

The Reason for the Season

(First Appeared in Escape Artists' Holiday Pack)

The naked man didn't look cold, standing in the snow. His pale ribs stood out, as if he were in a perpetual state of inhaling. It was nearly Time.

The yellow-robed cultists stood around the man, murmuring. He had no name, having forfeited it in favor of being known only as the Avatar or the Vessel (depending on whether you were talking to Jeremiah Pope, the cult leader, or Sapphire, the head priestess, respectively.)

Jasmine checked her smartphone in her pocket- the official time was 23:21:25 on December 20. At 23:21:39, the world would stop as the Earth's axis swung the Northern Hemisphere as far away from the sun as it could go, creating the longest night. At 23:21:40, they would begin approaching the sun again. But by then it would be too late.

The Vessel (or the Avatar) had been prepared, had freely given up his body, and stood, emaciated and stringy-haired, waiting. Jasmine watched the seconds tick by. She'd been skeptical of the cult, but it gave her something to do on Saturday nights after work, and she hadn't been invited to any Christmas parties this year. The Avatar (or the Vessel), who Jasmine still thought of as Joe, made no effort to cover his nakedness, and Jasmine wished he didn't have to be nude for the ritual.

She glanced at the other cultists. She wore a yellow robe like they did, even though she despised the color. She had her hood down, better to see the Avatar (or Vessel). She was tall, and didn't know the ancient language well enough to chant it, so it was her job to catch him at the point of the Solstice, if he fell. She would be the first to look into the face of a god.

You know. If it happened at all.

The seconds ticked closer. She found herself holding her breath as if she actually expected something to happen. The murmuring increased in volume, and Jasmine stepped closer to the Vessel (or Avatar) (or Joe). At 23:21:35 she put her smartphone in her pocket to free her hands. Despite the dry, freezing air, her palms were sweating.

Jasmine counted silently to herself. When she said "thirty-nine", the Avatar stiffened even more, and twitched, and then fell forward.

Jasmine jumped forward and easily caught the thin man, wondering, "Was that it? No lights or singing or anything?" The body gasped, as if forgetting how to breathe properly, and then looked up at her.

His eyes glowed yellow. It was all Jasmine could do not to drop him and step back in horror.

"I am returned on the Solstice," the voice croaked. "I would see my world."

The circle around them fell to their knees as one, some chanting, some gibbering, some sobbing. "Great," thought Jasmine, "I'm the only one holding it together."

"You want to see your world, Lord?" she asked. "Oh, and welcome back."

The eyes focused on her. "You are my herald? A woman?"

She made a face. "Last I checked. I could just let you go, dude. You're not looking too sturdy on your legs there."

His eyes narrowed. "So be it. Clothe me. Show me this world."

Finally someone put a robe around his pasty thin body, then bowed and groveled backward. Jasmine was torn between awe that the ritual had worked, and scorn that the being they had summoned was an asshole.

They had done their ritual in the woods in a park across the street from Parkside Mall, the largest Mall in Buffalo. Showing the guy the world could start there, she decided.

"So, uh, I'm going to take our Lord and show him around. Anyone want anything from Cinnabon?"

The cult members looked up from their prostrate positions, and she caught sight of Sapphire's enraged face. "You dare insult our Lord's return with mortal desires?"

Jasmine shrugged. "Sure. I mean, he wants to see the world. And the mall is open till midnight until Tuesday."

"You will not-" Jeremiah began, getting to his feet.

"Silence-" Joe said (She could no longer think of him as the Avatar or vessel, and no one was allowed to speak the god's name.) He waved his hand both Sapphire and Jeremiah were flattened to the ground as if a wind had blown them over. "My herald has been appointed to show me my world that I will rule. She will take me."

Jasmine grinned at him. "Cool. Come on."

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The look on Joe's face was one of utter bafflement.

To be fair, the mall was pretty gaudy. Red velvet bells framed by green holly hung from the rafters every thirty feet, and iced candy canes lined the upstairs railing. Christmas trees shone white in the upscale Macy's, while in Hot Topic they blinked red and green and sang dirty Christmas carols.

The being was speechless, but when he came across the display and throne for Santa, his face began to redden.

"What -- who -- " it blustered.

Santa's area was brightly lit, with little skating anamnetronic penguins going round and round an icy pond, and huge presents underneath the trees. Santa's throne was framed by huge candy canes, and the jolly old elf himself sat on the throne, talking to a bored-looking teenager. The line was relatively short behind the boy, since it was so late, and contained only a crying kid about 5 and a toddler asleep on a father's shoulder.

"That's Santa Claus. He's a guy who brings presents to good girls and boys on Christmas eve. He hangs out in malls before Christmas so little kids can see him and ask for presents."

"What has happened to the Solstice?" the being who used Joe's mouth said. "It was once a time of darkness, and

contemplation, and of the Wild Hunt, to announce my coming and bring death to all who witness it."

