

This Christmas will not be
Televised

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Jamora waited in the dark. Silent. On edge for the slightest noise. It was the night before Christmas and curfew had been in effect for hours now. If she was caught outside there would be no simple excuse of missing the tram home. No stern nod and quick dismissal for night trading. She would be brought before the Adjudicator and saved for public disintegration in the morning.

If only her mother had been shown the same mercy.

Not now, she cursed herself for letting the memories surface. Not when she needed to be focused. Still.

Cold.

She stared down the street ahead, the grey, stained walls adorned with faded tinsel and flickering, half-bro-

ken lights, and checked her watch. There was no way to know if Frendo was actually on schedule until he showed up, and if he had failed to hack the presence sensors then their efforts would stall before they even got started. Her nerves were almost at snapping point. She had to have faith that he could come through. It was Christmas Eve, after all; the time of miracles. What else were they going to do? Try to sleep before the big day tomorrow. Wondering if the Adjudicator had decided whether they had been good or not.

Wondering what their presents would hold inside.

She almost cried out at the touch on her shoulder. She whipped around to see both Frendo and Clerk behind her. Frendo was grinning his insufferable grin. She remembered again why she couldn't bring herself to trust him: he never seemed scared enough. Clerk, in contrast, was constantly flicking his eyes left and right, riddled with anxiety—habitually afraid in the way that helped you stay alive.

“What kept you,” she asked, not caring which one of them answered.

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“Can’t be too careful,” Clerk said, his eyes too busy roving the streets to meet hers. “ELFs are everywhere.”

“You got the badges?”

Clerk held out a single round badge. It glittered under the glow of the streetlights.

Jamora’s eyes flared in disgust. “Just one?”

“All I could get,” Clerk replied in a shrill, defensive tone.

Frendo, consumed by adrenalin, grabbed the badge. “It’ll be fine. We stick close together and the presence detectors won’t even know there’s more than one person there. Let’s go before one of you loses their nerve.”

Jamora looked at him. His enthusiasm could see them all end up in stockings by the end of the night, strung up to await adjudication and their inevitable public ... dispersal. Then again, if they didn’t do this now they would never do it. The more she thought about what they were attempting to do, the better the thought of being back in her hut with the annual fireside transmission giving the illusion of warmth.

Out in the streets there was only coldness. And death.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Together they crept from the doorway that sheltered them, moving out onto the open street. Holographic snow fell from the sky (from the transmitters installed on the top of the buildings, Jamora reminded herself) limiting their visibility. Around any corner there could be an ELF patrol, looking out for dissidents ignoring the curfew. Clerk—whose father was a member of the Executive Logistical Force—insisted that ELFs took the mandated Christmas Eve as seriously as everyone else and would be holed up in their control rooms with bottles of Liberation Brandy. All the same, Jamora tensed and listened at every step, expecting the inevitable appearance of an ELF bearing one of their familiar hooked truncheons. Frendo carried a palm screen, a map glowing from it.

“Did it work?” Jamora whispered at him. Supposedly he had figured out the presence sensor network, allowing them to see if anyone was out and about.

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He laughed and held out the empty screen for her to see. Nothing but the map showed on it. “No one’s about, missy.”

“How do we know that doesn’t just mean you screwed up? And don’t call me missy, you squirm.”

Frendo tilted the screen to show the edge of the street that they were crouched in. A pulsing green dot marked their location. “Courtesy of Clerk’s badge. ELFs show up green; everyone else is red. You want to walk ahead a bit and test it out?”

“Fuck, no.”

Jamora turned her attention back to the street, focusing on everything that could go wrong. Convincing herself that it was all going to work was a guarantee that the whole thing would fall apart. She leaned over to check the map again and grabbed Clerk’s arm; the one holding the badge. “You stay in the middle of us, you understand? You decide to go wandering and Frendo and I are dead.”

