

ZoZo's Bizarre Christmas Days of Christmas Past

Hosted by-

Wait, we already did that gag for the Halloween special. Erm, let's see... ah!

Delivered by Lewi H.

Disclaimer:

Unlike Halloween, I do condone Christmas!
Be holly, stay jolly, and remember that any
connections to real people, events, and
intellectual property are entirely coincidental,
except for when they aren't. Regardless,
shoutouts to Josh Malerman, Rooster Teeth,
Marshmallows, John Lennon, Tim Burton,
Henry Selick, Mattheu, Luke, and
MoBrosStudios.

And yes, this one actually takes place in the
main universe for once.

Starring:

TC Strider

Aris Undyroe

Bail Harley

Chara Brady

Alice "Jonathan 'ZoZo' Zoestar" Strider

TCsprite

The Spirit of Christmas Past

The Angel of Christmas Present

The Demon of Christmas Never to Come

Kim Probable

Liz Lalonde

Corrina Fey

Stuart Lipple

Kew Beck

Sam O'Neil

Joseph Brostar

Jack Swinerton

The CEO of Corporatetown

Dr. Gorman Freeman

Posano

Iona

Fidel

(St.) Dismas

Hinauea Strider

Doug Walker

Santa Claus

Zeorge Zoestar

Zabrina Zoestar

Prelude

The Star

IT'S REALLY FUNNY HOW age can affect what we feel about the

snow. For an adolescent going to school, or perhaps even to a full-fledged adult on a daily commute, it can be stressful just witnessing the first snowflake to fall from the sky, dreading what is about to come. In the mind of a child, it's a magical thing, and for older children, it might even come with a chance of sleeping in for once. And for those who remain, it elicits feelings of nostalgia, a longing for a time when things were simple. What does this have to do with the story? I don't know, I just wanted you to feel all holly and jolly inside, heh heh. Oh, who am I? Why, don't you remember? It's me, your bwerst frienemyd, TCsprite! I will be your host for this story, as per usual. Anyway, where was I? Oh, right. Setting the stage, Christmas, roasting Kuribos or something. I think you're all settled now, so let's begin the story. (I feel like that Grayble guy from Adventure Time right now...)

December 24, 201X. The first (and last) Christmas party held by Empress Harley and R.A. Strider in the Red House. It was... it was a party. Of course, it was for government officials only because none of their other friends had jobs or money yet. That made the atmosphere a little

lonely. “Just think, Bail,” said TC, wallowing in his despair. “In another universe, a better one, Mysteo and I could have been beating up Santa Claus.”

“TC, we brought Mysteo with us when we took over the government, remember? I made her a senator? And Santa’s not even r—”

“You’re right, haha. But he couldn’t enslave everyone’s mind in this universe because not everyone’s here. And also we don’t even have a swimming pool.”

“...have you been drinking mulled wine?”

“N-no! As a R-Royal Advisor, I must be a model citizen and not break any laws, including those regarding underage drinking—”

“Relax, I have.”

“Oh, then I have too, lol.”

“Yeah, uh... lawl...? Anyway, it probably fits under religious exemption anyway, because I am actually Hyl—”

Suddenly, the movie (the all-time Christmas classic, The Princess Bride) that was playing in the background this whole time apparently had been interrupted by some breaking news.

“I, Steve MacKevin, on behalf of Channel 6 $\frac{2}{3}$ News, deeply apologize for interrupting the 24-hour marathon of the all-time Christmas classic, The Princess Bride, but this is extremely important and sad news. *sniff* Santa Claus has been shot dead in Miami.”

TC and Bail, still quite legally ambiguously tipsy because it had only been like 30 seconds, began bawling their eyes out. And this was right after Bail almost confessed something really important: she didn’t believe in Santa. In a way, she felt like it was her fault he died, because she didn’t believe hard enough. Oh, and what of the other guests, you ask? They wouldn’t receive

the news that Nicholas, Sage of Water, had perished until the next... week. So they were just vibing in the dining room, drinking hot cocoa, eating beef wellington, singing karaoke, all that jazz. Aris and Mysteo still hated each other back then, so they were just staring each other down, refusing to speak. Meanwhile, Kamaea and Porrim wouldn't shut up (positive connotation, it's Christmas, talk your head off). By all accounts, for TC and Bail, this was the worst Christmas ever... at the time.

Again, still a little drunk, TC passed out, still crying. In his curious headspace (or heartspace? I don't know, it was notably not the Dream Bubbles this time.), he was met with a strange humanoid cuniculus, a slender chungus. "Come here, child," it beckoned.

"Wh-who are you? What are you?" TC asked, trying to stay calm but clearly failing.

"Fear not. I do not wish to hurt, but to help."

"Help me? But Christmas is already ruined."

"Helping you can ruin many Christmases."

"Explain how."

"My aid can be exchanged for the souls of the innocent. Wait no, it's the other way around, isn't it?"

"You're creepy, I'm out of here."

"No, wait! I got off on the wrong foot! Stay here! D-do you like knock-knock jokes?!"

"I'm gonna go wake up now and pretend like this never happened."

"If you ever need my assistance, you know where to find me! ...damn it, I revealed my true intentions too soon! Damn you, Freud, and your stupid f*cking slips!"

End of Prelude

Overture

What Went Wrong

“MAN, HE REALLY mathed it up this time. Hey, Maru and Sai, why

aren’t you at your posts?!” Aris violently shouted at her radio.

“Aris, we told you we’re not doing codenames. It makes literally zero sense,” responded ZoZo, or Sai, I guess.

“I don’t know, sister, I’m already getting used to them, fufu! Anyway, Bonni, we were just having a... a little heart-to-heart, I guess...” responded Chara, also known as Maru now, apparently.

“Well, there’s no time for heart-to-hearts! As you can plainly see, THE WHOLE CITY IS MISSING!!!”

“Not missing, I think it’s under that mysterious shadowy pillar.”

“Also known as missing because I can’t see it!”

“Heh, who died and made you knight?”

“Your sister’s brother’s girlfriend fired me when she quit, remember? I’m done with this whole ‘knight’ thing, I think it’s time to become a great defense attorney– Hey! You tricked me

into talking about my feelings on the job! Now return to base! We need to go over the battle plan!”

ZoZo and Chara made their way back to the base, positioned just outside city limits, as Aris commanded. The “base,” if you could call it that, was just some rusty, abandoned RV. There were signs that it probably used to be a meth lab, and more signs that it had since become some poor unfortunate soul’s new home.

“Okay. If we’re going to retake our hometown, then we’ll need to stop this... this shadowy maelstrom at its source,” Aris briefed.

“If you’re suggesting we moitle my brother, then—” ZoZo replied, fists bared.

“Kill him? Great idea, but it’s far too costly. We want TC alive, so we can give him a fair trial and I can prosecute him.”

“I thought you wanted to be a defense attorney,” Chara said.

“I CAN DO BOTH!!! Anyway, got any other suggestions?”

“Can’t we call Bail?”

“Can’t. She’s been missing for days. Probably went in to find him, or perhaps reason with him. I don’t know her motives, man, I don’t even know why she’s still into him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I already know his true love, because she told me herself in the Dream Bubbles. She can’t keep her mouth shut, you know. Oh and also the whole ‘envelop the entire city of Ame d’Alene in darkness and keep thousands of innocent civilians as hostages’ thing.”

“Oh, gossip? Tell me more!”

“Wait, why are you here again? I thought you hated your brother, I was certain you’d be on board with his demise.”

“Hmph.” ZoZo looked as though she were on the verge of tears after Aris said that. It seemed like she had just remembered something she would rather forget.

“...I’ll tell you later. Now’s not the time for petty gossip, anyway. We need to get back to planning—”

“I’ll go.”

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—”

“Repentance. If I die, then... Look, I’m going right now. You can’t convince me otherwise.”

“Wait, sis—”

“Stay away! Alice, let me do this!”

Chara ran off, into the void that lay before her. ZoZo and Aris, powerless to stop her, pondered their next move.

“ZoZo, I’ll go, too. I’ll get your sister back. You just stay here, make sure we’re okay. Look, I set up the RV’s TV to connect with the radio waves emanating off the void. I think they’re like... mega amplified brain waves, or something? I don’t know, just look through all the channels until you find us, okay?” Aris commanded. ZoZo nodded, as Aris headed off. After making sure she entered the shadowy fountain, ZoZo turned on the TV, just as Aris asked her to.

How curious, ZoZo thought. Every channel on here seems to have a sort of Christmas special airing. But I don’t recognize any of these people. They must be the civilians, trapped in

the city. “Aris, Chara... Bail,” she said to herself, “please be careful. I fear you’ve all fallen right into his trap.”

End of Overture

Movement 1:

Let's Hope It's a

Good One,

Without Any

Fear

The Case of Aris Apollo

Undyropo

“JC.. GOTTA FIND JC.. NEED... to kiCK HIS ASS!!!”

Some dream. I’ve already forgotten it, and yet that scream is exactly what woke me up this morning. My roommate, Corrina, must have heard it, as the next thing I knew, I could hear her footsteps rushing to my door.

“Aris, are you okay? And whose ass are you gonna kick? Can I help?” she asked, barging in. I could tell I woke her up, too. She hadn’t had any time to do her hair yet. She normally straightens it, but she’s naturally curly, though not as much as I am.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I must’ve had some weird dream,” I told her, chuckling. She chuckled along.

“Now, we gotta hurry up, remember? We have to go to that stupid meeting.”

“Ugh, why did you remind me about that? Who cares what some stupid shareholders think about how much we should be paid?”

