolate place isn't our home. We like
hedgerows and thickets near human farms
where we may heal and guard the livestock.
We've been tracking you - wanted to make
sure you treated your animals well before
we joined up!

(beat)

You'll be *needing* good farmers at this new
settlement of yours - word gets around.

NICHOLAS

So it would seem! Welcome then, Tufty!

EXT. NARROW TRACK THROUGH A WILD PINE FOREST. SUMMER DAY.

On screen we read, 'Finnish Lapland.

Nicholas's wagon climbs toward a ridge-top. Mistletoe sits at his side. A mix of perhaps a hundred elves, gnomes and brownies - of all ages, skin-tones and genders - follow, pulling their own mini hand-carts of tools and supplies.

Waiting at the top are Holly, Sooty Pete and Tufty. They have whittled trekking staffs, rucksacks and big smiles.

HOLLY

I think we've found it! We can be happy
here. Plenty of wild food until we get
settled. There's timber to build homes -

SOOTY PETE

- and ores to make tools.

Cresting the ridge, Nicholas looks out on a wide, thickly wooded, uncultivated valley that stretches to pointed snowy mountains on the horizon.

TUFTY

Very few Bigfolk too. What few just pass through. They call themselves Saami. Those we saw, live *with* the land and are kind to their animals. *They're* called 'reindeer'.

Holly points to the tallest peak, far away.

HOLLY

That tallest, pointy peak's got a prophetic name, *Korvatunturi*, 'Ear Fell'.

SOOTY PETE

- Named after the gnomes there. Met them. Nice bunch. Said 'welcome'.

They look expectantly at Nicholas, who looks back, perplexed.

NICHOLAS

Something is expected of me?

MISTLETOE

You know! The King names new places.

NICHOLAS

New only to *us*. What do the *locals* call this valley, Holly?

HOLLY

We couldn't pronounce it!

TUFTY

Hard to remember what you can't even say. We can have our own name for it surely?

SOOTY PETE

Something Pithy.

Nicholas laughs heartily.

SOOTY PETE

That'll do. 'Ho-Ha-Ho'. The Valley of Laughter.

SERIES OF SHOTS DOWN IN THE VALLEY'S FOREST.

- A) Ext. Day. forest clearing with a pool in a stream. Nicholas, Mistletoe, Holly, Tufty and Sooty Pete are looking at an especially fine, strong fir tree. They confer, then nod to each other and shake hands. Nicholas nails a carved sign to the tree; 'Alfheim'.
- B) Ext. Day. Around that same tree - which is now decorated with colourful ribbons, Nicholas and elves are clearing the land and sawing those trees into planks. Gnomes excavate the roots left behind. Other elves use the natural shapes of root and branch as frames for buildings, giving them an organic look.

- C) Ext. Day. Forest. Holly and Mistletoe with A LOCAL ELF dressed a bit like the Saami. Each has a basket. The Local Elf picks an ochre, funnel-shaped mushroom, licks his lips and pats his tummy. When Mistletoe picks a red mushroom with white spots, the Local Elf dashes it from his hand. Mistletoe goes to suck his smarting finger. The Local Elf stays his hand, mimes choking to death, then mimes washing his hands before licking his finger. wide-eyed, Holly and Mistletoe nod.
- D) Ext. day. a few hundred paces downstream of the construction of Alfheim (now well under way) Sooty Pete and his crew are testing the wooden water wheels that drive forge hammers in their new smithy.
- E) Ext. Dusk. Outside a lavvu (Saami conical skin tent) which flickers from the firelight within. From hiding, Tufty watches closely, approvingly, as a Saami woman, SHAMANKA, assists a reindeer birth.
- F) Ext. High treeline on a fell-side. Sooty Pete wheels a barrow with Nicholas's latest toys - proud-looking wooden gnomes - to a bare rock-face and taps a complicated rhythm on it with his pickaxe. A seamless door opens in the rock. LOCAL GNOMES with red beards, and even paler skin than he, come out, shake hands and talk. Sooty Pete, gestures often down into the valley. He demonstrates how the toy gnomes will 'march' down a sloped plank. Well pleased, the Local Gnomes exchange the toys for brass, copper and iron ingots.

EXT. ALFHEIM. LATE AFTERNOON.

On screen we read, 'Three years later'.

The town is arranged as a series of villages laid out like Wulpuzhof and connected by winding paths. It's a mix of log cabins or organic structures in shades of green and reddish-browns, reminiscent of squat elf hats, towers like pine trees, or domes like lavvus.

Mistletoe is hurrying on a kick-sled to a big, cosy log cabin, with Holly as his passenger.

INT. LIVING ROOM OF NICHOLAS'S NEW HOME. LATE AFTERNOON.

It's more spacious than Nicholas's Germanic cabin, but with similar décor. The wooden furniture is very well made, with curly carvings picked out in off-white, red, green and gold. There's a grand inglenook fireplace made of fitted stones. The many shelves are mostly empty of toys.

Nicholas is dozing by the fire in a wing-backed armchair. On His lap is a half-whittled toy.

Mistletoe knocks the door and lets himself in carrying a slate and chalk. talking over his shoulder to Holly.

MISTLETOE

- no, it's best I speak to him alone.
Santu!?

Nicholas stirs dopily.

MISTLETOE

Thought you'd want to know straight away.
The final elves have moved out of the last
tent into a cabin of their own. Alfheim,
'Elf Home', is officially finished!

NICHOLAS

(lacklustre)
That's nice.

Mistletoe looks at the half-finished toy with a worried look.

MISTLETOE

Didn't you start that days ago?

NICHOLAS

Yes, and? Who am I gonna give it to around
here? There're no people and every human *I*
cared for is long dead!

MISTLETOE

I'm worried about you. You've lost your
purpose.

NICHOLAS

I led a whole race to safety and founded a
town. One which I helped design and build!
That's plenty of 'purpose'. No, I've lost
my *humanity* - to immortality. I've been
Holly King for seven hundred and seven
years! Don't you think I've earned a *rest*?

MISTLETOE

Trust me, as one immortal to another, you
need to fill life with challenges, or you
will go mad.
(strained jauntiness)
Uh - you haven't gone dashing through the
snow in your one-horse open sleigh in ages.
You love that!

NICHOLAS

I used to. And visit whom? Oh yes, let's
try the novelty of another sleigh ride!
Perhaps I'll pass a rock I didn't notice
the last thousand times!

Nicholas leaps up and bustles through the door, passing an
anxious Holly waiting in the porch.

NICHOLAS

Don't wait up! Don't come looking for me! I
may enjoy it so much I never come back!

Nicholas snatches his red coat off a peg and slams the front door
behind him as Holly and Mistletoe exchange an anxious look.

We hear the JINGLE of harness and the CRACK of a whip;

NICHOLAS (OFF SCREEN)
Garn ya mangy nag! Get moving!

EXT. ELF HOME.

Merry and Bright look on, unbelieving, as Nicholas cruelly whips the horse, to pull the racing sleigh even faster out of town.

EXT. ICE FIELDS WITH PATCHY FOREST. AFTER DUSK.

Nicholas is still pushing his horse hard. The sleigh cuts swathes of snow as he careens through narrow gaps and tight turns. The lights of Alfheim drop behind the horizon. Nicholas drives on under the SIZZLE of the Northern Lights ahead.

EXT. NORTHERN ICE FIELDS. DEEP NIGHT.

The last of the trees are far behind as Nicholas still drives north. His temper is cooling at last, but now the panicked horse will not pull up. he lets the reins slip from his hands.

NICHOLAS
I deserve whatever happens, you don't
deserve to share it.

The horse, sees - and jumps - a narrow crevasse ahead. It's exhausted hind legs barely scramble onto the far edge.

The sleigh-runners dip and catch the edge, stopping it dead.

Nicholas is thrown forward, lands badly and skids unconscious to a stop on the hard-packed snow. His face is cut.

The shafts are levered up as the sleigh starts to slip back, but it wedges in the top of the crevasse. The horse is suspended for a moment between the shafts before they break, leaving the horse on the ice, but trapped in harness. It sinks to the ground. Heavy snow starts to fall.

Zoom out to extreme long shot, loosing sight of Nicholas, his horse and sleigh in the icy vastness.

EXT. ELSEWHERE ON THE ICE-FIELDS. DAWN.

Shamanka stands on the rear runners of her own well-equipped, two-reindeer sleigh, trotting across the ice. She's in her mid forties, with a broad, friendly face, white-blonde hair and striking night-blue eyes.

Something catches her peripheral vision. She slows up the sleigh and peers carefully.

Shamanka's POINT OF VIEW In the grey dawn light we see one distant speck of red.

She veers the sleigh off sharply towards it. As she gets closer, she urges her reindeer to full gallop.

SHAMANKA
Come now Glossie, on Flossie! Show what
you've got!

She pulls up alongside Nicholas, who lies exactly as he fell. His face is half covered with snow. His red coat is still partly visible.

Shamanka takes his pulse, then rushes to the horse. It's still breathing.

Running back to Nicholas, she grabs his legs, drags him to the horse and props him against it's warm belly.

She leads her sleigh to them, snatches large animal hides off it and throws them over Nicholas and the horse until they're completely covered. Snatching a snowshoe off her sleigh, she shovels a thick layer of loose, insulating, snow over the hides.

INT. UNDER THE ANIMAL HIDES. AFTER DAWN.

The hides flap in a HOWLING gale.

Shamanka is under this temporary shelter with Nicholas, chaffing his hands and feet. He swims up from unconsciousness. Her face is inches from his.

NICHOLAS

(groggy)
Sol - Solruna?

SHAMANKA

That sounds southern - Swedish? Don't know her. I'm Shamanka; it means 'Spirit Healing Woman'.

NICHOLAS

(Suddenly alert)
Like a Holy Woman?

SHAMANKA

If you like. what's that got to do -

NICHOLAS

Do you believe in reincarnation?

SHAMANKA

(confused)
Yes - what? *Everyone* does! Don't you?

NICHOLAS

I'm beginning to.

SHAMANKA

You should - you did nearly die! Do you know where you are?

NICHOLAS

Hoping that this *isn't* delirium and I really am holding the hand of the most beautiful woman I've met in *many* years!

She snatches her hand back, but blushes and smiles.

SHAMANKA

That - that *is* delirium.
(suddenly angry)
What man would hurt his animal to risk his own life!? It would serve you right if you *had* died.

NICHOLAS

That's unlikely, but yes it would.
(repentant)
I'm not usually like this. How's my horse?