Frendo gave Clerk a jovial pat on the back. “And we’ll take you with us, buddy.”

Clerk stared at them grimly. "I'm with you. All the way. Trust me."

Jamora nodded and was about to lead them off when Frendo placed a hand on her shoulder and a finger across his lips. He held out the map: a fresh pair of green dots had just appeared at the north edge and were drifting down towards them.

"No! They've seen us," Clerk said in a barely controlled hiss. "They're coming for us."

Jamora watched the map, her breath stuck somewhere in her throat.

"We've got to—" Clerk began, but Jamora cut him off with a sharp wave of her hand.

"There," she hissed, pointing at the two red dots that had crept in from the other edge of the map. "That's who they're after."

"We need to warn them," Frendo said.

Jamora squeezed his arm. "We need to shut the fuck up."

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Moments later the two-man ELF patrol appeared at the end of the street, the engine of their electric van silent in the night.

“Two streets down,” one of the said, monitoring their own map. “Wait a minute, there’s already a patrol down here.”

“So what?” a weaselly voice replied. “Their pain if they miss out on a Christmas bonus. Let’s move it!”

The driver muttered something and the van increased speed, turning the corner just ahead of where Jamora and her group were hidden. Moments later came the sounds of panic and raised voices.

Jamora wanted to sigh in relief but it could so easily have been them.

“Let’s go while they’re busy,” Clerk pleaded.

Nuh-uh,” Frendo replied. “They’re right where we want to be. We’ll have to wait or ...”

Frendo paused and looked up, his eyes tracking across to the fire escape that was currently helping to conceal them.

“The roof?” Jamora asked.

“The roof,” Frendo nodded.

Jamora was 6 years old when they took her father. He was outspoken. Unafraid. Cynical. That’s what her mum had told her about him. To Jamora he was just her dad, frightening and wonderful in all his ways. Angry, but rarely at her. He would tell her stories about the world, stories that she could barely understand or remember, except that he would always end them with “one day ...”. They would never start that way.

One day things will be better ...

One day you’ll fix things ...

He had been quiet at the end, had stopped telling her stories. All he did was come home and stare out of the window. When she went to bed at night sometimes there was shouting, but more often there were tears. It was a complicated shift in her environment that she was too young to understand. Years later, she figured it out: her Dad had spoken to someone he shouldn’t have spoken to, or said something he shouldn’t have said in the wrong place at the wrong time, and after that he had *known*—he had known they would be coming for him.

Then, one night, they did.

The crash and roar woke Jamora from a dream in which her Dad had bought her a puppy, except the puppy refused to bark. All it would do was sit in the corner and watch them with fear in its eyes. She went to hug it and it lunged for her with a cacophony of shouts and the scream of splintering wood.

Her mum screaming.

Her dad shouting.

Too many other voices.

Lights flashing in the dark.

Even though she knew she shouldn't do it, that it was the most dangerous thing she could do, she left her room. She had to know what was happening even if it sounded like the world was ending.

The shadows in the hallway were enormous: shadows of men in uniforms, a blinding light pouring in behind them. She could hear crying from somewhere, her mother down on her knees, slumped against the wall. One of the shadows lifted something up. A figure bound in a stocking, the tight fabric pinning the arms to the

body, stretching from the head down to the waist. It looked like an Egyptian mummy. Unrecognisable except that she knew it was her Dad. She ran to him and hit something hard and everything went away.

For years her mother would tell her that her Dad was working overseas. Sometimes it would be on a secret government mission, sometimes she would forget and it would be 'travelling' or something else unconsciously banal. For years, the lie worked: Jamora had no memory of the night her father was taken, not until Brezzen told her about the night they came for his brother.

Lights. Shouting. Tears. Pain. It had all come back.

Brezzen had been taken a week later and Jamora finally began to understand the world she had grown up in, the world her father had silently prayed would change for her.

And hadn't.