“Listen. If all goes well, we can finally unionize.”

“Like that’s gonna happen. We work at Megalocorp. As freaking warehouse workers.”

“At least try to have a little optimism.” She looked at me as she said that. I could see that, behind her eyes, I think I may have genuinely hurt her. Either way, we finished getting ready and left our crappy one-bedroom apartment. No, we don’t share a room, creep. She crashes on the couch. It’s a perfectly normal, healthy, platonic homononsexual relationship. Well, maybe. I don’t know, I’ve suspected that she’s had a crush on me for a while. We got in her car and drove to the warehouse. On the way there, I noticed the sky was much gloomier

than I had hoped. Not a good sign for my mental health. I thought that maybe if I turned on the radio, I would cheer up a little.

“...that the mysterious wave of death that had swept its way through much of Europe and Asia has now found its way to the United States. According to witnesses, the countless deaths are allegedly the result of a simple snail that seems to be travelling in a straight line. What this snail is trying to do, or if there even is a snail, is still a mystery, but brace yourselves for Shell on Earth. Stock up on food and resources, stay indoors, and lock all potential entrances until local authorities deem it safe to resume ordinary life.”

I should be afraid, but this is actually what I needed to hear today. A temporary reprieve from the mundanity of life, even if it's because of my biggest fear come to life. Plus, warehouses are like bunkers, so I should be safe, at least for today.

Corrina parked the car in the same space she always does. 489C. Why does she have such a fascination with that number? The walk from our space to the warehouse felt like a 15-mile hike. Would it kill her to park just a little closer? The gloomy atmosphere certainly did not help. We scanned our badges and entered through the sliding door, as we were greeted to the same depressing atmosphere as always. Shelves reaching two—sometimes three—stories in height, minimal lighting, dust everywhere, walls covered in Orwellian posters that say things like “Smile! You're being watched by our drones!” or “Remember to never frown, even when your heart tells you to,” or even “Remember, if you witness the death of a fellow crewmate, whether by ‘workplace accident’ or suicide, no you didn't *thumbs up emoji*!” I want to quit my f*cking job so badly, you don't even know. But... nowhere else is hiring, and I already spent the last of my college funds on rent, so I don't really have a choice.

At my job, I do very simple tasks. Pick up items. Put down items. Place items on the shelves. Take items off the shelves. Report any damaged items. And maybe, just maybe, I'll get that five-minute lunch break after doing all that for five hours. During my job, though, I heard some of my coworkers talking about that whole snail thing.

"So, uh, what do you think its motives are?" the lanky one asked.

"I don't know, probably looking for a cucumber and/or a Jackson 5 cassette," replied the bulky one.

"Or maybe he's so fed up with SpongeBob that he just decided to take it all out on us. After all, we fill his wallet more than Mr. Krabs."

"People are dying, Stuart and Kev. Now's not the time for jokes," added the youngest, most innocent one.

"Come on, Sam. Live a little. It's not like you're dying."

"What if it claimed someone in your life? Wouldn't be joking about it then, huh?"

"I have no one in my life," I added, "so does that make me qualified to joke as much as I please?" Stuart and Kev walked away, as I had successfully killed their vibe.

"Sam, was it?"

"Yeah, ỳ tú?" she responded.

"Aris. Listen, I'm actually really excited about this whole snail thing. It sure beats this dead-end job where apparently unionizing makes you the antichrist. Speaking of, let's unite in case the snail becomes a threat to us. We gotta survive somehow."

Sam pondered it for a while. Perhaps I was too sudden. Then, she said, "Sure. I personally think the snail's a hoax, heh heh, I just like to get under their skin. But it couldn't hurt to form an alliance, in case the mass hysteria takes a turn for the dystopian."

"Then it is done. Sam, you are now my comrade. So far, it's just the three of us: you, me, and Corrina."

"Corrina from the Toys and Games department? You got her on your side?"

"Well, I haven't asked her yet. But she's my roommate, so she has to go along with what I say, nyeh heh!" I was blushing a little. I never actually considered Corrina in all this. Does that make me a bad friend? Are we friends?

After a long, 10-hour shift, interrupted by another hour of meeting time (a meeting so mundane it shall never be mentioned), it's finally time to leave. I invite Sam to my apartment so we can discuss our plans for the imminent apocalypse. ...scratch that. Apocalypse planning starts now. As Sam and I leave the warehouse, I look up to see none other than my roommate standing on the roof. "Corrina, don't do it!" I shout, but I fear it's too late.

"I saw it, Aris," she says. What?

"You saw...?"

"The snail. It's beautiful. I mustn't stand in its way. It doesn't deserve conflict."

Immediately after saying this, she jumps off the roof, exploding her skull into a bony, brainy, bloody mess as she hits the ground. This is the first suicide I've witnessed. I wish I could say it's my last.

Now's not the time for grieving, or shock, or anything like that. We need to think rationally here. If Corrina saw the snail, then it must be nearby. There's no time to lose. Sam and I ran to Corrina's car. "Can you drive?" she asks me.

"No, sorry. I haven't gotten my license yet. What about you?"

"I'm 15."

"15?! Man, f*ck Megalocorp!"

We booked it for my apartment... never mind, there's a 150-car pile-up blocking the road that leads there. This snail really is a force to be reckoned with, isn't it? Continuing our drive, I looked for somewhere we could go. Huh, seems the only place we can go is some community college. That works for me, my annual binge of a certain six-season show still awaiting its movie has taught me the most secure part of any college. I parked the car, and Sam and I exited. We rushed to the library, needing to take refuge in a study room.

It seems that the snail hasn't reached the community college yet. Sure, it's empty, but at least there's no dead people. After wandering the abandoned courtyard for a bit, we finally found the library. Perfect. We head inside, easily locating a vacant study room almost immediately. Wait a second. I hear... breathing. "Sam," I say, "I get the feeling we're not alone in here." Quickly thinking, I pick up a piece of wood lying on the ground, broken from one of the desks, and raise it high enough to show that I mean business.

"Wait! We mean no harm! We're survivors, like you two!" shouted a man, frightened.

"I had a feeling that was the case, but you can never be too sure. I would hate for this whole snail fiasco to somehow turn into a zombie apocalypse."

"I get it, yeah. Quick, hurry in."

We did as the man said. The study room didn't look nearly as trashed as the rest of the library. With the blinds shut, it was almost like this peculiar apocalypse didn't happen.

"Well then. Welcome to Le Sanctuaire. My name is Joseph, but you can call me JoBro," the man said, introducing himself.

"I'm Sam, and this is Aris. We're trying to figure out what's going on here," Sam said, introducing us in return.

"And survive, of course," I added.

"Nice to meet you both. There's others, too, but they're sleeping because it's been a loooong day. So, what brings you guys here?"

"Oh, we were on our way to my apartment, but there was a... 150-car pile-up, I think, so we had to find somewhere else to stay."

We decided that we probably needed some sleep, too, and so we fell asleep. Another dream came to me... or was it a dream? Felt like a memory, or something. There were two people, they were me and some other girl, and we were talking at one of our houses.

"Last night was incredible!" she told me. "We went on some rides, played some video games at the arcade, ate a lot of junk food, and then we did it."

"Oh yeah? Did what?" I asked.

"We went on the Ferris wheel, at sunset! Isn't it romantic?"

"Yeah, sounds pretty romantic. You kissed, didn't you?"

"Maybe... ;P"

"Heh. You know, you're really living up to your name right now, Succubus."

“H-Hey! What about you, Undying? You were so good at living up to your name that you found yourself in the land of the dead, haha!”

“Well, that’s the thing. Are we technically dead?”

“Well, this happened to you just a couple days ago. Thought you would’ve known for sure by now.”

I woke up... crying. Huh, I wonder why? Who was that girl in my dream? Are these tears for her? Everyone else was still out, so I figured I’d run out and get something to eat. You see, in an apocalypse, you can break as many laws as you want because things are too chaotic for governments to exist. I learned that in law school... wait, I’m not in law school. I don’t think I am, at least. Wait, why can’t I remember anything from before yesterday?

When I left the study room, I saw that the F*CKING SNAIL WAS WAITING RIGHT OUTSIDE!!! Yet when I ran away, it did not continue heading into the study room. Instead, it went straight for ME! Why?! I fled the library and ran until I found a coffee shop or something. Perfect, a frozen croissant sandwich. I quickly heated it up and left the coffee shop, only to find that the snail was now... halfway across the parking lot. Huh. Not really a formidable foe when you can outrun it at a resting pace. In that case, I had a rather leisurely stroll back to the study room. Joseph was awake at that point.

“Hey, JoBro. I was just curious, do you have any ideas as to what that snail could be after?” I asked. My question had apparently piqued everyone’s interests, as they began to wake up, too.

“Huh? Oh, sure. So I’m a pretty big weeb, and in this story called JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure, there’s a certain ability called Sheer Heart Attack. I believe the snail behaves similarly to it,” he answered.

“So it tracks the warmest thing nearby?” Sam asked, apparently knowing what he was talking about.

“Exactly.”

“But wait. Why then,” I interjected, “was it after me and only me just now? You guys would’ve been much warmer.”

“Good point,” Joseph said.

“Then maybe it’s something else. Something like... a purely hypothetical situation... that could easily become a meme... except now it’s real...” Sam pondered.

“Okay fine, I admit it! It was me!” The whole room gasped. “I made a deal with the devil last week for unconditional immortality. But of course, everything unconditional is under one condition. In this case, an equally immortal snail would follow me for the rest of time. If we meet, we will both die. Its sole purpose in life is to kill me and itself.” Why was this the only thing from before yesterday I could remember?