SHAMANKA

You will *both* be fine. Healer is not just my name. And what is yours?

NICHOLAS

Santu Klaas, and I am doubly blessed -
(beat)
- just when I thought I was doomed.

SHAMANKA

There lies a story!
What did you mean by, 'that's unlikely', S-Sa- Santa Claus?

NICHOLAS

That's a much longer story!

The horse shifts its weight, jostling them both. Shamanka lays a hand on its flank.

SHAMANKA

Do not rise yet. The storm must pass first.

The horse responds to her touch and goes to sleep.

SHAMANKA

Santa Claus, you're not dressed for this freezing wind. You'll chill anew if we leave now. It's equally dangerous for you to yield to sleep yet, so *tell* me your story. Then you shall have mine.

EXT. ICE FIELDS. DAYLIGHT.

The gale has stopped. Everything is covered in deep snow, including Glossie and Flossie, who stand and shake it off.

Nicholas and Shamanka emerge from under the hides and start to unbuckle the horse from its broken harness.

SHAMANKA

- and I would say - if you really *are* immortal - it was a sacred gift that could be taken away again if abused.

Shamanka gives the horse something to eat from her sleigh. It revives and stands.

Nicholas is looking thunderstruck at her.

SHAMANKA

Oh it's just my own herbal remedy. Pretty potent if I say so myself.

NICHOLAS

No, not that.

(beat)

I've been a fool. You're right. Immortality; I had forgotten why I was given it. I think *you* were sent to remind me.

Long ago, someone I loved told me, 'If the world leaves you bitter, make it better!'

(hesitant)

Look, I'm alone up here - if you don't count the *many* elves. I miss *human* company. Would you - ah - do me the honour to visit a while?

(hurriedly)

- entirely on your terms of course!

SHAMANKA

Alone with nothing but elves for company you say? HA! Tell me about it!

Surprised, Nicholas almost steps backward the crevasse.

NICHOLAS

You see them too!

SHAMANKA

Did I not say I have my name for a reason?

EXT. A COUPLE OF MILES FROM ALFHEIM. MORNING.

Shamanka drives her sleigh towards the town, with Nicholas perched unsteadily on her cargo of pelts. The horse trots behind on a long lead.

SHAMANKA

Not long now, Flossie - Glossie.

She shouts back to Nicholas's horse.

SHAMANKA

Not far, Amerigo.

Nicholas risks a look back at her.

NICHOLAS

Amerigo?

SHAMANKA

You don't know your horse's name!?

NICHOLAS

Not so, his name is -

SHAMANKA

-That's *your* name for him. *He* likes 'Amerigo' 'cause he's of Italian stock.

NICHOLAS
How do you know- ?

SHAMANKA
-He told me. Just like Glossie and her mate Flossie. Their herd named them of course. That's reindeer tradition. Glossie for her fine coat, Flossie for his fluffy mane. I just like to translate them to rhyme.

NICHOLAS
This *is* a different magic! Listen, if you *would please* stay a while, I have - ah - *people* - who can heal animals, but none who can *talk* with them! *Amerigo's* not made for snow. He could retire if I had a *reindeer* whisperer.

SHAMANKA
Come to think of it; healing's lonely work. My clan respects me-
(beat)
- but that's not the same as 'like'. I never get social calls - that's *my* job. If they need me that badly - well - they can come to me for a change! I'll stay 'til I decide if I like you!

SERIES OF SHOTS.

- A) Int. Clean, roomy stables. Shamanka leading a reindeer in to join a handful who already have a comfortable stall each. In the background Holly and Tufty pet Amerigo and give him treats.
- B) Int. Mysteriously equipped apothecary shop. Alembics bubble on a work-bench where Shamanka is treating an elf with a rash. Merry and Bright bear baskets of forest herbs and fungi in. She instructs them where to hang them on drying racks over the cast iron range.
- C) Int. At Nicholas's fireside. Shamanka finishes sewing a red jacket with white fur trim which she gives to Nicholas. He puts it on and does a turn. His new outfit is a cross between Scandinavian and Sammi folk costume. He thanks Shamanka for the more weather-suited clothing with a courtly bow.
- D) Ext. Starry, moonlit night. Forest. A sapling is hung with decorations. An elf band plays stately music. Other elves dance a slow circle round the tree. Nicholas and Shamanka watch at a respectful distance as a 'NEW-BORN' YOUNG ELF steps right out of the tree and is greeted with gifts of clothing and hugged by its fellows. They lead the Young Elf to a table decked for a party. The band strikes up a lively reel. Nicholas asks Shamanka for her hand and they join the dance.

INT. NICHOLAS'S CABIN. EVENING.

Shamanka is at Nicholas's fireside. He's leaning forward intently, nodding agreement.

NICHOLAS
Just one more time?

SHAMANKA
(impatient)
The new reindeer are called, Racer and
Pacer, Reckless and Speckless, Fearless and
Peerless, Ready and Steady.
They're happier working as mated pairs.

NICHOLAS
You know you'll need to remind me again?
What's this - mead?

He indicates two tankards set on the hearth.

SHAMANKA
It's gløgg, a spice drink you can make
without alcohol - you can still add honey
for taste if you like.

NICHOLAS
Mead won't hurt me, I'm immortal!

SHAMANKA
So you say. I haven't been here long enough
to be sure. But I'm a healer, so I'm
keeping you healthy - just in case, because
I've decided I like you, so I'm staying.

Nicholas looks very happy. Shamanka returns his smile and takes
his hand.

SHAMANKA (CONT'D)
(coy)
I'm being selfish really - looking after
you means I keep my new best friend as long
as possible.

Deep sorrow briefly crosses Nicholas's face. Shamanka, reaching
him a tankard, doesn't see it.

NICHOLAS
As long as you do what you can to last as
long as you can too!

Nicholas raises his tankard to her. She raises hers.

SHAMANKA
To enjoying life!

NICHOLAS
As long as it can last!
(with a catch in his throat)
Well. Hu-hum! Production has started up
again, but how am I going to get more toys
to more children, this far from anywhere?

SHAMANKA
Trust Fate. Something always turns up.

FADE TO:

EXT. NORTHERN SNOWFIELDS. A DARK AND WINDY NIGHT.

The Northern Lights sweep and CRACKLE on the horizon. Nicholas is out on his newest sleigh, pulled by eight reindeer. The snow is powdery and the terrain is harsher than the valley of Ho-Ha-Ho. He pulls up.

NICHOLAS

Take a well-earned break boys and girls!
It's the furthest west we've ever come on
Christmas Night. Children we've never
reached before got gifts!

The wind picks up and buffets them from all directions, carrying a distant HOWL OF WOLVES, CAW OF RAVENS and indistinct WAR CRIES, that make the reindeer skittish.

As it grows slowly louder, Nicholas, looks all about him in confusion.

A shadow flits between them and the moon. Nicholas looks up in amazement.

As if riding on an invisible road, The WILD HUNT - a band of 9 beautiful VALKYRIES on horseback, led by a muscular, one-eyed, grey-bearded, OÐINN, wearing a golden helmet-crown - is spiralling down toward the sleigh. They all have spears. Oðinn rides a huge, dapple-grey, eight-legged horse. Flying apace are two spectral ravens and running ahead of Oðinn are two spectral wolves.

Nicholas jumps down to soothe the anxious reindeer.

NICHOLAS

It's all right! I know them.
(to himself)
- but only by reputation.

The Hunt lands nearby on the snow, but it's hooves leave no prints nor make any sound.

Nicholas stands his ground as the Wild Hunt gallops right at him and Oðinn pulls up just in time.

OÐINN

Woah, Sleipnir!
(double beat)
You, mortal, do not scare easily. Good!

NICHOLAS

If I have heard correctly, only the
dishonourable need fear you - Oðinn, King
of the Gods of these lands.

Oðinn brandishes his golden spear as the Valkyries cheer and follow suit. Oðinn casts his spear into the ground an inch from Nicholas's foot. It also makes no sound but sticks in solidly.

Odin leaps off Sleipnir and recovers his spear. He peers into Nicholas's face with his one keen, grey eye.

OÐINN

Either you are a man sure of his honour -
or a fool to face me!

NICHOLAS

I won't trade ritual insults with you
Oðinn. Flyting is the Norsemen's way, not
mine.

Oðinn sighs and slumps a little.

OÐINN

Oh, go on, please? I haven't had a good
flyting in ages! Just a little one?

The Valkyries look fretful. The wolves and ravens nose up to the
reindeer, they seem to just want to make friends.

Oðinn looks into the distance, at nothing in particular, and
sighs again.

OÐINN

I foresee that soon the old ways will be
forgotten in this land. I could think me a
long rest in Valholl - until my followers
grow numerous again.
(beat)
We've thought about following the last
pagans to Iceland.

He turns to the Valkyries -

OÐINN (CONT'D)

- haven't we ladies? There's work for us
there still.

The Valkyries nod.

NICHOLAS.

I do sympathise. I lost my purpose for a
while. But I envy you, Oðinn. If I could
ride the sky like a god! I could fill the
world with kindness.

Oðinn claps an enormous hand on Nicholas's shoulder, as much to
seek support as to intimidate.

OÐINN

I know of you, of course, Santa Claus.
Sympathy is more *your* line. You reward
honour. We elder gods punish *dis*-honour.
But our sterner lessons fall out of favour
with the mortals.
(Sighing)
Ah well. Each to his own magic.

A sudden idea crosses Oðinn's face. He turns to the Valkyries.

OÐINN (CONT'D)

What say you, ladies? You know my mind.
(aside to Nicholas)
Amazing judges of character. Better'n me
even. Size a man up in moments!
(aloud)
I am called, 'All-Father'. Perhaps this is
your time, *Yule-Father*.
(to the Valkyries)
- this one's reputation you know! Fierce
Generosity! Heroic forgiveness!
Should Gungnir give him what he wants? But
can he can endure it?

The Valkyries exchange the briefest of knowing glances, brandish their spears again, and shout;

VALKYRIES

AYE!
Hail Oðinn!
Hail his wisdom!

OÐINN

(confidentially to Nicholas)
They look fierce - and they *are*! But good
girls at heart, very supportive.

Oðinn removes a heavy golden arm-ring inscribed with runes, and holds it at arms length.

OÐINN

This is Gungnir.
(muttering. In Old Norse; English
subtitles):
By the power of the Nine Realms that flows
through me, 'Dripper', birth your
daughters.