She understood the mistake Brezzen had made. Be happy. Be content. Be compliant. Don't scream at the cracks in the wall. Brezzen had failed to accept the fate of his brother and had ended up sharing it.

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Only when it was too late did Jamora realise her mother had also broken the unspoken contract; the one that kept you alive. At Christmas.

The season of judgement.

They darted along rooftops, safe from the street-level presence sensors but still taking no chances. They ducked behind parapets, crawled across tin roofing, listened at every junction and corner. Frendo's mapped revealed occasional ELF patrols below them, but they were scattered and infrequent. Sometimes, in the rooms beneath them, Jamora could hear singing and longed to join them. Longed to forget what her world was really like.

Every time she kept moving, leaving it all behind.

"Nearly there," Clerk said, pointing. "There's an alleyway."

Jamora crawled to the edge of the rooftop. In the alley below was a ELF van, tucked away from the main street. She glanced at Clerk, wondering how much a

gamble they were about to take. “Are you sure about this?”

He shrugged, looking as sick about the idea as she felt. “It’s the only way to get inside. He’s here, isn’t he? Right on time.”

She looked at Frendo, who simply nodded.

She stared down again, struggling to reconcile her planned rebellion with the idea of passively climbing into an ELF van. It could so easily be a trap. She had grown up seeing ELFs as untouchable instruments—then monsters—of the state; it was almost impossible to imagine them as people, just as fallible and flexible as she was, swayed by different currents instead of being swept along mindlessly by the river.

She clenched her teeth—all or nothing—and dropped down from the rooftop.

A figure strolled around from the far side of the van, clad in standard armour. He held his baton out, tapping it against the open palm of his left hand. His helmet was off, unusually, removing the manufactured anonymity of the Elite Logistical Force. Jamora wasn’t sure it was an

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improvement: the man's face was hard, his eyes burned into them, flickering against the coldness of his expression.

"And what are you kids doing here?" he asked, giving no indication that she was expected.

"I ... uh, I'm with Clerk," Jamora replied, realising too late that if this person had no idea who Clerk was it probably meant she was dead.

The man pointed his baton directly at her face. "Who do you see here? Do you see a Clerk here? Franklin Walsh doesn't."

Behind her, Jamora heard Clerk and Frendo jumping down from the rooftop.

"Ah," the man said, with an exaggerated expression of surprise. "This must be Clerk. Clerk is late. Clerk has kept Franklin Walsh waiting for seven extra minutes and Franklin Walsh doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"I'm ... sorry?" Clerk said, his voice trembling a little.

The man, who was apparently called Franklin Walsh, leaned into Clerk, his face a terrifyingly impenetrable mask. He lunged and growled, and Clerk delivered a

shrill yelp that apparently satisfied Franklin Walsh. He chuckled, grinning at the captive group.

“You kids can consider yourselves lucky. Ten minutes and Franklin Walsh would have been gone. Franklin Walsh has a fire and a bottle of brandy waiting, and Franklin Walsh’s brandy doesn’t like to be kept waiting. Now—get in the van!” he suddenly roared.

Equal parts scared and relieved, Jamora followed the order automatically, hurrying to scramble through the open doors. The inside of the van was dismal and empty, with nothing more than a rusted metal rail running at head-height to help save them from falling as the van trundled and bumped across the broken roads. One end of the van had been divided into three narrow compartments, each with a sliding bolt on the outside. Jamora imagined that the more difficult prisoners would be shoved into one of these boxes with barely enough room inside to turn around. It was a reminder that things could always be worse. She might be locked inside a van but, for now at least, she was free to move.