“So then what will you do?”

“I’m glad you asked, Sam. I’m gonna run away through the most secluded parts of the world. I’m going to keep both myself and the snail away from civilization. Wish me luck.”

Before anyone could object, I made a run for it. Most of my time was spent in the ocean, but sometimes I would find an uninhabited island, or a tundra, or a vast desert. This would go on for eons, until eventually the sun was dying. And so, in my final moments, as tears fill my

eyes and the world beneath me caves in, I stop for the first time. The snail stops, as well, and sits beside me. We gaze upon the supernova. There's beauty in destruction sometimes. War is over.

"Okay, cut! Aris, what are you doing?"

"TC?! What's happening? And... why is there a snail right next to me?"

"Forget that, man! The script! You were supposed to stick to the script!"

"What do you mean? What script?"

"*sigh* You weren't supposed to regain consciousness yet. That little dream you had? It woke you up, but your memories hadn't come back yet."

"So...?"

"Your character was supposed to stay holed up in that study room with the rest of the cast, at least for a few months. Then, through the process of elimination, she would be revealed to be the cause of the snail's wrath, and so she would sacrifice herself to save the remaining few of the study room gang so that they can be the founders of a new civilization. Instead you just... you totally Aris-ed it. And you didn't even meet Josh yet! Your love interest! Sam was nearly going to murder you out of jealousy because of him! Just... Get out of my sight, no offense."

And then everything was white.

End of Movement 1

Intermezzo

Spirited Away

SO ARIS'S STORY WAS a total failure. Big whoop. We've got plenty

of time to make things right. I just need to keep all these folks distracted, and then we will receive the greatest gift of all. But first, I need to make sure the next players are ready... oh, hang on. Yet another knock on the door, this time at my mom's house. I swear, this had better be the last knock I hear for the next 20 years or so. Let's see who it could be... huh?! There's... There's nobody! Maybe I botched the whole "sending Aris somewhere else" thing, and now she's trying to prank me! Eh, it's alright. I'll just ignore it for now. I glanced at the new fancy lion head door knocker thingy my mom bought a few months ago from Hobby Lobby. I admired the design. It's a nice fancy lion head door knocker thingy. But then its face morphed into something I hadn't seen in three years (or was it four? Two?). It was the face of a dead eight-year-old catboy, who had fairly recently been gifted (cursed) with dog features, too.

"Boo. Did I scare you?" he said, ever-so-casually.

I won't lie and tell you I didn't scream, but I totally didn't scream (true). Seeing his face excited me so much that I ran inside, up the stairs, and into my room, where I locked my door

and hid under my blanket, still not screaming, of course. Thankfully, ghosts can't go through doors, because they're not fire. Oh, never mind, apparently I got it mixed up because HE'S IN MY ROOM RIGHT NOW! I AM ~~PANICKING~~ SO VERY JOYOUS RIGHT NOW!!!!!!

"Relax, kid. I'm not trying to kill you or anything like that. Heck, I don't even think I exist. I might just be a representation of your deepest anxieties, your guilt for what you've done. It's all up to the readers, of course," TCsprite said.

"Why are you here though?" I asked, calming down a bit but still a little ~~scared~~ joyous.

"Oh, that! Haha, I completely forgot. I just came to warn you about some things that you might want to know about, a little heads up."

"What things?"

"They told me to tell you that you're gonna be visited by three spirits. I don't exactly know what they want with you, but I figured I'd let you know so you're not scared."

"Who are 'they?'"

"The spirits. Okay that's all see ya bye!!!"

Three spirits? This is feeling a little oddly familiar... wait a minute! I know what this is! This is just like that one story, with the greedy old guy! Uh, what was it called again...? Oh, right! The Lorax! Wait, that's not right. Eh, maybe it'll come to me later. For now, I should check on how Bail's doing. I feel so bad for her, she didn't know about my spell. Maybe I shouldn't have cast it, I didn't know it would do this... no. It will all be worth it in the end. I'll bring them back, and we'll all be happy.

End of Intermezzo

Movement 2:
How the Capitalists
Stole Halloween, Got
Depressed, and Stole
Christmas, Too

The Case of Zelda "Bail"
Jade Harley

“A MIGHTY FINE HALLOWEEN this year! Just look at all the

profits!” exclaimed the CEO of Corporatetown. “If all goes well, next year we’re projected to make double— no, TRIPLE the profits next year!”

“That is, indeed, exciting...” replied Chairman Jack Swinerton, solemnly. Something was eating at him.

I wanted to keep watching him. I wanted to make sure he was okay. However, life had other plans. “Bail!” I could hear someone calling my name, off in the distance. It’s him.

“Y-yes?” I responded.

“This is the last time you roofie me so you can sneak out with your friends!”

“But I—”

“I understand it gets lonely, but you’re my employee. I don’t pay you to enjoy the festivities downtown, I pay you to be my personal assistant. Now, if you promise me you won’t sneak out again, I might give you that raise.”

“I promise, Mr. Freeman.” My fingers were tucked behind my back, crossed.

“Dr. Freeman. I have a degree, you know. Now come. This next experiment requires two people.”

I followed my boss back to his lab. It’s not like I have a choice. Dr. Gorman Freeman is one of the leading scientists in the world. He received the Nobel Prize for his research that could nearly prove the existence of God, but there’s just one missing piece. I don’t know why, but thinking about it gives me a certain feeling, like something’s on the tip of my tongue. Anyway,

my point in all this is to say he's a very smart man. And a rich one, too. A personal assistant to him gets \$20 an hour. A personal assistant as cute as me gets \$30.

His latest experiment is to create life. I mean sure, if he succeeds, I'm out of a job. But at the same time, I'll have all the freedom in the world. So far, it's not been going well. "Ugh! We're going nowhere with this! A corpse is just too dead to be reanimated! I can't think of any other ideas at the moment. Bail, would you make like Geoffrey and make me a sandwich?"

"Sure thing, Mr. F— erm, Dr. Freeman."

"And don't slip in any drugs!"

Well, obviously he's going to be inspecting the food. He may be easy to fool, but like I said, he's a very smart man. This is my chance to escape for good, but I'll need to find a new method. I prepared the sandwich he asked me to make, filled a cup of water, and headed out of the kitchen. On the way back to the lab, I noticed a vial of something I like to call "my ticket out of here."

"Here you are, Dr. F. Your sandwich, just as you asked," I said as I entered the lab, with my coat dripping.

"Thank you, Miss Harley. Your generosity has earned you an extra five dollars per hour. Together, we will ascend the ranks of Corporatetown with our research, and perhaps we will overthrow Mr. Swinerton himself!" the doctor said. I wonder if he's been planning on doing so for a long time.

"It's just a sandwich, doctor. It's not that deep."

"Oh, but it could be. Hmm, let's see... Ah, chicken salad! You do have hope in this business arrangement, after all! Oh, and no pills or powder anywhere, I presume. *sip* The

water doesn't taste particularly salty, either. Finally, a drug-free meal. You've outdone yourself, Bail."

"Why thank you. By the way, on my way back, I think I spilled something on my lab coat. Can you smell it for me? I think it might be chloroform." Before he had time to react, I stuck my lab coat in his face until he passed out. He's going to be quite mad when he wakes up, but I'll be long gone by then. Freedom!

Now that I'm finally free, there's only one thing left to do: check up on Jack. Mr. Swinerton has really been overworking himself this year, I don't want him to think these bad, bad thoughts about himself. We could end up with another American Psycho situation, like with the last chairman. I eventually found him at a park approaching the outskirts of town, Dedman Park. I had to keep things on the DL, as I didn't want him to suspect me of stalking him... even though that's pretty much what I'm doing, heh heh. "I just can't do this every year. We sell candy, decorations, and costumes. We make profits. And then we wait to do it all again next year. We absorbed the competition, so that bit of fun's gone. I just... I need time to think this over," I could hear him say. Think what over? I don't like the sound of that.

I had to keep following him, as he started heading into the woods, but I ran into something... familiar. A dog? Does it have an owner? I lifted its head to see if it had a collar and... Oh Lord, I remember everything now. What's happened to me? Where am I? And Bec?! "What are you doing here? You were prototyped years ago," I asked the dog. He barked in reply, mouthless as ever.

"Wait, then you're not the real Bec, are you? What are you, then?" I should really hold my tongue right now. I think TC would appreciate it if I stuck to the script for now.

“Never mind these stupid questions. We need to make sure Jack’s okay!”

The two of us headed into the woods, where we found Jack... and a peculiar circle of tree elevators. He seemed intrigued by these, and so he entered the one shaped like a cross. This does not bode well, but as long as he’s not dead, I suppose. He has no one written in his will because no woman ever loved him enough to start a family, so his billions will be wasted on helping the less fortunate (is that really what TC wants me to say? How despicable...). Bec and I wanted to go in after him, but we decided it would be best to just wait and see what happens. We both began to doze off.

While I was out, I had a dream. It wasn’t like any dream I’ve had before, because it actually happened once. It was like viewing a memory. It was the night before TC made this mess. “You ever find it weird that we’re technically old enough to drink now, and we can have a repeat of that one Christmas but actually legal now?” I asked him.

“Please, I don’t want to think about those things,” he said, solemnly.

“What things?” Despite the sincerity of my question, his gaze snapped at me as if I had just mocked him.

“That Christmas was the worst Christmas of my life! And that last adventure of ours was too traumatic!”

“I get it, it messed us up pretty bad.”