The bottom of the ring bulges and forms a big drop of molten gold which falls to the snow. Before it lands it has divided and taken on the exact size and form of nine rings identical to Gungnir.

OÐINN waves his free hand and the rings float up into it, shrinking to finger rings. He offers them to Nicholas.

OÐINN

You *have* a god's immortality; now I give to
you a god's magic of flight.

Oðinn indicates the ring's inscriptions.

OÐINN (CONT'D)

These match the runes carved on Sleipnir's
hooves. Wear one ring yourself. Attach the
others to harness and sleigh. As long as
I'm remembered the magic will abide.

NICHOLAS

I have no way of thanking you for your
generosity!

OÐINN

Thank me? Generosity? I am Oðinn - the Storm-Bringer. This may be a curse! With my single enchanted eye, I see clearer those things mortal sight does not. You have wished yourself a future of toil. But we think you have the mettle for it!

The Valkyries shout to Nicholas;

VALKYRIES

Hail The Yule-Father!
Good fortune on his Quest!

Oðinn remounts Sleipnir and spurs him on, looking at the Valkyries.

OÐINN

So supportive!
(To Nicholas)
Go well, Cheer-Bringer. Use my gift wisely!

Oðinn and the Hunt CHEER again and gallop away into the sky. As they go, their voices fade:

VARIOUS VALKYRIES

What now?
You heard the All-Father - Iceland.
Sword-play first!
And a feast in Valholl!
And a long bath.
Good idea, my armour itches.

OÐINN (FADING OUT)

Yes, yes, my fierce lovelies, but no more-

FADE TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE ALFHEIM STABLES. PRE-DAWN.

Shamanka, Holly, Mistletoe, Sooty Pete and Tufty are waiting, as usual, to welcome Nicholas home. Shamanka has gained laughter lines and her hair is now white, not white blonde.

On screen we read, 'Christmas Morning. Twenty years later'.

They look up and wave as Nicholas flies the sleigh over the town, circles back and lands neatly before them.

Shamanka greets Nicholas with a hug and kiss.

SHAMANKA

Show off! It's time for *your* Christmas present. This year's will actually be a surprise, because an elf didn't make it.

NICHOLAS

Intriguing! Tell me then!

SHAMANKA

Yes.

NICHOLAS
Okay, what *is* it?

SHAMANKA
'Yes.' That's my present - one word. Add 'I love you' if it helps.

NICHOLAS
Well, I love you too.

Nicholas is confused, then his face lights up with hope;

NICHOLAS
When you say, 'yes', do you mean-

SHAMANKA
Yes! How many times have you asked me to marry you?

NICHOLAS
Pretty much -

SHAMANKA
- every Christmas! Well, you didn't ask me this year -
(beat)
- yet. But I know you're going to, so -yes!

Nicholas's jaw drops.

The Elves start to dance a jig.

NICHOLAS
Wha- I- You're- Why!?

SHAMANKA
'Why'? You're supposed to kiss me now!

Nicholas obliges. The elves WHOOP and clap, then, as the kiss continues they look away, blushing, until it's over.

NICHOLAS
(breathless)
I mean - *why now?*

SHAMANKA
I'm catching you up, you really are immortal. You haven't aged a day in all the years I've known you, but I have.

NICHOLAS
Not to me.

SHAMANKA
Charmer! Anyway; I want to be sure I spend every year *I have left* with you.
Is tomorrow soon enough?

Sooty Pete turns to Holly,

SOOTY PETE
Christmas wedding! Romantic!

Tufty turns to Mistletoe, worried.

MISTLETOE

That's lovely, but who can we find, *around here*, with authority to marry a Holy-woman and a Sainted Bishop!?

EXT. CONCOURSE AROUND THE CENTRAL FIR TREE. ARCTIC NIGHT.

Scores of elves in their smartest folk costumes, each holding a coloured lantern, gather around the decorated tree. It's also bedecked with coloured lanterns and has grown a lot. Many more elves look on from lit balconies and rooftops.

Under the tree, Nicholas and Shamanka stand face-to-face, hand-in-hand, dressed in beautifully embroidered versions of their clothes. Holly is Bridesmaid and Mistletoe is Best Man.

Tufty, looking slightly baffled, stands with her back to the tree, holding a gold brocade ribbon.

TUFTY

- And, as *recently* appointed Minister of Elven Ceremonies, it gives me great pleasure to pronounce these Bigf- - These humans; Husband and Wife -

The elves let out a great CHEER, throwing hats in the air.

Tufty can make her light voice carry shockingly well;

TUFTY

HOLD ON! I'M NOT DONE YET!

Nicholas and Shamanka giggle at Tufty's impatience during the commotion of hats being found and passed back to their owners.

TUFTY (CONT'D)

U-u-uhm - and Holly King and Holly Queen.
(emphatic)
And so -

She looks around, her expression just daring anyone to interrupt again, before she wraps the ribbon around Nicholas's and Shamanka's joined hands,

TUFTY (CONT'D)

And I hereby - hereby - uh - hereby -
AH! - do symbolically bind these two together, to go forward as equals.
Let neither be in the other's path nor shadow!
(hurriedly)
and -
You may now exchange rings.

Nicholas removes Oðinn's magic ring and puts it on Shamanka's finger, where it magically shrinks to fit her. She opens her mouth to protest.

NICHOLAS

Because I love you: I know my flying
frightens you, so I want you to guard this
for me. I won't use it except when I need
it around Yuletide.

Shamanka signals for Holly to step forward.

Holly brings forward a silver ring with a compass-star design,
set with a single iridescent stone in the centre. As Shamanka
puts it on Nicholas's finger the star pivots.

SHAMANKA

Because I love you: This ring was already
old when great grand-mother wore it. She
was told the stone fell from the pole star
- which it always points to. Use it to
always find your way back home to me.

They kiss passionately. Golden light sparkles off them.

TUFTY

You may now kiss the br-
Oh.

Tufty shouts to the crowd,

TUFTY

Now you cheer! Go on then!

The elves CHEER, APPLAUD, WHOOP, WHISTLE, and break into
spontaneous jigs, cartwheels and handsprings.

The blissful couple process arm-in-arm to the eight, well-
groomed, reindeer standing in the shafts of the decorated sleigh.

They take a fancy seat, added in the rear. Mistletoe, sat on the
driver's seat, starts the reindeer into an easy trot.

Shamanka kisses Nicholas cheek.

SHAMANKA

I do declare, *Mister Claus*. That first
married kiss was, *wow!*

NICHOLAS

Wow indeed, *Missus Claus!*

Nicholas looks deeply into her eyes for something, then smiles.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Were your eyes *always that blue?*
I've had *that* feeling just once before,
when the elves made me one of their own.
I just *know* we're going to have a *long* and
happy marriage.
Or perhaps - I'm just that good a kisser!

FADE TO:

INT. TOY DEPARTMENT SANTA'S GROTTO. PRESENT DAY.

The streets beyond the windows are now dark and empty. Uri has a wistful look.

URI

Epic! You was all set then; fine wife,
bling manor, legit job-

FATHER CHRISTMAS

But I was *not* all set. People were loosing
the spirit of Christmas.

URI

(engrossed despite himself)
How?

FATHER CHRISTMAS

One word, 'Puritans'.

URI

Luther and all that lot. Yeah, real buzz-
kills!

FATHER CHRISTMAS

I recall Luther was a *jolly* fellow. Many
think *he* was the first to put a Christmas
tree in a church. He wasn't *against fun*,
just dubious scholarship!
Actually, the dark times started right here
in the English Civil War. Made darker by a
parliament which thought the People weren't
pious enough. The People rebelled, bless
them, with -
(beat)
Strange *Mummers* plays, about me!

FADE TO:

EXT. MID 17TH CENTURY LONDON MARKET SQUARE. LATE AUTUMN.

A small, BOISTEROUS CROWD is gathered expectantly before a
makeshift stage, built on a long cart.

JOHN TAYLOR; a slender, middle-aged man, with long ginger goatee
beard - whitened with flour - a red steeple hat and tunic, and a
white ruff collar and cuffs, climbs old crates onto the stage
carrying a pilgrim's staff decorated with greenery.

Behind him, four other MUMMERS, in equally makeshift costumes; a
Little Red Devil, Saint George, a Turkish Knight and a Plague
Doctor, await their cues.

The Crowd CHEERS.

TAYLOR

In cometh I, Old Father Yule. Welcome, or
welcome not, I hopeth old Father Yule will
ne'er be forgot.
I wast born in a rocky country, where-

From the top step of a severe civic building opposite, a gaunt, pompous Puritan, MAYOR GRIMSTONE, dressed all in black, but rich velvets and silks, raises his swagger-stick and shouts;

GRIMSTONE

John Taylor; Waterman! Self-styled,
'People's Poet'! Thou hast been warned. I
shalt have none devilish Popery in my
borough!

The Crowd turns to Grimstone as he strides towards the stage. Two RUFFIANS nudge each other as if to say, 'more entertainment than we expected!'

The Crowd turns back to Taylor's strong voice.

TAYLOR

Doest *thou* forget so soon, that thou, Mayor
Grimstone, hast no power over the People
that it did not elect unto thou?

Grimstone mounts the stage, stick raised like a cudgel.

GRIMSTONE

I speaketh for parliament, the which 'the
People' - did elect. That same Parliament
hast outlawed Popish Christmas.

The Crowd jeers at Grimstone. Some in real protest, the Ruffians - winking to each other - to antagonise the situation.

Taylor raises his staff in return.

TAYLOR

Whom we hast elected we can un-elect.
(Darkly)
- like unto *recent* King Charles.

The Crowd cheers rowdily.

GRIMSTONE

Shall I call the Constable, since thou
threateneth me with violence!?

The other Mummers start to sneak away.

TAYLOR

Nay, not violence, justice!
(turning to the Crowd)
All the liberty and harmless sports, the
merry gambols, dances and friscals, which
the toiling plowswain and labourer were
wont to be recreated - and their spirits
and hopes revived for a whole twelve months
- are now extinct and put out of use in
such a fashion as if they never had been!
Thus are the *merry* lords of misrule -

He places one hand on his heart, then points at Grimstone.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)
- suppressed by the *mad* lords of *bad* rule
at Westminster!

The crowd CHEER Taylor even louder. With mischievous leers, the Ruffians reach forward, yank Grimstone's ankles from under him and drag him surprised and protesting off the stage into the riotous crowd.

NEARBY ROOFTOP.

A shocked looking elf shakes its head.