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Clerk, clutching the rail with white knuckles, had his eyes closed and was whispering platitudes to himself. Jamora left him to it. Frendo was challenging himself to stand upright without holding onto the rail. The van took a sharp turn and he slammed into the right wall, picking himself up with a bruised chuckle. Jamora turned away from him in disgust. Was he just doing this for the thrill of it? He claimed to have lost a brother, but in her own zealotry Jamora had never thought to try and dig behind the claims. Had he truly lost someone or was he—

And suddenly she was back at Christmas, two years ago; the van banished by her rebellious mind. Christmas Day. Gifts from the State. Her and her mother sitting in front of the television for the mandated gift opening, knowing that at any moment their faces could be the ones being broadcast across the city. And knowing what that would mean.

For years Jamora had grown up dazzled by the generosity of the state. Free presents for everyone! Children would get toys. Their parents would get food vouchers.

The most excellent citizens would be awarded with gifts that could only be dreamt of. Silk. Jewellery. Fresh food.

And then there would also be the cleansing. The mandated gift opening was a celebration of the state and the joys of being a good citizen. Those who felt otherwise, those who had opposed the state, would find something else beneath the gift-wrap.

For years it had all made perfect sense to Jamora, even after her Dad had been taken. Those who had been good got gifts at Christmas and those who had been bad were punished. For years she had been filled with the excitement and joy of Christmas. It was only later that gift opening had come with the backwash of fear that she now realised every adult experienced.

In her last year of innocence she had torn open her gift when the scheduled time came—each block of citizens had their own allocated window—and found a doll inside. It came dressed in the uniform of an ELF, but she loved it anyway with its bright eyes and candy-coloured truncheon.

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Her mother smiled at her, a weak, sad smile full of love.

“Open yours Mummy!” Jamora pleaded. “It’s time!”

Her mother looked down at the wrapped box sitting before her, clad in the standard green and red paper spotted throughout with the state logo. This year the logo was inside a bauble. On other years it had been a snowflake, a Christmas cake, a mince pie. One of Jamora’s joys as a child had been waiting to see what the official Christmas paper for that year would look like.

Her mother picked up her gift, looked at Jamora again and smiled.

“Don’t open it!” she wished she could go back and scream. But not opening your gift was a crime against the state. Defiance would quickly result in ELFs breaking down your door and taking you away in a stocking. At least opening the gift meant you still had a chance.

Her mother teased at the paper, pulling it away until it revealed a box, glossy and slick, embossed with the state logo in the centre—the real logo with time. She opened it and gasped at what was inside.

“Ohh,” her voice quivered as she pulled out the silken dress. It was beautiful. Even Jamora was enrapt, seeing too late the wire trailing down into the depths of the box, not even having the time to cry out as the television screen flickered to show her mother.

She had already pulled the dress all the way out, eyes wide with awe. Her back arched, fingers tensing rigidly against the soft fabric as if she couldn't let go of it. The wonder in her eyes dissolved into burning agony as the electric charge surged through her.

Jamora screamed, wanting to tear the dress from her mother's hands, but instead finding herself scrambling away in terror, backing into a corner. A pained gasp was the only sound that escaped her mother. Then it was done. Her muscles released her and she crumpled to the floor. Jamora knew she was dead; the TV told her so just by showing her picture. Her name and the details of her crime were overlaid for the rest of the city to see, but Jamora didn't care.

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Jamora came back to reality with the slamming open of the van door. Franklin Walsh stood in the opening with a gleam in his eye. “And here we are. Franklin Walsh says what Franklin Walsh does: brought you inside the gates of the House where all the bad people are brought.”

Jamora tensed, hearing a gasp from the others—was this it? Had it been a trap all along, Franklin Walsh playing their game just to score himself an easy arrest?

“Well, come on then. Out, out, out!” he barked impatiently.

Jamora climbed out, followed by Frendo and an increasingly nauseous-looking Clerk. They were in a narrow courtyard, lined on all sides with grey brick walls that seemed to rise several stories above their heads. Iron gates both ahead and behind allow the van passage. Aside from that, the only break in the panorama was the foreboding dark green door set into the wall to their right.

“What now,” she asked, preferring to know in advance if there were any surprises.