“No, you DON’T get it! I DIED! YOU died! We failed more times than we succeeded! We doomed someone else’s universe!”

“But we succeeded in the end, didn’t we?”

“No thanks to me. And at what cost? My two best friends are dead, my sister hates my guts, and now I have to keep trying to convince myself every morning that an entire year never happened, and that I’m still 20 right now.”

“They chose their paths, you chose yours, and I chose mine. You can’t erase the past, but you can learn from it. Now come along, your parents are expecting us.” I had never seen him so depressed, and during the happiest season of all, too.

When I woke up, Jack had just left the elevator. He seemed to be ecstatic. This might be a good sign. I followed him back to Corporatetown, where he decided to hold a company meeting. “Everyone, you’re not going to believe this. I think I might have just found our next big opportunity for MAJOR profits!” Jack exclaimed. All the employees were intrigued.

“But we make major profits on Halloween,” said the CEO, confused.

“Ah, yes, but this year we’ll add something new, something unexpected. We’re going to make some big bucks off Christmas!” The crowd murmured intensely. This was unheard of.

“Don’t those people in Religioustown hold a huge monopoly on Christmas?” I asked.

“Bail, how good to see you! Don’t worry, they won’t mind if we take care of things for this year. Don’t they deserve a break after all they’ve been through these past two millennia?”

I did not respond. All of this just... gives me a bad feeling, you know? Jack then tried to explain how Christmas could boost the company’s profits, but no one fully grasped the concept. Maybe that’s a good sign. Maybe this Christmas stuff will just blow right up in his face.

Weeks went by, as the calendar leaped from early November to the middle of December. Only a few days were left before Christmas Day. All the employees were working hard on all things Christmas. Candy, toys, decorations. Heck, they’re even investing in movie studios and

record labels. They seem to be doing anything and everything in their power to make sure the profits of Christmas are maximized. And still, in all that time, I've never felt the same excitement as they do. Trust me, I want to (not really), but I just can't. Jack's playing a dangerous game here.

"Jack, wait!" I shouted, hoping to get his attention among the crowd. Maybe I can talk some sense into him, before it's too late.

"Bail! Aren't you supposed to be helping Dr. Freeman with his newest experiment?" he asked. He knows what I'm about to tell him. He just doesn't want me to say it.

"That's not important right now. This is about your Christmas."

"Oh, well I couldn't have done it without the help of everyone around here. Raises for the lot of you!"

"No, not that. I've just noticed something. You've been putting a lot of work into Christmas, and you've nailed a lot of it down. Santa, elves, reindeer, presents, it's all accounted for. But I think you're missing some of the more crucial aspects."

"Like what? You can't sell giving, or goodwill, or family. At least not legally, that last one."

"Not that stuff, no. The stuff that makes Christmas... Christmas."

"The tree? We've got lots of trees, some made of metal instead of plastic!"

"No! You don't get it! Where is the nativity in all this?"

"The whatatitty?"

"Where's Jesus?" Jack stared at me with a look of introspection. Whatever I said made him think really hard. Did I really sway him so easily?

"Cheese Nips!" **Nope.** "That's what I wanted to eat with my lunch today!"

“NO!!! You’re playing a dangerous game, Jack. Sooner or later, you will learn the hard way that there are some who will take things too personally, and they’ll fight back. They’ll fight back hard. And they discontinued Cheese Nips a long time ago, man!”

“Okay, but look—and just hear me out. I took the ‘Christ’ in ‘Christmas,’ and replaced it with an ‘X!’ Because ‘X’ looks like ‘chi,’ which sounds like ‘key,’ which is the elevator I went in... I think!”

He’s hopeless. He hasn’t an ounce of respect, of decency, for religion. Actually, I don’t even think he knows what a religion is. I tried to warn him. But like I said before, this whole thing’s gonna blow right up in his face. Maybe then he’ll get a sort of reality check.

It was now Christmas Eve, and Jack was getting ready to make some profits. All of Corporatetown’s Christmas merchandise had already been shipped to retailers, movies and albums had already wrapped up production, and no bad press. It’s the Christmas Jack had been dreaming of, but not the Christmas it was to become. Suddenly, we could all hear rumbling and chanting in the distance. A mob. “Oh, how delightful!” Jack exclaimed. “They loved our Christmas so much that they’re willing to come straight to us in order to tell us directly what a spectacular job we did!”

“I don’t think you want to celebrate just yet,” I assured him.

“Nonsense! Why else would they come to us? Wait, are those pitchforks?”

Jack’s Christmas, in theory, was the perfect Christmas for profitability. However, he forgot one crucial demographic: the ultra-conservatives.

“Where Jebus Gobbles?!” I could hear one ask.

“Why cup red?! Cup need snowflake, you snowflake!” another screamed.

“Go woke, go broke!” they all chanted.

Jack had not anticipated this reaction. However, he should have. You see, he offended the crowd that likes to be offended by everything. All to appease their lord and savior, the GOP, of course. He looked at me, as if to tell me to do something. I merely shrugged. I had to think of something, and fast. Wait, could it really be that simple?

“Stop this at once!” I shouted. “Can’t you see that none of this is what Christmas is about? Jack, you tried to make a mockery of one of the holiest days of the year and somehow didn’t think people would get upset about it? That’s idiotic. As for you guys, Jack sanitizing Christmas doesn’t take away Jesus. You can keep your traditions AND acknowledge that these corporations are trying to exploit you for maximum profits. A little corporate corruption ain’t gonna erase centuries of tradition. You’re all behaving like morons. Be bett—”

“Okay, that’s enough. Bail, what the heck are you doing?” a disembodied voice called.

“Oh, heya, TC. Thanks for trapping me here, I love it.”

“Bec was supposed to be a gift for you, by the way. I recreated him from scratch, just for you. But he’s a spry li’l guy, so he escaped. I think he’s also tied to your DNA signature or something— What am I saying? There are more pressing matters at hand! You ruined it, you made the story woke!”

“But TC, you ARE woke.”

“Not on live TV. Yeah, Aris gave me this idea to broadcast all my stories throughout the local counties, since that’s what she did outside the city limits. Anyway, the world isn’t quite ready for leftist TC, y’know?”

“While we’re talking, do you mind if I give you a few constructive criticisms?”

“Sure, whatcha got?”

“Firstly, you just plagiarized *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Not even being subtle about it, I mean the main guy’s literally named Jack. Secondly, Christianity isn’t a religion in this universe, why did you include it? Thirdly, what the hell is a GOP?”

“Hinawa taught me about those last two things back when we were— Oh, I see. You’re tricking me into remembering things I’d rather forget.”

“You’d rather forget Hinawa? She was like your best friend... number 3. 4?”

“Eh, I lost track, too. And no, I don’t want to forget her. Just the adventure we had that took us to her and then away from her. Anyway, you kinda failed my test, so I’m gonna send you to the Island of Broken Toys. It’s not all bad, though. Aris is there, too. Bail? Bail, you still with me?”

I ran away. He’s not going to send me there. He’s not omnipresent, nor omniscient. I’m going to find help. Bec! Come along, boy!

End of Movement 2

Intermezzo

TC Strider's Precious Little Life

AW, MAN. I WAS actually really hoping Bail would pull through. And

she almost did, too. Oh hey, it's almost midnight! I need to see if anyone's gone missing somewhere, today was pretty overcast. Wait, that was a video game. The Midnight Channel doesn't exist IRL, does it? Eh, whatevs. I'll just watch Adult Swim anyway. I wonder if they have anything special planned for tonight. Just before they announced the next program, the TV became all staticky, and the signal was lost. Great. Just great. Now how will I celebrate Christmas by myself? Wait, something's not right. The static began to pulsate, as light came from the TV and enveloped the room. When the light cleared, the power was gone. The room was in complete darkness, save for one light. A familiar one. "Heyo!" it called.

"Y-you're supposed to be dead!" I exclaimed in ~~fear~~ joy.

"I could say the same about you, heh heh. Anyway, didn't you get the memo? I thought that doggish version of you already told you."

“Oh, so you’re one of the ghosts that’ll be visiting me tonight. Okay. So, what’s your plan?”

“Personally, I prefer ‘spirit.’ Call me the Spirit of Christmas Past.”

“I’ll just stick to Romy, if you prefer.”

“That’ll work. Now come on, we need to see your past!”

I wasn’t sure why I needed to see my past. I don’t feel particularly greedy like that old guy from that story... Ducktales? No, no. That’s not it. But I feel like I’m getting close. I don’t mind seeing my past, I’m pretty nostalgic myself. Just as long as she doesn’t show me all the messed up stuff.

“Here we are. Where it all began,” she said, directing my vision to my window. Suddenly, we were outside, and the window was a different window. In the window I could see a woman and a young child. Mom and I. I don’t remember this at all.

“What do you want for Christmas?” my mom asked my past self.

“I want Daddy to come home!” my past self answered. Oh dear.

“What’s the meaning of this?” I asked Romy. “I have my dad back now. How is this memory relevant?”

“Oops, sorry! I took us to the wrong memory, haha! Here, let me fix that.”

The scene changed once again. Now we were at my old school, Hill Top Elementary. We were in a classroom, my homeroom. There was a Christmas party. My past self didn’t look much older, so perhaps this is the very next year. I looked at the whiteboard, and the date written on it confirmed everything. December 24, 201X (2014). A party before winter break. The end of the

second term of 5th grade. This was the year before I would start going to Kan High (they really ought to rename that place to Kan Jr./Sr. High). But why am I being shown this past?

“Do you see those two girls over there?” Romy asked.

“That’s you and Chara, right?” I asked.