FADE TO:

INT. TOY DEPARTMENT SANTA'S GROTTO. PRESENT DAY.

FATHER CHRISTMAS
Things can get - ah - a bit *heated* when people become used to war. But how could anyone say I - an ex-bishop - was devilish? Well, *that law* was reversed, but thirteen years too late: Other countries had followed. It was nearly two hundred years before Father Christmas - as they call me in Britain to this day - was a household name again.
Meanwhile, we moved H.Q. for the last time.

URI
More trouble?

FATHER CHRISTMAS
The opposite: For years I'd wanted to reward *all* good children. For that I needed stronger magic than even Oðinn's gift...

FADE TO:

EXT. ALFHEIM, OUTSIDE REINDEER STABLES. NIGHT.

Shamanka, worried, is peering through a brass telescope, sweeping the night sky.

On screen we see, 'Early Nineteenth Century'.

Her expression clears as a dim, comet-like smudge appears over the northern horizon.

EXT./INT. NIGHT. THE STABLES.

Nicholas drives the sleigh in through the wide stable doors.

The sleigh has new brass navigation instruments fixed to it.

Shamanka, Merry and Bright, follow it in and start to unharness and feed the reindeer as Nicholas jumps down, elated.

SHAMANKA
That's the latest you ever got home. Was everything alright?

Nicholas knows her moods, so before he speaks he gives her a big, reassuring hug, then holds her at arms length for eye contact.

NICHOLAS

You *know* I try to extend my range every Christmas. But I still finished early - so I took a detour. I thought it'd be fun to see the Northern Lights from the *inside*. Shamanka - it felt - incredible - like - like a *homecoming*! We flew at incredible speeds, and look!

Nicholas taps his nose and vanishes in a sparkle of northern-lights-coloured snow.

SHAMANKA

(frightened)
Nick! Where-?

- but as the last twinkle fades another sparkle of snow is reforming into Nicholas - now sitting on a roof beam.

NICHOLAS

Up here, my love.
In ways I haven't fully understood yet, the Northern Lights boost my magic! I felt - I *feel* that I might fly around the *world*! If we could *collect* the Aurora -

EXT. ALFHEIM CENTRAL CONCOURSE. ARCTIC NIGHT.

The population is gathered around the (now ancient) fir tree.

looking out over the elves, Nicholas and Shamanka proclaim from where they once stood on their wedding day. Flanking them are Sooty Pete, Tufty, Mistletoe and Holly.

NICHOLAS

My good and dear friends. You've all heard of my exciting news.

SHAMANKA

But that is not why we're here today.

SOOTY PETE

There's other news.

TUFTY

As Bigfolk have spread, we have fled, always. Now Goodfolk join us every day from far places, with tales of Bigfolk machines that sicken the land.

HOLLY

-And that makes *us* sick.

MISTLETOE

We have lived here for many years.

NICHOLAS

But life is change - and I don't think the Valley of Laughter, though beautiful, is 'The Untouched Lands' of the old prophecy.

MISTLETOE

We have flown with Santa to the place where the Northern Lights flow into the Earth.

HOLLY

And our magic *also* grew stronger!

NICHOLAS

I am asking each of you if you will join us there in building a new home.

HOLLY

Big enough for *all* Goodfolk if need be.

SOOTY PETE

-clean-

TUFTY

Just animals, plants and us.

MISTLETOE

And better organised!

SHAMANKA

Somewhere Bigfolk might venture, but will never settle. A place of true quiet.

NICHOLAS

A place where every elf can be happy doing what they enjoy doing well.

(beat)

But it's a hard journey, and we will be starting again from the ground up.

Holly indicates Mistletoe, Pete and Tufty.

HOLLY

We your spokespersons all believe it will be worth following the Holly King and Queen for this great adventure.

SHAMANKA

If you believe that too, step forward.

The assembly looks at each other, there are exchanged mutterings. In the tense silence, a few elves step forward. Then a few more, many more, and soon almost everyone.

The New-Born Elf, raises its hand nervously.

NEW-BORN ELF

We thought you'd never ask.

A Sammi-style, ANCIENT ELF, who has not stepped forward, speaks.

ANCIENT ELF

We who were here before you will remain, to redirect messages to you and guide the land back to how it was.

EXT. TUNDRA IN THE HIGH ARCTIC. DAY.

The icy land is flat and rocky. the horizon is a great evergreen forest. In the foreground a broad encampment of lavvus trembles and sways in the wind. Elves are already clearing the stunted brush to build permanent wooden homes from tree trunks. Nicholas and Shamanka arrive by sleigh, hauling more trunks for that work.

SERIES OF SHOTS.

Everything is festively coloured and beautifully crafted:

- A) Ext. Autumn/dusk. Snow is falling thickly. Sooty Pete and his crew capping hot springs in airtight, bell-shaped, stone domes then connecting them via iron pipes to the new buildings.
- B) Int. Merry warming her hands on a vintage radiator.
- C) Ext. Autumn/dusk. Sooty Pete and his crews are hewing deep pits. Tufty's gangs build giant greenhouses - igloos of perfectly clear ice - over them. Her gang is just dropping in the perfectly fitted ice 'keystone' on another one's apex.
- D) Ext. Winter/dark. The snow is very deep. Holly supervises the finish of giant wooden funnels that swivel, to feed the constant winds to blacksmithing forges in a nearby workshop.
- E) Ext. Spring/dawn. Some of the snow is melted. Nicholas admires a wind-mill. It is winching up a huge stone counter-weight hanging deep in a wood-lined shaft beneath. Mistletoe proudly shows Nicholas how that connects through giant clockworks to a drive belt for forge-hammers in the smithy.
- F) Ext. Summer/day. There is still much snow, but the rivers are unfrozen. Shamanka shows Nicholas a huge array of beaten brass mirrors that focus the sun into an open-sided workshop. Int. Inside, the focused light makes great metal-smelting crucibles glow red hot.
- G) Int. Under the ice greenhouses, Tufty and other content Brownies collect eggs from chickens or they milk cows and goats that roam the planted meadows beneath. In fenced-off plots, Holly and other elves plant crops.
- H) Int. dark ice caves, lined with shelves. By lantern light, with frosty breath, Bright take out some baskets of frozen, laid-up food.
- I) Ext. Nicholas and Shamanka outside their new cottage, receiving Inuit, African and Far-Eastern elves. The colourful town behind them is much bigger than Alfheim, with stone towers, wrought-iron domes, tall brick chimneys and many, large Scandi-style, log buildings.

INT. THE NEW GRAND WORKSHOP. DAY.

Though charmingly decorated in white, gold, red, green and whimsical carvings, this oval shaped space with a floor of polished bedrock is as big as an aircraft hangar. It's divided into zones labelled; 'Puppets', 'Construction Toys', 'Board Games', 'Clockwork', 'Soft toys', 'Confectionery', etc. The walls are stone-built, with stained glass windows that flood everything with colour. The roof is a column-free, ornate cast-iron-and-timber fan vault. At its dead centre is a twisting, fluted funnel of crystals and coiled coppery wires, that tapers down to a steam-punky machine on a broad dais. An inactive, wide conveyor belt leads into a tunnel mouth. On the opposite wall, the last of many elves file silently in through giant, double doors, in clothes brighter and less rustic than formerly. Everyone is focussed on the dais where Nicholas and Shamanka stand with: Holly, who wears a hat, embroidered, 'Head Co-Ordinator of Toys & Post'. Mistletoe is proudly fidgeting with his, 'Departmental Resources Synchronisation' hat. Tufty has a 'Farming & Animal Welfare' hat. Sooty Pete's reads, 'Minerals. Wood'.

NICHOLAS

(pensive, to himself)

"Wood, the right tools and time enough."

(aloud, to the room)

This is a proud day. For each of us have - in every meaning - come a long way to this, our permanent home, 'Christmas Haven' - or as Elves say, 'Jólaskýli'.

He points at the crystal funnel.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

To harvest raw magic, we have built where the Northern Lights fall to Earth. If this works, Christmas Haven will become invisible, with much magic to spare. All that remains is to engage the Prismacumulator - and hope our joint ingenuity was enough!

Nicholas takes a crystal from his belt-pouch and slots it into the last gap in the array.

For a moment, no one dares breathe, then there is a GENTLE, CELESTIAL HUM and iridescent lights start to glow near the roof, before coruscating down through the funnel. Dials, lights and switches, start to TICK and flicker, then settle to a steady light. The conveyor belt starts rolling towards the tunnel.

Exchanging looks of wonder, everyone notices their fingertips sparkle briefly.

High up at a window, an ELF WITH A TELESCOPE, is on a suspended platform looking out through a clear pane.

EXT. TUNDRA OVERLOOKING THE DISTANT TOWN.

A BORED LOOKING ELF sits up a tree looking out.

Gaping in surprise as distant Christmas Haven fades away, she waves a green flag.

INT. THE GRAND WORKSHOP.

ELF WITH TELESCOPE
(shouting down to the dais)
That's an invisibility confirmation!

HOLLY
(loud)
Three cheers for Santa Claus!

NICHOLAS
(louder)
Oh No. Three Cheers for *everyone!*

EVERYONE
Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!

Hundreds of hats are flung into the air. Mistletoe, Holly, Tufty and Pete - exchanging experienced smiles - throw theirs up just high enough to easily catch their own again.

Shamanka gestures for Merry and Bright, in chef's aprons, to bring up trays of tankards. She passes them to Nicholas and our four new Head Elves.

SHAMANKA
I saved this for a special occasion. It's the new, *In Thing*, back in my old country: South American Chocolatl beans and sweetened milk. It's very restorative.

Nicholas and the others take sips, exchange looks of amazement then speak between big gulps.

NICHOLAS
This is - the - most delicious thing - I've - ever tasted!

MISTLETOE
This we've *got* to confectionize!

NICHOLAS
yes! *And* - right now on this Founding Day - I'm declaring this, ah - 'hot chocolatl'?

Nicholas looks to Shamanka, who nods.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
- our new national beverage!

Tufty regards the Prismacumulator. Her thoughts elsewhere;

TUFTY
Somehow word always gets out. The Bigfolk'll think we're at the *geographic North Pole*.

MISTLETOE
Good, then we should be left alone.

TUFTY

(mischievous)

How they'll scratch their heads about how we build on moving pack-ices.

Sooty Pete produces a large pocket-watch-shaped contraption and thrusts it into Nicholas's hand.

SOOTY PETE

Thought you'd like this. I call it a 'Yule-o-meter'. Measures Christmas spirit.