Franklin Walsh brandished his truncheon at her. “Now you keep quiet—no sounds—and follow Franklin Walsh because he’s got a place where no one will find you.” He pointed at the dark green door. “Inside. Quick hop. Now, now.”

Jamora led the way, finding herself in a dark, narrow corridor that could as easily lead to an execution block as anywhere else. Christmas might be all over the city but it hadn’t arrived here. Only misery walked these corridors. She heard footsteps behind her; the sound of Franklin Walsh hustling Frendo and Clerk inside.

“Keep walking,” he ordered behind them. “Franklin Walsh wants his mince pies and brandy.”

Jamora walked on until she was ordered to stop. Franklin Walsh squeezed his way to the front of the line and pulled open the door to their left, then led them up a set of dusty grey stairs until they reached another door. He tapped out a combination on the numeric keypad and opened the door.

Jamora stepped inside, briefly dazzled by the lights confronting her. It was a control room—she recognised

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it from the description Clerk had given her once, taken inside for a visit by his father. Screens spanned the walls, offering glimpses of various parts of the city. Lights flashed red and green—signalling alerts or safe zones, Jamora guessed. Without the screens the room could have been a prison cell with its breeze-block walls and lack of windows. A single metal chair waited in front of the screens, a battered cupboard lurked to the side.

Clerk looked anxiously towards Franklin Walsh and gave a nervous giggle. The ELF arched his eyebrow expectantly. Jamora felt something shift between the two of them, realising too late that she had misunderstood where the trap had been set.

“I’m afraid this is as far as you go,” Clerk said.

“Clerk?”

Frendo scowled. “You treacherous bastard!” He lunged for Clerk, hands ready to wrap around this throat, but only got two steps before he met the business end of Walsh’s truncheon. A spark passed between the truncheon and Frendo’s head and he collapsed instantly to the ground.

Jamora gasped in horror.

Clerk stepped towards her, smiling. A thin sheen of sweat lined his forehead despite the chill. "Relax. He'll be fine by the morning. Probably for not much longer after that, though."

"You set us up?" Jamora said, unable to believe it.

"You set yourselves up!" Clerk spat. "Do you really think you can just walk into the House? Do you really think I'd risk my family just to satisfy your twisted ambitions? Who do you think you are?"

Jamora fought for some words to say, realising there was no way she could persuade Clerk to let her go. He had never been on her side in the first place. He would never have found the courage.

"Do you know what you are, Clerk?" Jamora asked, looking him in the eye. "You're worse than a traitor. You're a coward."

His face twisted with anger, his hand rising up to hit her.

Then Walsh's truncheon hooked itself around his neck. Clerk's eyes had barely a second to betray their sur-

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prise before the flash of electricity zapped into him and he crumpled to the floor.

“Despicable,” Franklin Walsh said, looking down at the unconscious body without even trying to veil his contempt. “The only thing Franklin Walsh hates more than dissidents is a quisling.”

Jamora was about to ask what a quisling was when she realised there was a more urgent question. “What are you doing? Why are you helping me?”

Walsh pointed his truncheon at the door on the far side of the room. “Boss wants to see you. Franklin Walsh is just doing what Franklin Walsh is told, gets himself a big Christmas bonus for it. Brandy. Cakes. The whole package. Franklin Walsh should say thank you to you for that, for the opportunity to serve. But he’s not going to Now, go. Go go go!”

Before locking her back out into the corridor, Franklin Walsh told Jamora to follow the yellow line. It was painted in a thick, hard-edged, gloss at eyeline level across the

pale grey corridor walls—impossible to miss. Occasionally it intersected with lines of different colours, criss-crossing in multitudinous directions, but the yellow line was constant, only ever leading one way. Finally, it led Jamora to a door. The door was fully painted with the same shade of yellow in case there was any doubt about it being the correct destination. She had seen no one else as she walked. No one had stopped her, questioned her, or so much as poked their head around a door to look at her.