“Correct. I want you to see what happens next.” We watched them for a second. Then, they approached my 11-year-old self and young Acetablook. I think I’m starting to remember.

“Hey, uh... D-do you guys want to uh... uh...” 10-year-old Romy began to ask, but couldn’t find the courage to finish.

“She wants to know if you wanna be friends with us. We’re gonna play Mario Party in the gym and we need two more people,” 11-year-old Chara said, speaking for Romy.

“Yeah, that!”

“I never played Mario Party before. I tried once, but my grandma’s disk was messed up. I guess we could,” 11-year-old me said.

“Yay! Come on, we’re gonna start now!” Just before my past self could leave, our teacher came up to him.

“Your mother’s here to pick you up now,” she said. I could see the look on my past self’s face. He was on the verge of tears. He didn’t want to cry. He left without saying goodbye.

“That really hurt me, but now I understand why you did it. You were like me. You had to stay brave,” Romy said.

“Wait, was this whole thing just therapy for you?” I asked.

“No, not at first. I was hoping you would learn something from this, too.”

“I learned that we were destined to meet. But the universe had other plans.”

“Like I said three years ago, I really wish we had become friends under better circumstances. Now let’s go watch the next memory.”

Now we were on a boat. I remember this. This was 7th grade now. Now that we were in middle school, our Christmas/End of Term parties got an increase in budget. I guess this was before Kan High spent it all on military grade weapons and junk. Standing at the bow were Kim Probable and I. I still don’t know how she ended up in my world, and I especially don’t know how she ended up going backwards in time, either, because otherwise she would’ve been like 11.

“Hey, Kim,” my 13-year-old self began to ask.

“Yeah?” 13-year-old Kim responded.

“Listen. Recently I learned from a certain famous skeleton that stalking people is bad. So I don’t have a crush on Kumatora anymore.”

“That’s good to know.”

“But I think I learned something else.”

“Oh?”

“Kumatora and I would never have worked out. She’s way older than me. So I did some thinking, and I know who I really like now.”

“Who?”

“You. Huh?!”

When my past self turned to look at Kim, she was gone in an instant. Had he been imagining her this whole time? Obviously not, with what I know now. But back then, I didn’t know. And it scared me.

“So what’s the point of all this? Christmas sucks?” I asked.

“No! You don’t get it!” Romy replied, frustrated.

“No, I don’t. Please explain to me what you’re getting at.”

“*sigh* I’m trying to show you that your heart is the strongest this time of year. Your emotions can sometimes get the better of you if you’re not careful enough. I’ve shown you sadness. I’ve shown you love. I’m trying to tell you that you need to do a better job at controlling your emotions before they consume you, like they have in the past. I mean look at that 5th grade memory. You stayed strong, even in the face of sadness. Be more like him, y’know?”

“Heh. You’ve grown a lot since you started dating my other half, haven’t you?”

“Well yes, but— That’s besides the point!!”

“No, I’d say it’s part of it. I’m proud of you. I’ve been quite bitter this year, haven’t I? But I promise you, after all is said and done, you’ll be back. Mysteo, too. And we can all be happy together.”

“But we don’t... Listen. I’m trying to help you move past the grief.”

“But I’m so close to fixing this!”

“STOP!!! There’s one more memory I want to show you.”

One year later. The Kan High pool room. This was only months away from the beginning of 9th grade, the beginning of this bizarre adventure. I could see myself, hanging out with Mysteo and Liz, as we usually did.

“What do you guys want for Christmas?” my 14-year-old self asked.

“Probably a new amp for my bass. And a bass to go with my new amp. Preferably one that looks like Marceline’s from Adventure Time,” 14-year-old Mysteo answered.

“i watn a cat or soemthig idk lpl,” 14-year-old Liz answered. God, I can’t understand her past self anymore.

“What about you, TC?”

“I don’t want anything, really. My friends are the greatest gift of all.”

“Dude, that’s so corny.”

“Fine then. I want a Nintendo Switch because none of the stores around here have the Wii U version of the new Zelda game, for some reason. Also I want to know your name, mysterious onlooker.”

“Haha, nope! Not gonna happen!”

“Come on, just tell me!” This was a fun sight, but I still don’t know how this was relevant.

“Do you get it now?” Romy asked me.

“Eh... still no,” I said.

“He literally said the exact thing I was trying to show you.”

“That no one sells the Wii U version of Breath of the Wild? Why would I care? Tears of the Kingdom is out now.”

“Your friends! You have friends! You don’t need— You know what? Maybe the next spirit will help you. I’m done. Now if you’ll excuse me, I gotta get back to playing Mario Party with your other half. This was a waste of my time.”

“Don’t worry, Romy. I’ll take over for you.”

End of Intermezzo

Movement 3:
Lullay, Thou
Little Tiny Child
The Case of Charis “Chara”
Desiree Brady

FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, there was peace, as every heart

prepared room for the new savior. That moment, however, faded almost as soon as it began, thanks to a heavenly light. Well, it was less because of the light, and more because of the wise guys who couldn't keep their mouths shut. And now, because of it, King Herod was pissed. Fearing that he may be usurped by a so called "King of Kings," he ordered a massacre of all infants, from birth to age two. Rumors of this quickly spread throughout the land, and Judea was in utter turmoil. Soon, these rumors reached a family in Bethlehem, a mother—Posano—and her two children. The eldest child was no older than 14, considered an adult. Her name was Charis. The youngest child had only breathed the air outside the womb for a few days. His name was Iona. There was no father. No one knew the father, though perhaps that was for the best. Together they lived in a hovel, which was not a very good hiding spot from a bloodthirsty king and his loyal men.

When Posano heard the rumors, she knew her son was no longer safe. "Charis," she said, "I need you to take your brother somewhere safe."

"Why can't you, mother?" Chara asked with a slight whine.

"I am still far too weak to travel. I fear that it will be too late by the time I recover to a point where I can."

"B-but—"

"I know you will miss me. I will miss you, as well. But for the purposes of your journey, Iona is now your son."

Charis, though reluctant, knew she had to be up to this task. She nodded at her mother, hugged her goodbye, swaddled her brother, hastily packed some rations, and headed out. At her age, stealth shouldn't have been an issue. She certainly had the dexterity and slender build to get past anyone with ease, and if they did notice her, she could have outrun them even while carrying a baby. There was only one problem: what was a safe place to hide from Herod? Obviously it would have to be somewhere outside his kingdom, but the kingdom was so vast. It's not like she could just find the closest nation to Judea... or could she? Not too far outside the kingdom was Egypt. She heard that Alexandria was a very beautiful city, and it wasn't that far away, either. If she rented a mule, and assuming she would stop every, say, four hours to rest and eat, she would be there in about five days, possibly longer. After some careful planning, Charis spent the last of her money on a mule rental and rode off into the night before anyone could spot her. She and Iona had a long, restless journey ahead of them.

What felt like hours had passed, and in that time, Charis began to zone out.

"Hey, Chara. Why do you always get to play as Anakin?" a voice asked.

"I... I don't know. I guess I can relate a lot to his story," another responded.

"Does that mean that someday, we're gonna fight?"

"Heh. We're siblings. It's inevitable, ZoZo. But eventually we'll put our differences aside.

Maybe one of us will take it too far."

"Haha, yeah, you!"

"Maybe. But the point is, no matter the quarrel, we'll always have each other, and who knows? It could take a few weeks for us to find forgiveness, it could take well over 20 years, but by the end of it, we'll be back to normal."

“You’re right, sis. By the way, this level’s on a timer, so we can’t be dawdling.”

Perplexed by the vision (memory?), or perhaps enchanted by it, Charis snapped out. It had finally dawned on her: she had no idea how to get to Alexandria. All she knew was that she had made it to the Mediterranean coast, as the starlit sky was reflected on the sea like a glistening mirror. She was, without a doubt, lost. That was it for her. She and Iona were as good as dead. But before she could cry, she saw a glimmer of hope. A stranger, off in the distance, approaching her. She decided to approach him, as well. “Excuse me,” Charis asked, “but where am I?”

“Jaffa. I’m wondering how someone so young made it so far,” said the stranger.

“Jaffa?! That’s the exact opposite direction of where I’m supposed to be! At this rate, I’ll never make it to Alexandria!”

“Woah, woah, woah. Why do you want to go to Alexandria?”

“Haven’t you heard? Herod’s sending his men to slaughter babies. I need to go into hiding, to protect this little guy.” Charis showed the man her brother.

“But why Alexandria?”

“Well, it’s far, and it’s not in Herod’s kingdom, and—”

“There’s no need to travel so far. Why, there’s no need to go outside the kingdom! You should go to Jerusalem!”

Charis pondered this proposition, but knew something felt off about it.

“Jerusalem? Isn’t that the capital city? Surely security would have been ramped up there, right?” she asked.

“No, no! Not at all! You see, if all of Herod’s men are out and about across the farthest reaches of his kingdom, from Galilee to Idumea, then how many men would be left in the capital?”

“Huh... That’s actually a really good point. Very well then. I shall head to Jerusalem.”

Charis prepared to ride again, but the man was not finished speaking.

“Oh, and if you do run into any trouble, the city is huge anyway. There’s lots of nooks and crannies to hide in.”

“Okay, thanks. By the way, I’m Charis.”

“Fidel. And here, I’ll show you where to go so you don’t get lost again. Just go... that way!” Fidel pointed southeast. Charis thanked him once more and headed off.