As Nicholas opens the cover it sparkles magically. Inside is a dial with three zones. The lowest one, in red, is labelled, 'oh-oh!'. The middle, amber, zone reads, 'so-so'. The highest, green, is, 'Ho-ho-ho!'. The Christmas-tree-shaped pointer is wiggling around the highest 'ho'.

The elves, having regained all their hats, start making toys. The first ones, each carefully labelled, are already being put on the conveyor belt.

INT. THE STABLES. MORNING.

On the back wall is a giant world map entitled, 'Most Efficient Route. Annual Update.' contented reindeer are munching food in clean, roomy stalls.

In the central space, Nicholas, and the four Head Elves admire a new, larger, streamlined sleigh. The nose has an intake grill. Just in-front of the low windscreen is a narrow vent.

A new gnome, IVALDI, joins them wearing a 'Maintenance and Engineering' hat. He's powerfully built, even for a gnome.

NICHOLAS

Friends, this is Ivaldi - recently of Iceland and renowned for his magical craftsmanship. We've been designing this sleigh together for *fast flight*.

IVALDI

Hail and well met, fellow fey folk! Oðinn says hello. Actually, he said, 'The All-Father hails and hallows the glorious endeavours of all honourable elves.'

(beat)

You know what he can be like!

MISTLETOE

(slightly resentful)

So, Ivaldi, tell us about this marvel of yours.

IVALDI

Not mine; I just tinkered it together. Santa here designed the improvements, like different woods for lightness or strength. Mrs Claus invented the organic, airtight, frictionless paints - including the shiny underside to look like a shooting star.

Their POINT OF VIEW as Ivaldi explains the artful instrument panel:

IVALDI

The gyroscopic World-globe doubles as the pitch, yaw and roll indicator.

Ivaldi pulls a small lever. The globe rotates to a new position and a sleigh cut-out pops up. He points out other features.

IVALDI (CONT'D)

That's a Magnetic compass.
Altitude barometer.
The airspeed dial is connected to the wind turbine in the intake.

SOOTY PETE

So few instruments navigate the world?

NICHOLAS

I fly by the stars, above cloud level. And we live at Geomagnetic North. A compass is all I'll need to get back.

Nicholas subconsciously twirls his wedding ring.

SOOTY PETE

What about this new Bigfolk 'electric-trickery'? You could have, 'dash-lights' powered by 'batt-er-ies'.

TUFTY

Why would it need a place to keep bats?
(beat)
Oh! They're to help it fly!

NICHOLAS

(chuckling)
No batteries, Sooty. They're heavy and bad for nature. Just the old luminous dials. They don't spoil my night vision.

MISTLETOE

But if you DO get lost?

IVALDI

The internal wind turbine IS connected to optional emergency lights.

Nicholas opens the glove compartment. behind the gloves are a sextant and stellar almanac.

NICHOLAS

I'll fly old school. Nothing that relies on extra magic.
Now, I'm keeping the broad snow runners to spread weight. We don't want to crack people's roof tiles. They land quieter than wheels and -unlike wheel- work on sand too.

TUFTY

But there won't be snow everywhere.

NICHOLAS

We've thought of that. We bring our own!

Ivaldi pulls a lever and nozzles spray water on the runners' front curves.

IVALDI

The slipstream will spread it over the runners, to freeze at altitude.

HOLLY

But, *why*, "Nothing that relies on extra magic"?

NICHOLAS

I don't know yet how much magic I'll need for the Big Ride. I'll use as little as possible, when ingenuity isn't enough.

HOLLY

I like it then, very slick!

NICHOLAS

Note the overall aerofoil shape. The faster it goes the more lift I get!

MISTLETOE

Is that enough lift for the bigger loads?

Nicholas knocks on the fuselage, which SOUNDS HOLLOW.

NICHOLAS

It has airtight inner and outer hulls, filled between with helium.

He gives the sleigh a gentle shove. It drifts sideways. Impressed, Sooty Pete drops to the floor to look under.

His POINT OF VIEW: The sleigh doesn't actually touch the floor.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

See! Neutral buoyancy at sea level.

MISTLETOE

(disdainful)
Bigfolk doings! Though -
(reflectively)
If you'd had *that* during The Mid Atlantic Plummet of fourteen thirty -

Nicholas interrupts loudly as Shamanka walks in with a basket of reindeer treats.

NICHOLAS

- *AND* with the two-point seatbelts *and* the new back-up, sherry-powered rocket - it's *completely* safe.

SHAMANKA

Morning my love! The workshop's so efficient we'll have all but the last-minute wrapping done by Sancta Lucia day.

SHAMANKA

Excellent! That means I'll be free to raise Christmas spirit in person.

SHAMANKA

Nicholas? For years the boy reindeer have been jealous of the girls keeping their antlers over Christmas, so I've made a potion in their treats to stop the boys' ones falling out until January.

NICHOLAS

That'll also balance wind drag at high speed. Doubly good!

Shamanka passes out treats from her basket for the Head Elves to feed the reindeer.

SHAMANKA

Memorised the new team's names yet?

NICHOLAS

I have *tried*! It would help if I knew why they chose those names.

Shamanka points back and forth to different reindeer.

SHAMANKA

Okay. Listen. Dasher's a natural sprinter, Dancer is the graceful one, Prancer lifts her hooves highest and Vixen is the sly reddish coloured one, Cupid is the one all the girls fancy, Comet has the white belly, Donder's the heaviest - his hooves 'thunder', and Blitzen's antlers are jagged like lightning.

Nicholas rubs the back of his neck and grimaces,

NICHOLAS

Oh - kay. Think I've got that. I wonder - once I *have* memorised them -
(beat)
Ask them if future reindeer could use *their* names as team positions - to immortalize this first world Big Ride?

Shamanka shapes her hands like antlers, tosses them in specific ways, paws the ground and makes a series of grunts and bellows.

The reindeer reply similarly.

SHAMANKA

They said they'd be honoured.

NICHOLAS

(sighing relief)
Wonderful! Now I'll never forget the best team layout.

FADE TO:

INT. TOY DEPARTMENT SANTA'S GROTTO. PRESENT DAY.

URI

Yeah, yeah, all very plausible. But no way you deliver all them presents to the whole world in one night!

FATHER CHRISTMAS

One night? I have a whole month! Admittedly Christmas Eve is my busiest night, but - depending on the culture - I give gifts from early November to early January! Also, I don't visit unbelievers, naughty children, or some *whole countries* - except the *few* believers in 'em. And though the population's grown, more than half the world now lives in cities, which cuts down the travel a lot! No, *Communication* was always *the* problem-

FADE TO:

INT. ONE-ROOM HOUSE OF POOR RUSSIAN FARMSTEAD. DUSK

At a shabby writing desk looking out of a frosty window at deep snow, a GIRL of seven is helping her three-year old brother, VIKA, write a letter, while MOTHER and FATHER are laying out a frugal meal on a plain table.

NOTE: THE DIALOGUE IN THIS SCENE IS SPOKEN IN RUSSIAN AND SUBTITLED IN ENGLISH.

GIRL

Is that everything?

VIKA

Wanna na-na too.

GIRL

I don't think Grandfather Frost brings bananas.

MOTHER

I've never even *seen* a banana! How do you know about those, Vika?

VIKA

In my an-am-in-al book! You say I is little monkey. Monkey in book has na-na. I gotta have na-na.

Everyone laughs good-naturedly.

FATHER

Then ask Ded Moroz to make *you* into a monkey - and for a 'na-na' for us all!

The girl concentrates as she adds it to Vika's letter.

GIRL

Now we address it to him in Siberia.

VIKA
How it go him?

GIRL
Magic of course.

MOTHER,
- But it only happens when you're not
looking, so come and eat now. Leave it by
the chimney or under the tree.

During the meal, while the children are not looking, Father goes and picks up the letter on the hearth. He corrects a mistake on the spelling of 'Siberia' - but puts it back.

As he returns to the others, the letter flutters in a draught onto the log fire. It doesn't burn, but floats up the chimney on the updraft, sparkling slightly-

EXT. GEOMAGNETIC NORTH POLE. ARCTIC NIGHT.

-our letter speeds through the air above the icy landscape, swoops down to a low hill covered in snow and passes into what looks like an animal burrow-

INT. CHRISTMAS HAVEN POST OFFICE.

-our letter flies out of a roof-vent into a shiny new room, like the Grand Workshop. Instead of assembly lines, two dozen huge hoppers range round the walls, with labels like, 'Central America', 'Oceania', 'North Africa.', 'Indian Sub-Continent'.

Our letter deposits itself neatly in the 'Eastern Europe' Hopper. A steady stream of other letters come thorough other vents and fly into hoppers. By each hopper is a long sorting table, above which vacuum tubes painted with candy-cane stripes, lace under the roof and through the walls. Elves are sorting letters into the correct vacuum tubes. Others fit the last tubes in place.

Nicholas and Shamanka walk in through an arch. She's holding her hands over his eyes, guiding him.

NICHOLAS
-and let's stay with clockwork when
possible.

Shamanka removes her hands.

NICHOLAS
You and the Elves *have* been busy! Do you
really think we'll need *all this*?

SHAMANKA
Maybe not this year, maybe not for a
generation, but I believe in you, and soon
many new children will too. They're going
to want you to know their wishes.

NICHOLAS
-And I want to know. So-
(beat)
- how did the last of the summits go?

SHAMANKA

The last countries - in Eastern Europe - have joined the world scheme! Any letter addressed to any name you're known by will be redirected here by their governments.

NICHOLAS

So only letters from remote areas need magic to get here. More magic for The Big Ride! You've done a marvellous thing. I really couldn't do all this without you.

SHAMANKA

You *may* have mentioned that!

Holly walks up and hands Nicholas our Russian letter.

HOLLY

This one needs your personal attention.

NICHOLAS

Best run this by the new Slavic elves-

HOLLY

The Veela, Santa.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

-That's them. My imperfect Russian has this boy, Vika, wanting to *become* a monkey!
(reads on)
We can manage the bananas, but I can't change what people are.

SHAMANKA

Indeed. They can only do that themselves.

EXT. TREGAARDENS JULEHUS, DRØBAK, NORWAY. WINTERS DAY.

Tregaaardens Julehus, is a real, year-round Christmas shop; a fine, wooden 1850s building with Oslo Fjord in the background. Here we see it new-built on a bright day, in deep snow.