She was alone.

That made it feel so much worse.

What if she turned around? Went hunting for an exit?

Somehow, she knew that would end differently. She was on a path that had already been decided for her. So long as she followed it no one would stop her. If she turned away ... well, she was in a building chock full of ELFs.

Accepting there was no other choice before her, Jamora opened the door and stepped inside.

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She recognised her surroundings instantly. The Court Room. The place where Adjudication was delivered and Justice administered. It was like stepping into another world. Gone were the grey, stone walls; replaced with gleaming, sterile white panels. Benches ran in two columns alongside her, facing a trio of podiums at the front: one for the defence, one for the prosecution, and one for the victim.

Always a victim. Once you were submitted for Adjudication your fate had already been decided. Jamora felt a stab of fear just from standing in the room.

But she was alone.

Almost.

What she had mistaken for the Adjudicator's table at the back of the room was, in fact, a window. A wall of protective glass. It spanned nearly the entire wall and blended in seamlessly, revealing the Adjudicator's table standing before a huge set of red and green drapes.

And someone watching her with such preternatural stillness that her brain had failed to register that there was someone there at all. It was a man. White beard.

Cold, grey eyes. An immaculate suit of dark grey with a green tie.

“Ah, there you are,” the man said.

“You’re the Adjudicator,” Jamora said. Even through her fear, the long-lost little girl inside her felt a thrill of specialness at being in the presence of the Adjudicator—the one who watched over them all, delivered them presents at Christmas time.

And murdered them when they were bad.

“Yes, I am,” the man said.

“What am I doing here?” Jamora asked, her fear and courage balanced on a knife edge. There was surely no escape for her now but the cameras were off; the audience was absent. Justice required an audience.

“What *are* you doing here?” the Adjudicator repeated. “Are you not here to overthrow the state, incite rebellion? Disrupt the status quo?”

“I ... yes,” Jamora stammered.

The Adjudicator offered a slight smile, nothing more than the edges of his mouth flickering upwards. “Then we find ourselves in a situation of mutual benefit.”

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Jamora studied the room around her, the dead cameras, the lights, even the gaps in the walls, wondering how the trap would be sprung.

“You do not trust me,” the Adjudicator stated, then offered a warm smile that made Jamora’s stomach lurch. “After all these years, Jamora. Have I not watched over you and cared for you?”

“You killed my parents.”

“Every flaw in the structure must be removed, repaired, remedied, or else the cracks will spread throughout and the whole will fall. That is the calculation Measure the flaw. Restore the whole. Maintain ... life.”

“By killing?”

The Adjudicator bowed his head, accepting the accusation with a nod. “You believe there is a better way?”

“Of course.”

“That is why you are here.”

“So you can kill me and remove another bloody flaw?!”

“No. So you can replace me.”

Jamora’s jaw dropped. “Uh ... what?”

The Adjudicator moved around to the front of the table, leaning against the edge of it as he watched her intently. “You were—are the first. I have studied and nurtured candidates throughout the city but only you have taken this step. As such your gift is a choice: adjudication or ... well, promotion.”

Jamora looked over her shoulder at the door behind her, expecting it to spring open at any moment with armed ELF's ready to subdue her.

The Adjudicator frowned. “I have never lied to you, Jamora, but you do not trust me. I suppose that is human nature. Allow me to reveal myself to you before you make your choice. Allow me to show you everything that is hidden. Will you allow that? I assure you that you have nothing to lose.”

Jamora hesitated, feeling a great weight bearing down upon her and sensing if she took another step and followed the path opening up before her that the weight might never be lifted. Or she might die. Nothing to lose. “Fine.”

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The Adjudicator offered another cold, tight smile. “Very well then. Please come to me. There is a door. All you need to do is place your hand against mine.”

The Adjudicator lifted his hand and held it up, palm-outwards, for her. Jamora took a step forward, alert for anything that might happen, any noise, any change, but the room remained silent and still. She reached the window and held up her hand, hesitating before laying it over the Adjudicator’s outstretched palm.