Meanwhile, in Bethlehem, soldiers questioned Posano. They asked her about Charis, so she said that since she was an adult she had decided to move out. Then they asked if she had any other children. Posano told them she didn’t, despite knowing they had seen her pregnant before. She then added that she was pregnant recently, but tragically had a miscarriage. The soldiers remained skeptical of her testimony, but didn’t have any reason to investigate further, so they went off. *That was close, Posano thought, but they’re smarter than that. They won’t buy it for too long. They’ll find a hole in my testimony somehow, somewhere. But I hope that it bought you enough time, Charis.*

Charis was exhausted, so she decided to rest inside a small cave, hidden behind some rocks. The desert was cold and unforgiving that time of year, so she needed any shelter she could get. She and Iona quickly fell asleep.

“So, ZoZo... Even after everything I did, you still forgive me?” Chara, one of the prior voices, asked.

“Of course. Remember when you told me that we would always find forgiveness, no matter what?” ZoZo, the other voice, answered.

“Well yes, but—”

“So, I forgive you. Why is that such a hard concept for you to grasp?”

“I killed countless innocents. I wiped out two entire universes, if only for a moment.”

“That wasn’t you. That was CHARA BRANDO. You’re Chara Brady. You’re my sister.”

“I’m a monster.”

“You’re human. You’re you.”

Charis woke up, once again confused by her dream. But Jerusalem wasn’t very far. She packed up her little cave camp, grabbed Iona, mounted her mule, and headed off once again. It’s difficult being stealthy in broad daylight, though. Therefore, Charis had the perfect solution. Just like the story of Moses, she would hide Iona in her basket. That way, no one would be suspicious of her. Eventually, she reached a gate. Her goal was complete. She had finally arrived in Jerusalem. Stationed right outside, however, was a centurion. Bad news.

“State your name and business,” he commanded, coldly.

“I am Charis, daughter of Posano. I have come because my mother has sent me here,”

Charis answered.

“So you are not entirely sure? Very well then. May I ask, what’s in the basket?”

“Oh, the b-basket? It’s empty. I was hoping to use it after purchasing some fresh produce from the market.”

“But you said you didn’t know why you were here.”

“Well, when you asked me about the basket, I suddenly remembered.”

“And give me one good reason why I shouldn’t be suspicious of that.”

“Well... I’m 14. I don’t have an adult mind like you yet.” The centurion thought for a moment.

“That checks out. Welcome to Jerusalem, Charis. Do not be alarmed if there seems to be more of a military presence than usual, from us or from your king. After all, he ordered them here, but I’m not quite sure why. No one has told me yet.”

Very bad news. Charis was promised that Herod’s men would be away. *It’s okay*, she thought. *If I just keep up this charade, no one will suspect a thing. I should find an inn next.* She parked her mule outside the gate and headed in. The city was bustling this time of year. She wondered what for. The streets were filled with people from all over Judea, perhaps others from the rest of Herod’s kingdom, and maybe even just a few from Rome who weren’t soldiers. She navigated through the crowds and eventually found herself at the nearest inn. Before she could open the door, a man flung it open, fleeing from the hotel in a rush and knocking Charis down. “And stay out, you dirty thief!” shouted the innkeeper. “Oh, sorry! Not you, the guy who just left. Anyway, come in, come in.”

Charis did as the innkeeper told. The innkeeper was an elderly woman, but clearly still more than capable of fending off thieves.

“Now, please, make yourself comfortable. You remind me of my granddaughter. So, what brings you here?”

“Well,” Charis explained, “I need a place to stay for a while.”

“Until Herod calls off his massacre?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“So then I take it you have a little baby with you.”

“Well no, but let’s say hypothetically that maybe I do.”

“Don’t worry, you’re safe here. Now where is he?”

Charis uncovered the basket. Iona was safe and healthy. The innkeeper told Charis that she could sleep in her quarters for as long as she needed to. After all, the innkeeper was already used to working late nights anyway, so her room was practically abandoned. Charis was thrilled by her generosity, rushed upstairs, and made herself comfortable. She could finally make up for all the sleep she had lost. In her sleep, she had another dream. But this one wasn’t a “memory.” It was a premonition. She saw that Chara girl from her other dreams, along with ZoZo and a few other people she hadn’t seen in her dreams before. They gathered together as they prepared to conquer a giant dark storm cloud.

Chara woke up. “She’s right down this door, officers,” she faintly heard the innkeeper say. Suddenly, she could hear the footsteps of three, maybe four different people. Her heart was pounding. The door opened, as two of Herod’s men invited themselves in. Following behind were the innkeeper and Fidel.

“Charis, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to rat you out, but they were paying me a handsome sum. What was I supposed to do, reject it?” the innkeeper said.

“I, however, am not sorry. I can’t believe you actually fell for it. You’re smarter than you look, but you’re just as gullible. In other words, shoulda went with your gut,” said Fidel, the traitor. “Boys, take the infant away. And as for Charis? Leave her be. Let her wallow in despair.”

The soldiers left with Fidel, and the innkeeper, though remorseful, had other things to do than comfort Charis. *Mom... what do I tell her? I... I failed!* Charis thought to herself. She had no one left, and so, she left the city, hoping that maybe a lion would show up and give her a more merciful death than waiting for the desert heat to claim her life. She walked until she spotted a fig tree, and so she sat under it.

"You in trouble, too?" a man asked. He was sitting on the other side of the tree.

"Maybe not with the law, but definitely in a million other ways," Charis replied.

"Sounds rough. Sometimes I wonder if my days are numbered, if I'm beyond salvation."

"No way, man. Think about it. From what I hear, this whole thing started when some wise men asked the king where to find the King of Kings. If these men are to be believed, then salvation is coming real soon."

"Yeah, but... I'm still worried. I'm worried that I'll be dead before that day comes."

"You know... I kind of am, too. I feel like the scum of the earth right now. I listened to complete strangers these past couple days, and now my brother's as good as dead. There's no one I can trust anymore."

"Wait, you made it all the way here with a baby? And you didn't get caught until just now? That's pretty impressive. Tell you what. You don't need to worry anymore. I'll get your brother back. You go find a place to seek refuge until Herod gives up or dies, whichever comes first. I'll make sure your brother's taken care of."

"And how can I trust you? I trusted everyone else, and look where that got me."

“Because you showed me how to be selfless. You’re so young, and yet you’ve risked your life to try and save your brother’s. Also, I’m a thief. Stealing your brother back from the government will be the ultimate heist.”

“Thank you, erm...”

“Dismas.”

“I’m Charis.”

There was hope again in Charis’s once hopeless world. Dismas ran back to Jerusalem, ready to pull off the ultimate heist. And as for Charis, well, there was only one thing she could do. She had taken quite the detour, but now it was finally time to get back on track. It was finally time for her to go to Alexandria.

A couple years had passed, and Charis was living quite comfortably in Alexandria. Dismas, as promised, had already returned Iona to her. Something about Iona was special to Herod. Maybe it was because he was being carried in a basket, much like Moses was. Maybe he thought Iona was the so-called “King of Kings.” A special execution ceremony was prepared for him, and before the ceremony began, Dismas stealthily swapped him out for a bag of wheat. Charis and her brother were finally safe. Charis decided to take her brother on a shopping trip with her, as they were running low on food. As the two left their abode, Charis saw something in the square, someone familiar in the crowd. Could it be? She ran up to the person, just to be sure.

“Mother!” Charis exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“Why hello, Charis. Oh, is that little Jonathan? He’s grown so much!” Posano greeted, excited to see her two children once again. “I came to get you two. Haven’t you heard the news? Herod has died. The massacre is over!”

“That’s great news! We can come home now!”

The family, now reunited, decided to return to Bethlehem.

“Mother, what happened when we were gone?”

“Herod’s men came to me, asking about Iona. I told them I had a miscarriage. When they found you in Jerusalem, they knew I was lying, and so they had me thrown in jail. I thought I was going to stay in that cell forever, but that’s when a nice young man came and broke me out. He said he knew his fate. Even though he was a kind young man, he was destined to be a thief, to die by the side of a savior. So he decided to be a good thief, stealing righteously. When I asked him why he thought this about himself, he said that he was traveling to Egypt, delivering an infant to a young woman there. On the way, he met another family in exile. Their baby prophesied to him, telling him such.”

“That... was a lot of information to take in. But because that story sounded so crazy, I’m going to assume you met Dismas. He’s a friend of mine.”

“I thought Iona was dead, and that I was wrong. I thought that maybe, just maybe, the task I gave you was too much for a girl your age. And yet you pulled through. And I’m so proud of you.”

Charis, Iona, and Posano had finally returned home from their journey. With Herod gone, they could finally rest.

End of Movement 3

Intermezzo

A Frigid Carol Ringing

“MYSTEO?! WHY are you here now?! Have you come to ruin my plans,

too?!” I asked. Under normal circumstances, I’d be happy to see her.

“Yeah, pretty much,” she said.

“Very well then. Let’s just get this over with. You’re gonna show me how I’m making everyone’s lives miserable by trying to help them out, right?”

“How is bringing your friends back helping everyone?”

“Okay, my friends and I.”

“I hate to say it, but it’s been almost four years. They’ve all moved on, at least enough to not spend their time grieving like you have. Quit sulking and be your jolly old self again! And forget I’ve ever been this energetic and excited before!”

“You’re dead because of me. I should’ve been a better friend to you.”

“Nonsense! You were my best friend. You did everything you could to protect me, until I had no choice but to leave you. And though that was the end of me, I am grateful for all you’ve done. And you’re never gonna hear me say any of that ever again.”

“You killed me. And then you tried to destroy the omniverse.”