Nicholas and Shamanka stand on the top step of the ornate porch with the MAYOR and a few other LOCAL DIGNITARIES. A SMALL CROWD, in Victorian-era fashion or folk-costume is gathered below.

A FASHIONABLY DRESSED YOUNG WOMAN in the crowd turns to her BOYFRIEND. He's in festive folk costume.

FASHIONABLE YOUNG WOMAN

(in Norwegian; English subtitles)
But is not this fellow very convincing!

BOYFRIEND

(in Norwegian; English subtitles)
And that Mrs Yule-Elf adds a cosy familial tone.

FASHIONABLE YOUNG WOMAN

(in Norwegian; English subtitles)
I know it! Pappa told me they stay in character the whole time.

She waves to the Mayor, who smiles indulgently back.

BOYFRIEND
(in Norwegian; English subtitles)
Hush, he begins the speech!

On the porch the Mayor holds a short speech in Norwegian then hands Nicholas an ornately carved knife.

Holding the knife together, Nicholas and Shamanka cut a fancy cord tied across the porch rail. It starts to snow prettily.

SHAMANKA
(in fair Norwegian; English subtitles)
We declare this Christmas House open. May there be many more!

NICHOLAS
(in fair Norwegian; English subtitles)
And let each one inspire the loving generosity that makes Christmas true *all* year round!

Nicholas and Shamanka lead the Mayor and Dignitaries off through the crowd, shaking hands and smiling at wonder-struck children.

NICHOLAS
(under his breath to Shamanka)
To think it might all soon end, just when it was really beginning.

Shamanka gives Nicholas a questioning look.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)
Christmas Haven is self-sustaining, but even centuries of investing father's old money in festive businesses isn't going to build toys forever.

SHAMANKA
I've been thinking. Instead of trying to keep your inventions secret - which is impossible - *let* toy-makers make copies - exclusively - for a percentage. Then you'd still control the quality - *and* earn enough to make many more toys!

NICHOLAS
How would I stop others from copying *those* designs anyway?

SHAMANKA
You wouldn't have to. The people *paying* for them will do that - most litigiously.

NICHOLAS
Shrewd! We can test that along with my new designs, right here.

They mount the new sleigh and Nicholas twitches the reins. The reindeer move off but do not fly.

They parade through the town, waving to people-lined streets. One LUXURIOUSLY DRESSED LITTLE GIRL breaks free of her NANNY and runs up to the sleigh, thrusting a long list into Nicholas lap.

LUXURIOUSLY DRESSED GIRL
Give me everything and *Then* I'll be good!

Nicholas smiles to her, but shares a disgusted look with Shamanka as he passes the list to her.

Nicholas waits until they are out of sight in the forested hills behind the town, then winks tremendously at Shamanka and taps his nose. He twitches the reins.

NICHOLAS
After you my love.

SHAMANKA
On Dasher! On Dancer! On Prancer and Vixen-

NICHOLAS
-On Comet! On Cupid! On Donner and Blitzen-

SHAMANKA
-Dash away all!

They rise into the sky, gathering speed.

Shamanka begins to speak but stops and shields her eyes as they're buffeted by increasing NOISY HEADWIND.

Nicholas is shouting excitedly,

NICHOLAS
Wait - for - it -!
Wait - for - it -!

As they rise into the clouds, still accelerating, the snow and clouds swirl violently around them. Suddenly, the buffeting turns into a smooth slipstream; through the vent, across the windscreen and over their heads like an invisible canopy.

They break through the clouds into a crystal clear sky.

NICHOLAS
- Cruising speed! You were saying my love?

SHAMANKA
That little br-
(beat)
-girl. I've been thinking.

NICHOLAS
I rely upon it!

SHAMANKA
We need a third list. This new - let's call it - *the Nearly List*, that'll be for naughty children *trying* to be good, or normally good children who are acting up. You'd decide *them* on Little Christmas Eve.

NICHOLAS

We know when they're faking just to get presents.

SHAMANKA

Or just won't try to be nice -

NICHOLAS

But if I see they've made an effort, I can put them on the Nice List, last minute!

(beat)

It's still a lot to keep track of.

SHAMANKA

That's where my other idea comes in.

INT: CHRISTMAS HAVEN. CORRIDOR.

Shamanka and Nicholas walk hand in hand. The corridor is festive but dusty. She stops them in front of a wide door.

NICHOLAS

The obsolete, Unknown Sender, Post Office!

Shamanka points out the new door sign, 'C.A.R.O.L. SERVICE' and leads him in by the hand.

INT: C.A.R.O.L. SERVICE.

The floor is suspended half-way up a towering room. In its centre is a three sided lectern bearing three enormous, hand-bound books, which elves are consulting or writing runes in. Other elves with dossiers scurry between the lectern and walls of pigeon-holes, accessible by mini pater-noster lifts.

SHAMANKA

We enlarged it. A lot. Welcome to the, 'Conduct Assessment for Rewards Or Lessons Service'. I've moved all three lists here from now on. Meet the troops!

Elves of all ethnicities snap to attention, with a smart salute. Some are dressed in human clothes, often school uniforms.

One dark, surly, scruffy elf, BELSNICKEL, has a 'C.A.R.O.L. MASTER' badge.

BELSNICKEL

Ready for inspection - Ma'am - Sir!

NICHOLAS

What's this with the human clothes? And - why are these men clean-shaven?

BELSNICKEL

(Barking an order)

Recruits! Deep Cover Mode!

As one, the human-dressed elves all swap their caps for realistic wigs or school caps, covering their ears to become the very image of 8 to 10-year-old human children.

BELSNICKEL

An elf's beard is his nat'ral pride-n-joy
sir, but there's nothing unmanly 'bout
sacrificing it for the CAROL Service!
(reciting by rote)
Our mission: infiltrate and observe. As
'new kids' we're first to identify bullies.
We monitor the conduct of known naughty
children. Moving covertly, we assess whole
schools in days. We are the last line of
offence - and its reckoning.
(with relish)
Our motto: 'Be nice to the new kid or
you'll be sorry!'

Nicholas laughs heartily as he shakes hands all round, and ends
by planting a kiss on Shamanka.

NICHOLAS

Genius! And you've already put up The Five
Principles, I see.

Prominently displayed on one wall is a beautiful, calligraphic
notice board. We see the matching text as Nicholas recites it
from memory.

NICHOLAS

'Naughty children get coal or nothing.
'We only give gifts adults approve of.
'We never grant wishes to hurt someone.
'We reward nice non-believers' if others
think they deserve it.
'For impossible gifts, we give the next
best thing.'
(beat)
Everything comes together. My magic has
never been stronger. There's nothing in the
way of the first Big Ride.

EXT. GERMANIA FOREST. NIGHT. WINTER.

In the distance, down a flagstone road, is a small town. Some
ancient familiar buildings - and a sign 'WOLTHURSHOF' - show us it
is Wulpuzhof, grown.

Krampus clambers, blinking as from a long sleep, from a filthy,
abandoned badger-set and lifts his face to the sky.

KRAMPUS

My old adversary soon returns. I sense it.
I have thought long on the exact meaning of
your words, 'saint'.

INT. CHRISTMAS HAVEN FLIGHT CONTROL. CHRISTMAS EVE. ARCTIC NIGHT.

It's an octagonal room with a continuous window all round, except
one wall which bears a large split-flap-time-display showing
'9:53 AM GMT'. Beneath, a sign; 'REST STOPS: LOCAL TIME' are
smaller signs for; Christmas Island, Drøbak, Ho-Ha-Ho, Jerusalem,
Uummannaq, Navidad and other Christmas-related place-names round
the world - each with it's own time display.

The control room looks down from a height on Christmas Haven. Ranged round the room, Elf CREWS sit at consoles full of mechanical knobs and dials that sparkle slightly when adjusted. A 3-metre-wide world globe on gimbals dominates the room's centre. It's oriented so its geomagnetic north pole, labelled, 'home', lies under cross-hairs set at eye height. Centred under it a compass rose is inlaid in the floor, but the points are labelled, 'South to Europe/Africa, South to Atlantic, South to Americas, South to Pacific, South to Antarctica, South to Australia, South to East Asia' and 'South to West Asia'.

Holly, Mistletoe, Sooty Pete, Tufty and Ivaldi stand looking down on a runway beyond the town. Shamanka is pacing the room.

SHAMANKA

Tee minus three minutes to first optimal dusk delivery. Flight-Elfexecutives report!

Holly, Mistletoe, Sooty Pete, Tufty and Ivaldi - today wearing different caps with wing emblems - cross to various consoles where the Crews are double checking gauges.

The 'Animal Welfare' console crew gives Tufty the thumbs up.

TUFTY

Reindeer confirmed fed and fit for duty!

The 'Magic Reserves' console crew glance at Sooty Pete.

SOOTY PETE

Aurora Concentrate tank full!

The 'Toy Sack Flow System' console crew smile at Holly.

HOLLY

Shop floor powered up, poised and ready!

The 'Sleigh Pre-Flight' console crew nod at Ivaldi.

IVALDI

Mechanical systems all optimal.

MISTLETOE

We have green lights twinkling across the board. We have a go for launch. I Repeat, *go - for - launch!*

Mistletoe grasps the dead-man-switch of a large lever in the floor and looks to Shamanka who is watching the main clock.

SHAMANKA

Seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, *Starlight!*

Mistletoe throws his weight against the lever.

EXT. RUNWAY.

The runway is a long frozen lake on the outskirts of town, which the octagonal Flight Control tower looks along to a single, unlit beacon tower at the far shore.

Nicholas sits expectantly in the sleigh, which is by the near shore, looking over his shoulder at the Flight Control Tower. The sleigh holds a dozen big sacks labelled 1 - 12, each in a number-matched hollow.

A bright white Christmas star rises on the mast of Flight Control. Nicolas turns to verify a green one is rising from the far beacon. He beams joyfully as he twitches the reins and steers for the green beacon.

NICHOLAS
On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer-

INT. FLIGHT CONTROL.

The globe moves imperceptibly, as the cross-hairs track the sleigh. Shamanka and all the elves look out, tense, watching the sleigh take off, accelerating over the distant mountains.

They are alarmed as the sleigh banks tightly and heads straight for them, and instinctively duck as the sleigh rockets overhead, to Nicholas's fading, Doppler-shifted yelp;

NICHOLAS (OFF SCREEN)
YEE - H-A-A-OH - HO - HO - HO!

MISTLETOE
That was not in the flight plan!

SHAMANKA
(suppressing a giggle)
Now we know why he insisted on the extra
nineteen seconds for take off!