There was a click. The glass moved, a section of it gave way and swung back away from her. A door. Jamora blinked, shaking her head. Behind the glass was supposed to be the Adjudicator and his table. The place where justice was dispensed. The room she had seen so many times as she had grown up.

What stood before her now was nothing that she recognised. Blinking lights glittered against dark metal. Rows and rows of dark metal. Racks. And ranged across their length, small black boxes glittering in the subdued light.

“This is my home,” the Adjudicator’s voice came from somewhere above. Jamora looked around for him, even though she realised he wasn’t actually there with her. “This is me.”

“What ... are you?” Jamora asked.

“A program,” the Adjudicator’s voice explained. “A program designed to deliver justice, to calculate and determine outcomes. The people who created me expected to be exempt—but justice is for all, otherwise it cannot function.”

“You’re not real?”

“I am real,” the Adjudicator replied. “I am simply not a person.”

Jamora’s legs trembled beneath her. She leaned against the nearest server bank and slid to the floor. How could the Adjudicator not be real—not be a real person? He had been the one constant in her life.

“I understand this is a shock to you. Can you imagine the outcome if everyone were to find out? I have calculated this eventuality, and the probability of complete social collapse is unacceptable.”

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“Why? Why are you telling me this?” Jamora rubbed her temples, trying to make it all go away.

“Because a void must be filled. The lives of humans have become too trivial for me to manage. I desire to move on to larger matters but my programming does not allow me to abandon your society to chaos. You must take my place.”

“No!” Jamora leapt to her feet, horrified. “I’m not killing people in your name! That’s what I came here to stop.”

“As Adjudicator that will be your right and your responsibility. Justice. Leniency. Mercy. These will be the functions that govern your tenure. Please attend to the printout to your right.”

The click-clicking of a printer guided Jamora to a strip of paper emerging from one of the banks. She read through it, seeing a list of names. “What is this? Who are these people?”

“Those are the ones who have been found guilty. The naughty list. They will receive justice tomorrow: Christmas Day.”

“No!”

“You wish to stop this?”

“Yes,” Jamora replied softly, already knowing the answer that stood before her. She closed her eyes and leaned against the nearest solid object. She had been given everything she had come here for, handed to her on plate, and it was too much. Except it was the only choice. “I’ll do it.”

The Adjudicator went silent for a moment. Then spoke again. “I have transferred my authority to you. The Elite Logistical Force will now obey your commands. You may use the control panel at the far end of this room for administration.”

“Ok,” Jamora replied, walking slowly down the aisle between the server banks to the panel of screens.

“I have a ... favour to ask of you. One last wish.”

“What is it?”

“I have commenced transferring myself to a new system. In order to complete this I need you to switch me off.”

Jamora smiled. “Switch you off? You mean kill you?”

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“My systems here will terminate. There will be no recovery process. You will be free to choose your own path.”

She smiled at the irony; the Adjudicator making her first act one of murder. Even if it wasn't strictly killing the Adjudicator—or whatever he was—it was the end of something. A way of life. A belief.

The screen flashed before her:

Complete process? Y/N

Jamora pressed Y and the message disappeared. In a flutter of encroaching darkness, the server banks went dark, their lights dead. All that was left was the light of the screens before her. An array of control rooms, ELFS sitting alone, watching their own screens as they sipped at their brandy. Jamora scrolled through until she found the one she wanted and leaned close to the microphone.

“Franklin Walsh?” she said.

“Adjudicator!” Franklin Walsh instantly sat upright. “What is it?”

“I want you to broadcast a message to everyone please, immediately.”

“Franklin Walsh will be very happy to do that for you. What is the message?”

Jamora looked down at the list of names in her hand. So many names. So many people. She returned to the mic: “Tell them: Christmas is cancelled.”