“Oh, I did? I mean y-yes, I did. And I apologize. Now come on, I need to show you what you’re doing.”

She took me by the hand as we flew off into the night. Guess it’s time to see the current happenings. I looked around and everyone was acting like an idiot. I did this? They seem to be in some sort of trance, and they could easily hurt themselves. Bumping into walls, tripping over each other, eating nothing. It’s only a matter of time before one of them does something really stupid, like try to operate a vehicle. What have I done?

“Okay, I think I learned my lesson now. Bringing you guys back wasn’t worth holding everyone hostage and—”

“Now wait just a second, kid. You think I’m just gonna let you off easy like that? I know you’re just trying to trick me. We’ve got things to see.”

It wasn’t a trick. I’m being genuine. But I decided to hold my tongue regardless. I want to see where this is going. We ended our flight in front of a grocery store. Fred. F*cking. Meyer. Where it all began. Somehow I felt anxious, but I had to remind myself that we were in the present. I wasn’t gonna see the story of my life in real-time again. This reassurance did not help.

We entered the store and wandered for a bit. And then I saw them.

“Mom! Dad!” I screamed. But no response.

“They can’t hear you. Not unless you speak to their hearts, their SOULs. You trapped them in a crappy Hallmark movie. Your mother is now a girlboss from the big city who’s been so caught up in her job, she’s forgotten the spirit of Christmas. Your father is the country boy that’s gonna teach her a thing or two about humility,” Mysteo explained.

“Well, at least they’re still together.”

“What’s the end goal?”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone’s trapped in a movie, a holiday special. What happens to them after the credits roll?”

“I’m not sure...”

“Now, the next thing I want to show you.”

We took off again. What is happening anymore? I’m feeling a sense of whiplash, she keeps jumping from one subject to another. Actually, in all this time, I hadn’t really seen her. I don’t know why, I guess I just felt her presence and immediately knew it was her without even looking. As I glance over to her face, I notice she looks... significantly younger. Like... Like she was the Mysteo I knew when we took down the Illuminati all those years ago.

“Forgive me for asking, but... why do you look like a 14-year-old?”

“Oh, uh... Haha, f-funny thing about that is... is... I’m a ghost, remember? I can be whatever age I want to be.”

“But why 14?”

She stopped our flight. It appears I have cornered her, in the only place that has literally zero corners. What is happening?

“Okay, I think I owe you a confession. I’m... I’m not the Mysteo you think I am. I didn’t die from sacrificing myself for your happy ending, I died during the war between Skaia and Subconcia. I have no clue what happened to the other Mysteo,” she said, solemnly.

“So you didn’t actually kill me?”

“No, I was just along for the ride. I was tethered to her. I should have warned you that what you were trying to do with trying to fix her wouldn’t work, because I had been trying that same exact thing all the way until her demise. I pretended I was you so I could finally speak to what remained of her original heart. And it worked.”

“I see... I think I understand. Bringing you— erm, the other Mysteo back would completely undermine everything she and you and everyone else had done to fix everything?”

“Now you get it!”

“But what about Romy? Can she—”

“She made a sacrifice, too. A sacrifice to save a goddess. You need not undo a heroic death, nor a just one. Those are up to fate.”

“...then I don’t want this anymore. I want to fix this mess. The deal’s off!”

Mysteo stared at me with her blank, white eyes. I’d call them “soulless,” but this literally is a projection of her SOUL. “What deal?” she asked.

“Wait, this whole time, you thought I ALONE was capable of making this mess? Wow, I’m actually honored to know that people think I’m more powerful than I really am.”

“Alien X.”

“Oh, right. But this wasn’t my doing. I made a Christmas wish... a deal with the Devil. But I don’t want it anymore.”

I closed my eyes and reached as far as I could into my SOUL.

“Everyone, it’s time for me to make things right. I’m sealing the fountain, once and for all!”

End of Intermezzo

Movement 4:
The Blight Before
Christmas (or,
Strider's Revenge)

The Case of Chishi "TC"

Kirby Strider

WELL, GUESS THIS IS my life now. I only wanted to help fix everything,

and what do I get? An all expenses paid trip to a desert– erm, tundra island because I didn't "stick to the script" that I didn't know existed. I glanced over at the sign. The Island of Broken Toys... ain't that the truth. I don't know if I'll ever get fixed... To Hell with this. It's too dangerous to be left alone with my thoughts, I'm outta here.

I jumped into the freezing lake and swam to shore, which thankfully wasn't too far away. Now what I need to do is what I meant to do from the very beginning: find TC and kick his sorry little ass. I ran through the woods, hoping to find a way out, but instead all I found was someone running toward me. "Bail? Is that you?" I asked.

"More or less, yeah," she said. "What are you doing here? And how have you resisted the curse?"

"I came to get Chara. She ran straight in, something about 'retribution.' Instead I got a little sidetracked with some story about a snail that was almost definitely a rip-off of Bird Box, but I snapped out of it after having a dream about Romy. How about you?"

"Huh. Sounds kinda like my situation. I was trapped in a 'parody' of The Nightmare Before Christmas, if you could call it that. I only snapped out of it when I saw Bec."

"Your dog? Didn't you say he became a part of TC's eight-year-old ghost?"

"Yeah, but that's the weird part. He was back. TC said he recreated him as a Christmas gift, so maybe he did a little ectobiology? Ugh, I don't have time for this! We have too much at hand!"

"You're right! We need to find TC and rescue Chara!"

Charis, now finally back in Bethlehem, was sent by her mother to buy some ingredients from the market. She had something special planned for that night. On the way to the market, Charis heard a peculiar voice, not attached to anybody nearby. Could it be God?

“Okay Chara, you can snap out of it now,” it said.

“Hey TC. Where am I?” Chara asked.

“Does it look like ancient Judea?”

“Kinda...?”

“Then you’re probably at the mall. Here, I’ll come get you.” Just like that, the Middle Eastern village Chara had become so used to was revealed to be a Macy’s. Nothing more, nothing less. Just your run-of-the-mill department store.

“Hold on. I came here to put you in your place and finally redeem myself.”

“No need. I’ve already sealed the darkness away. Plus you don’t need to redeem yourself. The fact that you’re here with us is enough redemption.”

Chara couldn’t help but cry after hearing TC’s words. It was exactly what she needed to hear. “Okay then. I’ll be waiting... brother dearest.”

“Hey! Just because ZoZo calls me that, doesn’t give you the right to say it!” TC and Chara laughed together.

Huh, how odd. The TV lost its signal. I hope nothing bad’s happening in there. I glance out the window of the RV to see that the veil of darkness has vanished. The curse has lifted? Something’s afoot. I’m going in. It’s time for me to make things right.

“So this circle of... tree elevators will get us to TC?” Aris asked.

“I hope so. I’m not sure where they all go, but one of them’s bound to take us where we want to. Now let’s hurry. I sense the curse has lifted, so we might not have time before these trees become... regular trees.”

We checked elevator after elevator, but all of them were nothing more than just empty shafts. Eventually, there was only one tree left. With no other option, we pressed the button to open the doors... and to our surprise, there wasn’t an empty shaft waiting for us this time! We quickly entered, pressed the only button inside the elevator, and prayed it took us to our destination. After a few seconds, the doors opened again to reveal... hanging clothes. I think we’re in someone’s closet. Wait, I recognize these clothes. They’re TC’s. We’re in his house. Bingo. Now to play the waiting game, since his room is empty.

“So, this is TC’s room, huh?” Aris asked.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Wasn’t that kinda obvious?”

Aris’s expression changed to one of confusion. “Well, it’s just that... something’s bugging me about that.”

“Elaborate.”

“Doesn’t he live with you? Like don’t you two share a place?”

“That’s... That’s irrelevant. He has a right to keep his room with his parents. He can’t stay away from them for too long.”

“So then it’s the same with your parents, right?” I have no clue what she’s trying to get at.

“O-of course. My mom, that is. I still have yet to meet my... mi padre... papa... Oh, I get it now. You’re trying to suggest that TC and I are the same. I still don’t understand how that’s relevant, but you’re right. I’m going to meet with Jon and my father this New Year’s Eve, I promise!” Aris made a soul-gazing glance, as if to tell me I was completely wrong.

“Are you purposely trying to evade the question? Why do you live together when you guys still have rooms with your parents? I don’t need to know why you two have rooms at your moms’ houses. I need to know why you have an apartment.”

“Who told you that we even had one?”

“I investigate matters that never pertained to me. It’s what I do.”

“It’s because we’re girlfriend and boyfriend and that’s what people do when they become very close to each other!!! We agreed to rent one last month because, unbeknownst to him, I was gonna—”

“Gonna what?” I asked, seemingly unphased by Bail and Aris chatting in my closet. This wouldn’t have been the first time, after all. Wait, I never talked about that one.

“There you are! You’re overdue for an enchanted evening, a date between my sole and your ass!” Aris screeched.

“I missed you, too.”

“Hey Aris, did ZoZo head in, by any chance, too?” Chara asked.

“No, I made her watch us to see if anything bad ha— Wait, Chara? Why are you with him? Did you beat me to the ass kicking?”

“No, TC actually just picked me up from the mall, which I thought was Israel before Christ’s era.”

“Actually, it’s before the common—”

“Forgive me for interrupting your Reddit atheist rant, because I’m forgiving you for interrupting a conversation between me and Bail.” (I was just correcting her on what BCE stands for, Christianity barely even exists in this universe. Why do you keep forgetting that? Wait, what the heck is Christmas for then? (And no, you can’t move your rant to parentheses, either. Jesus is the Sage of Light in Hylia’s court. ;P))

“Oh, uh... What I was saying? It’s nothing! It’s just a Christmas surprise that, unlike yours, I will not be leaking early,” Bail said.