INT / EXT. THE SPEEDING SLEIGH. HIGH IN THE ARCTIC SKY.

Nicholas reads sack number 1's label; 'Tuktoyaktuk, Inuvik'. He checks the compass. On his right, the sun clears the horizon in a reverse sunrise due west. He turns to chase it, keeping the sleigh in the Earth's penumbral dusk.

He stops on the roof of the first of an arctic hamlet of low, wooden houses - just as the sun is setting locally. Slinging the same sack over his back, he jumps down the chimney, which is broad enough to fit him. In moments he bounces out again to the next rooftop. The chimney is a narrow stove pipe. He becomes swirling, Northern-lights-coloured snow and shimmers down it.

Moving almost too fast to see, he zips from chimney to chimney, briefly re-materialising on each roof to check gift labels. Soon the sack is empty and he's back to the sleigh, where the reindeer are already moving off as he boards.

The checks sack number 2 labelled, 'Gjoa Haven / Uqsuqtuuq', taps his nose and empty sack number 1 vanishes.

WIPE TO:

CHRISTMAS HAVEN DISPATCH ROOM.

This immense room is domed and spherical. Vents, open to the outside, keep the room at arctic temperature. Gifts slide out of

an archway at the dome's 'equator' and down a continuous terrace of smooth ice, which spirals down to the centre. Each circuit is shallower than the last so that the gifts don't accelerate. A team of elves in street crampons brush the ice here and there - like curling teams - to keep everything moving. Twelve long tables have teams of elves in thick woollen uniforms standing ready. A suspended gangway leads from the tables up to another - opposite - arch, for personnel access.

Sack number 1 re-materialises on table '1', which is laden with wrapped and labelled toys. The elves put them in and relabel the sack. Each toy is still attached to the letter sent to Nicholas. It is removed only once a toy goes in the sack, then immediately put, loose, into overhead vacuum tubes labelled 'ARCHIVE'.

An elf holding a cross between a firehose and ray-gun fires coruscating sparkles at the sack - which disappears.

WIPE TO:

INT. / EXT. THE SPEEDING SLEIGH.

Sack 1 materialises in its number-matched place. As he steers the sleigh for another landing, Nicholas is already lifting sack 7, labelled, 'Cambridge Bay / Iqaluktuuttiaq'.

FADE TO:

TROPICAL FOREST OVERLOOKING OCEAN. DUSK.

On screen we read 'Christmas Island. National Park'.

The sleigh is parked in a small clearing. Nicholas is leaning against a palm tree finishing a mince pie. The reindeer are out of harness, foraging. Nicholas checks his pocketwatch.

NICHOLAS

I'll have to bring Shamanka here on holiday
boys 'n' girls. Time's up! Our next rest-
stop is Navidad, Chile.

The reindeer trot eagerly back to there positions.

SNOWY FOREST ROAD JUST OUTSIDE WOLFTHURSHOF. MIDNIGHT.

The sleigh lands, coasting to a smooth stop on the road.

NICHOLAS

(to the reindeer)
Ah, nostalgia, what could be more
Christmassy? Just here, I promised myself
I'd do it the old-fashioned way.

Nicholas swings the next sack on his back and walks into town.

WOLFTHURSHOF. BACK GARDEN IN A QUIET SIDE STREET.

The garden outhouse is Bardulf and Solruna's old cabin, now blackened by age and tar. Nicholas is quietly trying the back door of the main dwelling. Unable to get in conventionally, he taps his nose and wisps onto the roof.

INT. CHRISTMAS DECORATED LIVING ROOM.

By the Christmas tree, Nicholas takes a gift from his sack and checks its label. He lifts a teary smile to the heavens.

NICHOLAS
Agatha Holzändler! Meaning, 'good' -
'Wood-trader'. Bardulf old friend, your
descendants still live here!

BACK GARDEN.

In deepest shadow Krampus's bestial eyes glow up at the roof.

KRAMPUS
It was here that you tricked me. Now
though, *now-*

Nicholas leaps down with a MUFFLED THUD. He walks to the next house. Krampus sneaks behind.

FOREST ROAD OUTSIDE WOLFTHURSHOF.

Still shadowed by Krampus, Nicholas arrives back at the sleigh and misunderstands why the reindeer are skittish.

NICHOLAS
You're safe. The townsfolk hunted out the
wolves and bears here long ago.

Unseen by Nicholas, at the exact moment he slings the empty sack into the sleigh's hold, a dark wisp shoots from the shadows into the sack's mouth.

Nicholas taps his nose and the sack vanishes as before.

CHRISTMAS HAVEN DISPATCH ROOM.

The sack appears on a sorting table. Holly is the one to open it and a shadow bolts out, forming into Krampus on the table.

HOLLY
YOU!

The Elves are terrified as Krampus starts kicking at and stamping on toys. He tears off wrappings with his teeth and claws,

KRAMPUS
(laughing maniacally)
Ah-ha ah-ha!
'You will not meddle with the gifts I
leave!'.
Ten Centuries cramped! Then you released me
only to hem me in another nine. 'You will
not meddle with the gifts I leave!', But
you have not yet *left* these gifts 'Saint'!

Holly bravely tries to stop Krampus, who slashes at her with his claws and smokes away to another part of the room. The elves now clamber to rescue toys while staying out of his path.

Mistletoe, nose in a clipboard, enters from the gangway arch, looks up angrily at the sound of bedlam, blanches, and retreats speedily the way he came.

Holly struggles up to her feet, her clothes ripped but unblooded.

HOLLY

(Shouting)

I know this beast - don't antagonise it!
Protect *yourselves* - more *toys* can be made!

As the last elves retreat. Krampus, robbed of the energy of others' terror, slows down.

FADE OUT. FADE IN:

Krampus stands alone, chest heaving, amid his carnage.

Mistletoe enters, breathless, speaking over his shoulder.

MISTLETOE

I didn't know who else to call!

Shamanka is hot on his heels.

KRAMPUS.

The Captor, reborn!

SHAMANKA.

How do I know you!

Krampus cowers back, then stands tall.

KRAMPUS

No. You're not the-

(sneering)

- '*holy*' woman who imprisoned me, just an echo in time. I do not fear *you*.

Shamanka stands rooted, the faint sparkle of magic at her finger tips and in her eyes.

SHAMANKA

(dead level)

I am a healer, '*Clawed One*'. Yes, somehow I know your true name -

Is a healer not also a holy woman?

Krampus looks worried, crouches to pounce on her, but is unable.

KRAMPUS

I need no healer, only vengeance.

Shamanka looks at Krampus's handiwork. Mistletoe is terrified.

SHAMANKA

People seek vengeance in anger at what they cannot heal in themselves. Will any revenge ever be enough for you?

Krampus looks confused, then rallies.

KRAMPUS

(crowing hysterically)

Word tricks! I am goblin. It is my nature -
denied me two thousand years! I - *will* -
not - change! I - *will* - rip!

SHAMANKA

If you *could* heal yourself, you would *still*
do as you want, but -
(Beat)
- what you want would change, to something
less burdensome. *Let me heal you.*

KRAMPUS

I - I *cannot* change! A Goblin is fear.

SHAMANKA

Change how others see you. All you must ask
for is forgiveness.

Trembling, Krampus's powerful shoulders sag. He buries his face
in his hands and wrenches words from forgotten depths.

KRAMPUS

I - do - want - that - thing.

SHAMANKA

Then I do forgive you.

Amazed, then understanding, Mistletoe nods his head.

MISTLETOE

Poor creature, you couldn't help it. Not
looking like *that!* We'll *all* forgive you.

Mistletoe flinches as Krampus beats his own chest and howls,
sinking to his knees.

KRAMPUS

I have done much harm, *much* harm. But now -
now I want - yes - I feel - want - to -
help!

Krampus looks around him, then at his own claws.

KRAMPUS (CONT'D)

I cannot fix these broken things. I cannot
change that I *am* goblin. Goblins are made
to rip not mend.

MISTLETOE

Okay. So how about we get you home, where
you can begin a new life -scaring the
wickedest children into being good!

KRAMPUS

That is -
(beat)
- acceptable.

SHAMANKA

It's also what Nicholas told you all along.

EXT / INT. THE SLEIGH. HIGH IN THE NIGHT SKY.

Nicholas looks worried at the empty hold and the last empty sack in his hand. He speaks to the reindeer.

NICHOLAS

That's all the sacks we had. We'll fall behind. If only I could get a message - wait!

He pulls the almanac from the glove compartment, tears out the back page and gets a fountain pen from his waistcoat.

He writes a message; 'Over Russia! No presents! Everything alright there?' pops it in the last sack and taps his nose. The sack vanishes.

Tense moments pass then a sack pops into being at the rear of the hold, then more, working forward until all twelve are back. Relieved, Nicholas starts the sleigh's next descent.

Behind him Krampus's hairy arm rises out of the nearest sack's neck and grabs his elbow.

NICHOLAS

Yule's bells!

Nicholas, startled, drops the reins. The sleigh spirals into a dive.

While Nicholas struggles to regain the violently flapping reins, Shamanka's arm appears from the sack next to Krampus's and guides his arm to her sack. Each arm starts working on unknotting the other's sack. In weightless freefall, Nicholas boggles at this surrealness and almost forgets to recover the reins.

As he looks to get his bearings, a wall of thick fog races towards them. It spans the whole sky. There are weird dark star shapes in it.

NICHOLAS

(alarmed)
Treetops! Not cloud - GROUND!

He pulls up as sharp as he dares. Everything goes from weightless to too many Gees in an instant. He struggles to stay upright.

The sleigh, still levelling off, plummets into the fog and the runners clip the tops of pine trees. In the hold Shamanka and Krampus, still half way out of their sacks, are bounced around.

By sheer skill Nicholas steers between the trees that loom last moment from the thick fog. Spotting a relatively clear part of the canopy Nicholas plunges the sleigh below into the undergrowth, where the bushes snag hooves and runners alike, decelerating them in a pile of toppled BELLOWING reindeer and entangled SHOUTING people.

Nicholas is the first to recover his senses and turns to the extraordinary sight of Shamanka and Krampus piled in one corner of the hold, fighting their way from under toy sacks.

NICHOLAS
What in blazing borealis was all that
about!?

SHAMANKA
It was quicker to explain in person. A
lot's happened!

Nicholas looks askance at Krampus.

NICHOLAS
Who'd have thought it!