"Well," Jasmine said gently, "it's kind of evolved. Instead of the Wild Hunt, Santa flies through the sky in a sleigh pulled by reindeer now. To take those presents around, you know."

"Where is my Wild Hunt? What are these lights, this whimsy?" His eyes began to glow yellow again, and Jasmine quickly pulled up his hood.

"Take it easy, man. Let's go get a cinnamon roll to eat, that will cheer you up."

"I require no sustenance but that being's soul," he said, pointing to Santa. "And I will have it."

He started forward, but Jasmine stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Whoa, hold up, where are you going? You can't just eat Santa in the middle of a mall. You'll give these kids nightmares for the rest of their lives."

"Their lives will be mercifully short once I return in full power, let me go!" Joe's voice snarled.

"Hey, you're not killing anyone on my watch. You were brought back to rule, which I'm cool with. Discriminately killing people who piss you off, that's not cool. Who's going to fetch your robe and stuff when you kill off everyone? Who," She paused for effect, "Will make the cinnamon rolls?"

The being began to struggle, and Jasmine pulled him bodily away from Santa's throne, causing some concerned people to notice them.

"My little brother is out past his bedtime," she explained, glad that the yellow hood ensured no one could see that the struggling person was a) too old to be considered a "past his bedtime" and b) white.

That seemed to be enough for people, and the high pitched keening coming from the hood seemed to confirm her story. She dragged him past the food court- asshole cost her a cinnamon roll - and out the main doors to the mall.

"I didn't agree to this, they just wanted me to do what you needed, not kill anyone," she muttered. "Now we've made a scene, I'm still hungry, and you tried to eat Santa. How messed up is that, dude?"

She forced him onto a bench and pulled his hood back. He was a mess of tears and snot and glowing yellow eyes. Jasmine made a face and handed him a used tissue from her pocket - better than nothing, she thought.

"You're really freaking out here, huh?" she asked, pity cutting through the annoyance. "So all that time you spent out there," she waved vaguely toward the trees and sky, "You never once checked back here to see what the world was going to become? To see if it was even a place you would want to rule?"

"You will never fathom the workings of the gods," he spat, dabbing at his nose. "Your concerns and daily routines are as inconsequential as an insects."

"Oh yeah?" she asked, pissed off again. "I never saw an anthill make someone cry as much as you just did. Admit it. You are freaked out that this wasn't what you wanted it to be."

"This is now how it is supposed to be," he said, looking down at the snow. "It's perverse."

Jasmine snorted. "Well yeah, you're not the only one who feels that way. I passed another, "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" stickers the other day. But come on, dude, it's not Jesus, and it's not you. The earth moves, axial tilt happens, and humans see it as an excuse for a party. If you were gone, if Jesus was gone, and his followers, the world still would turn, there would be a longest night, and a longest day. People would find reasons to celebrate the sun coming back. If you wanna return, then Joe has apparently given you his body, but you're not going to change Christmas. I don't know anyone strong enough to do that.

"Now if you're OK, I think we have about five minutes before Cinnabon closes."

She felt proud of herself, like Linus in that TV Christmas special. The being that inhabited Joe's body continued to stare at the ground, though, and she looked around, annoyed. He wouldn't budge, but she was pretty sure she'd be in trouble if she left him here.

"Or we could go back to the circle. I bet some people there would love to talk to you about setting up a Wild Hunt or something. Who knows? If it gets big, Target might do a sale for it."

The being in the yellow robe choked back a sob. "I did not know it would be so different. I don't fit in here."

Jasmine rolled her eyes but went to pat his shoulder. "Come on, dude, you can find a spot here, and maybe even get some more worshippers - " She stopped. He had begun to glow. Heat radiated from him, and she backed up. "Are you all right?" she managed to ask, but the light got too bright and the heat too much. Snow all around her was melting, and she heard the crack of an icicle.

She turned and ran, slipping through the slush of the parking lot. There was no explosion or kaboom, but the light behind her got daylight-bright, and the heat made her feel as if her cloak was going to catch fire. Then it was dark again.

Jasmine risked a look back. The being in Joe's body was gone, all that remained was a tattered yellow robe. The wooden bench he'd sat on was also ash, and the benches on either side were aflame.

"Huh," Jasmine said. She pulled her smartphone out again and dialed 911. She calmly reported the fire at the mall, there no injuries that she knew of, and hung up. "Huh," she said to herself. "I saved Santa. Well, the mall Santa, anyway. That's closer than most people get to saving Christmas."

With an improved opinion of herself, she thought she deserved that damn cinnamon role. She checked the time. 00:02:34. Damn. Cinnabon was closed.

She shrugged and dropped her own yellow cloak in the snow. Time to find a new Saturday night hobby.