FADE TO:

EXT / INT. THE SLEIGH. FOREST. DEEP FOG. NIGHT.

Nicholas, Shamanka, Krampus and all the reindeer are now on their feet. No one is hurt. Krampus is using his immense strength to help Nicholas right the sleigh.

NICHOLAS
(to Krampus)
- and it was all you needed, all along?
(beat)
I failed you. I never even guessed.

KRAMPUS
I was never good at talking feelings.
Except fear. I *am* goblin.

Nicholas wrinkles his nose.

NICHOLAS
That is clear.

Krampus LAUGHS. It's impossible to tell with mirth or malice.

SHAMANKA
You see! People are usually alright if you
get to know them!

Nicholas starts checking the cockpit over.

NICHOLAS
(muttering to himself)
At least when they're down wind.
(aloud)
We need to catch up a lot. Sorry, Krampus,
there's isn't time to get you home yet.

KRAMPUS
No need. Now I am freed by my own will. I
go anywhere at will.

Krampus smokes away and reforms at the edge of the fog, facing them.

NICHOLAS
Not *completely* free. We had an agreement:
Your native Germania and -

KRAMPUS

- and I keep it, my word has meaning now.
Fare well, saint. You too, healer. Look for
me next Christmas!

Krampus grins (it doesn't improve his looks) turns and vanishes.

In the distance wolves start to HOWL. The reindeer skitter.

NICHOLAS

We're not out of the woods yet. The
sextant's gone, Shamanka! I have no idea
where we are. I really thought I'd planned
for anything, but back home we never get
such fogs. I daren't take off!

Cupid snorts and shies as a shadow looms out of the fog. But it's
only another reindeer. A young, antlerless male, smaller than the
sleigh team, limps into view.

SHAMANKA

How did you find us in *this* I wonder?

Shamanka makes reindeer gestures and snorts.

The new reindeer snorts and lifts its muzzle.

Shamanka continues, matching reindeer language to her words;

SHAMANKA

Nicholas, he found us by smell.

NICHOLAS

With Krampus around, anyone could!

SHAMANKA

Is that your gift, little friend? An
exceptional nose? And a bright mind to use
it! Could you find the next town in this
pea-souper? Even through forest?

The reindeer nods its head.

NICHOLAS

You could do with some love. Help us back
on track and we'll feed you up.

SHAMANKA

- and I'll heal that leg.

The sound of wolves is getting closer. Nicholas lifts the little
reindeer into the hold.

NICHOLAS

Just point with your nose and well *all* get
out of here. Giddy up girls-n-boys!

As Nicholas twitches the reins, the Alpha wolf appears out of the
fog right in front of them. The wolf pack follows.

Donder and Blitzen, in the lead, lower their antlers, lock them
together and charge, tossing the alpha wolf aside roughly.

SHAMANKA

It's understandable they're a bit cranky
right now!

The other wolves hesitate before giving chase, snapping at the reindeer's hooves as they flash pass. Soon the wolves fall behind the accelerating sleight.

EXT / INT. THE SLEIGH. HIGH ABOVE THE FOG.

Nicholas steers by the stars. Shamanka tends the new reindeer's leg, covers it with a blanket and joins Nicholas in the cockpit.

NICHOLAS

Thrilling isn't it!

SHAMANKA

Nothing about this night has changed my
views on flying!

NICHOLAS

(quickly changing subject)
So - a-a-h - what of our new friend?

SHAMANKA

His herd call him Famous as The Wolf,
because his sense of smell's even better
than the wolves that hunt them. He barely
escaped all the same. They got his parents,
poor mite. He needs a new family now.

NICHOLAS

Us! That nose'll earn him his keep. Oh! -in
Old Germanic, *Rudolph* Means, 'famous wolf'.
Would he mind being called that if we're
adopting him? Easier to remember in flight.
A proud name. He'll go down in history.

EXT / INT. THE SLEIGH. OVER THE ARCTIC. SUNRISE.

On screen we read, 'Christmas Morning'.

The sleigh speeds west with the rising sun shining behind.

Turning north, Nicholas begins the descent to Christmas Haven,
plunging the sleigh back into darkness.

NICHOLAS

That was cutting it too fine. But what an
adventure! Are you all OK?

The Reindeer - including Rudolph - toss their antlers in a 'yes'.

Wide-eyed, Shamanka nods, gripping the cockpit, white-knuckled.

EXT. NEAR END OF RUNWAY TO CHRISTMAS HAVEN. DAWN

Hurrying to join the other Head Elves looking out with binoculars
and telescopes, Mistletoe tuts;

MISTLETOE

I calculate they were visible in daylight
for nineteen minutes!

SOOTY PETE

Not over people.

HOLLY

(letting out a pent-up breath)
He looks very jolly; it went well. They
definitely got noticed 'cause the mail
room's already getting thank you letters!
We were right to build big.

In the distant sky a comet resolves into the approaching sleigh
and in mere moments it's sliding to a halt in front of the elves.

Shamanka can't get onto the firm ice quick enough.

NICHOLAS

You were amazing, dearest. You're welcome
on the Big Ride every year.

SHAMANKA

I prefer my reindeer on the ground, thanks.
I'll do *my* flying in spirit.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

All seen from within the sleigh in flight, during which the last
costume differences between Nicholas and the department store
Father Christmas vanish.

- A) Nicholas sets off in the sleigh, pulled by *nine*
reindeer [from now on] with Rudolph taking point.
- B) Nicholas looks down with mixed amazement and concern at
the British Industrial revolution.
- C) Nicholas looks down poignantly at the trenches of WWI
where British and German soldiers are playing football.
- D) Nicholas looks approvingly as he flies over NATO
headquarters in Brussels.

FADE TO:

INT. TOY DEPARTMENT SANTA'S GROTTO. PRESENT DAY.

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS

- so that's my full story, Uri. Few outside
Christmas Haven have ever heard it.

Nicholas/Father Christmas takes a hand-carved angel from his
sack. With the silver-handled knife we saw long ago he shaves a
little off one of the wings.

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS (CONT'D)

There, perfect! I made this for you Uri.
Short for 'Uriel'. Also God's archangel of
truth and wisdom. Did you know that?

URI

(derisive)

So? what? - of all the Santa's in all the toy shops in all the world, you had to walk into mine? But if you're the real deal, how come you're in a cardboard grotto with fake snow *right now* - but no one's s'posed to see you on Christmas Night?

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS

I'm here now because meeting children *reminds me of my purpose*. But otherwise; faith makes things happen, Uri. That's why I mustn't be seen on the Big Ride. A whole world believing without seeing boosts Christmas Spirit with extra magic - for one special day.

Nicholas/Father Christmas consults his Yule-o-meter and nods knowingly.

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS (CONT'D)

I haven't seen you since you were ten, because you wouldn't have it. You had this idea that becoming adult meant thinking magic is childish, as if casting off wonder is a good thing! But before you leave childhood completely behind, give me this last chance to steer you from a tragic life.

URI

My life ain't tragic!

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS

Oh? You're too young for prison -
(beat)
-for now. Yet you're mopping floors as your Community Sentence - for vandalism done to please your gang of so-called 'friends'.

URI

Oi! That's confidential! Bloody manager!

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS

She's a good woman who wouldn't break a confidence. You know that because she gave you a chance when no one would employ you. So think on this please Uri: Use your natural gifts to raise up, not to destroy. Then, if you *do* change - well - my lovely wife had another brilliant idea, The Yuletarian Order.

URI

Sounds like a cult!

Nicholas/Father Christmas peers sternly over his glasses at Uri.

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS

Say's the gang member!

In a few decades you will have a fine white beard like your great grandfather did, and then - if you've lived well - I'll return to invite you into the, 'Yuletarian Order of Saint Nicholas'. You'd be among the honoured - *and honourable* - few who stand in for me. Even I cannot be *everywhere*.

(beat)

A gang *worth* joining!

Uri looks briefly excited then resumes his tough-guy act.

URI

I ain't seen no actual proof your 'Christmas spirit' can work real magic.

Nicholas/Father Christmas taps his nose and winks. Uri doesn't notice that through the windows fluffy snowfall begins.

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS

This night was never about you believing in me. I want you to believe in the good in *yourself*, Uri.

Nicholas/Father Christmas rises to leave.

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS (CONT'D)

There's much to do and I really must fly. Think on what I said, and, *Merry Christmas!*

Uri cannot help smiling.

URI

Yeah, yeah! Merry Christmas mate!

EXT. LONDON STREET. LATE EVENING.

Uri, walking through the thickening snow, notices an OLD LADY leaving a late-open corner-shop.

A bus rumbles past, she looks up -

OLD LADY

Blow it! Missed the last bus!

- and, distracted, she fumbles putting her purse back in her handbag. The purse falls silently, unnoticed, on the snow as she starts the long trudge home.

Uri quietly picks it up and looks in it.

URI

Coo, ninety quid!

He smiles, takes the notes out, drops the purse and turns to walk away. Putting the notes in his pocket he finds the angel. His smile becomes a scowl.

Close Up. A hand picks up the purse.

It's Uri's. He puts the money back and chases the Old Lady.

URI

Oi, Granny!

She looks frightened. Uri slows down.

URI (CONT'D)

Er - I mean - excuse me madam? I believe you dropped this.

He gives her the purse.

OLD LADY

Oh gawd, yes! Thank you! That was all what's left 'til pension day. *And* me bus pass too! Round here? - most'd've just taken it!

(beat)

You're one of the good-uns, though!

Uri rubs the back of his neck.

URI

(rueful)

Tryin' to be. Look, this place gets rough at night. You've missed the last bus haven't ya? Want me ta walk you home safe?

INT. NIGHT. NICHOLAS AND SHAMANKA'S COSY, AIRY LIVING ROOM.

The floor is lime-washed timber. The walls pale blue. All the fittings and furniture are the now familiar folky, red, green, white and gold. Shamanka is watering a magnificent, decorated Christmas tree in a pot in the bay windows, through which we see Christmas Haven. Holly, Mistletoe, Tufty and Ivaldi are sat at a table playing board games. Sooty is playing Minecraft.

Nicholas/Father Christmas clomps in, stamping clean snow off his boots in the doorway. All eyes turn to him.

SHAMANKA

Well?

Nicholas/Father Christmas taps his nose and smiles broadly.

NICHOLAS/FATHER CHRISTMAS

He believes again - in himself.

The elves CHEER and toss their hats in the air. Nicholas and Shamanka look with love into each other's eyes, then kiss.

FADE OUT:

THE END.