“Okay, I get it. Now can you two please exit my closet? I need to go in there and punish myself. I messed up.”

The two did as I asked them to, but I didn’t hold my end of the bargain. One more thing to punish myself over... or maybe not. Immediately after leaving the closet, Bail hugged me as tight as she could. We both began to tear up.

“Please don’t do anything like this ever again, and if you do, then please don’t plagiarize random movies!”

“I won’t, dear. And one of these stories was fully original.”

“It was Bible fanfiction.”

“Still counts.”

We never wanted to let go, but we had to save our love for later, because unbeknownst to everyone else, there was a looming threat I never once considered had it not been for that

Mysteo ghost. As much as I hate pushing people around, I commanded everyone to meet me at Panthera Square for an important meeting, and a formal apology.

“Okay, so what exactly did you want us here for?” I asked. Even though the curse has seemingly completely lifted by now, the square was hauntingly empty. Maybe that’s because it’s like 11:00 at night.

“Listen up, all of you,” TC said, “because what I’m about to say is extremely important. I... I’m sorry for the Hell I’ve put you all through. I totally shouldn’t have.”

“Hey, I didn’t hate it. It was fun, reminded me of WandaVision, in a way. But, that being said, don’t do it again and I’ll accept your apology,” Chara said.

“Yeah, looking back at it, it wasn’t a totally awful experience,” Bail added.

“You guys aren’t supposed to be encouraging me, you know.”

“Okay then. I’ll never forgive you.”

“That’s much better. Wait no it’s not, I DEMAND FORGIVENESS!!!” We all laughed. Suddenly, Bail approached TC.

“Well, I think you’ve earned your early Christmas gift by owning up to your mistakes. Here.” She handed him a small, royal blue box. I think I know where this is going.

“What’s...?” He’s speechless. I think he knows, too.

“Open it!” TC did as Bail asked, revealing a beautiful golden pendant, with a sapphire gem inspired by a certain Spiritual Stone from a bygone era.

“It’s... It’s b...” He’s choking on tears. “It’s beautiful...”

"I know I've been a little commanding right now, but... Marry me." TC's eyes widened even further somehow, with a smile on his face so wide and a blush so red you'd be forgiven for mistaking him for a certain famous tomato who likes to tell stories.

"I— *sniff* excuse me for one second."

"Of course."

TC walked away for a moment, behind a statue of a jaguar, and—I sh*t you not—yelled as loud as he possibly could, "SUBLIME!!!!!!!!!!!"

Then, he returned, saying, "I don't know, I'll have to think on it more... over a glass of mulled wine, with my bestie, just like the good ol' days!"

"You two are still legally underage!" I interjected.

"I thought you hated that Christmas."

"Not anymore. Santa died, that was sad, but we had so much fun. Oh, right. Speaking of that night—"

"Your IDs will show that you're 20. You can't buy wine."

"We're from one year in the future, remember?"

"THAT'S NOT HOW THE LAW WORKS!!!"

"I miss trolling you. Can I join?"

"Aris? Chara?" I could hear a familiar voice calling. TC could hear it, too, and his face grew into a more serious look.

"Okay, listen. We're running out of time here."

"ZoZo? What does she have to do with this?"

“This isn’t about her. It’s something much worse. She could be hurt. We all could be. All these innocent people. I broke a contract.”

“Broke a... Dude, are you okay?”

“Contract?”

“*big le sigh* I, uh... I may have summoned a certain sadistic holiday demon and... made a deal with him... to bring back Romy and Mysteo... by trapping you all into holiday specials of my own creation...?”

Everyone looked at me with such concern, but not like an “Oh, how could you have made such a foolish decision?” look of concern, more like an “I’ll have what he’s (insert action related to substances that can be abused).” look of concern. “Look, I’ll clarify for you all,” I said. “That one Christmas, five years ago? The real reason I’ve hated thinking about it had nothing to do with Santa dying. I passed out after getting a little too tipsy—”

“An admission of teen drinking? I ought to have you locked up by now!” Aris interrupted... again.

“LET ME FINISH! Anyway, I had a dream where this... humanoid rabbit thing, who kinda looked like a weird Bugs Bunny, told me he could help me, but I woke up before he could tell me how. Truth be told, I think it was because he told me doing so would ruin more Christmases. Well I went back to him last night and asked him to bring Mysteo and Romy back. I thought I was doing something nice, but I have since realized that doing so would selfishly undo their heroic and just sacrifices to grant us our new beginning.”

“And he said he would, as long as you kept us all busy?” Bail asked.

“Pretty much.”

“Lowkey, I thought it was your Alien X that was doing all of this,” Chara said.

“Mysteo thought that, too!”

“Mysteo? It worked?”

“Nope. I forgot to mention that just earlier, I was told by TCsprite that I was going to meet three spirits.”

“Oh, like A Christmas Carol?”

“That’s what that story was?! This whole time?! I was going crazy trying to remember the name of it all evening! Anyway, Romy showed me the past, to show that I’m extremely emotional this time of year, and always have been. Also I think it was a bit of therapy for herself, probably because she hasn’t seen any of those memories for herself in the Dream Bubbles.”

“How on Earth would you know that?”

“Mysteo came next, and she showed me the mess I made. Of course, I learned my lesson the second she made me go outside, but she didn’t believe me. Then I made the executive decision to seal the fountain of shadow that covered Ame d’Alene, and—”

“You said that you were gonna meet three spirits. I counted, you only mentioned two.”

“That’s where we are now, I believe.” Suddenly, I could feel the ground rumble all around us. Then, a voice boomed, “You twit! You are almost there. So finish off these worms!”

What was that noise? Oh no, Aris, Bail, my sister... and my brother. They’re all in danger! I have to find them!

Before us stood a large, shadowy figure. It was almost completely black, save for perfectly white teeth and claws, and two eyes like burning fire. Its silhouette resembled that of a rabbit. A mysterious symbol was on his chest, also burning. Instead of legs, he had a furnace, burning hotter than Hell itself, walking on spider-like legs. This must be the demon TC was referring to. Well, he's here now. The final spirit confrontation. The battle for Christmas Yet to Come.

"I'm not killing my friends for a chance to see the ones who spent their lives to preserve ours," TC said quite sternly.

"Your dead friends? Hah! This was never about them! I'm almost free and now... Christmas and your SOUL are mine!"

"That was never a part of the deal!!"

"Like you said, the deal's off. THE PAST MUST BE PAID FOR." The

demon let out a roaring cackle. But, when it comes down to it, we've faced off against larger threats than this wabbit.

"We can take you on," I said.

"Bail, what—"

"That's right. We're strong enough," Aris added.

"And since I've got my Stand back, I can be on the offensive AND heal you all!" Chara shouted, enthusiastically. Something tells me she's been waiting for an excuse to use 「Girl's Best Friend」 for a long, long time.

“You know what? You’re right. Let’s take him head-on right now, before he has a chance to do something dangerous like making us face our nightmares, slowly corrupt us into his minions, and harvest our SOULs!”

Hey all, your friendly neighborhood TCsprite here! So originally I wanted to show the final battle in a very humorous fashion. You see, I wanted to provide it in the form of a special animation, in which it starts out like it would become a Homestuck-esque epic battle, only for it to turn into a good old fashioned Flip-O-Rama (like from Captain Underpants), all set to 100 geecs’ “sympathy 4 the grinch.” Of course, due to the fact that authors are naturally allergic to animating and don’t even know how to finish a storyboard in less than a year, this will not happen for a while. On top of that, I have no idea how I would implement such a thing naturally in a Google Doc. In fact, this story was planned very early on to be in MSPA format, rather than the typical style, but that would’ve taken forever. So for now, you’ll just have to accept that our sadistic holiday demon friend died by being curbstomped indefinitely by TC and company with no evidence. I sincerely apologize for this inconvenience, and I wish you all a merry Christmas.

Oh, it looks like the problem has been taken care of. Guess that means I’m a little late for the party. Doesn’t make my invitation invalid, teehee. I joined in the holly jolly curbstomping until the weird rabbit demon started bleeding... whatever demons bleed. “v-very well then, You win. And I was so close too,” the demon said, before fading to dust. Everyone celebrated, as Christmas was saved. I wasn’t finished, though, because I didn’t do anything. And on top of

that, curbstomping a demon to death was not on my agenda. Simply put, that's not why I'm here.

"TC," I said, approaching my estranged brother.

"...ZoZo," he said, not wanting to look into my eyes. Understandable, after the things I said to him. But, once again, that's why I'm here.

"Listen. I know you probably hate me—"

"Hate you? Hate you?! ZoZo, I love you! You're literally my sister! I've spent these past three years thinking that YOU hated ME! Because of what you said! But I'm done now. I'm over it. Like you said, Chara's more of a sibling to you than I will ever be, so if you'd rather live the rest of your life with her as your only sibling, then I—"

"I'm sorry." I couldn't hold back my tears. I'm sure this night has been emotional for a lot of us.

"Huh?"

"I said some things I didn't mean, and I wish I hadn't, and I'd take them all back if I could, I was upset because you were trying to protect me, and I didn't know you were trying to protect me, and—"

TC ran toward me and hugged me as tight as he could. "I forgive you," he said, crying just as much as I was. Chara then joined in the hugging-crying festivities, as well, saying, "Isn't this great? The three of us, siblings bound by both blood and love, now with a bond that's stronger than ever. The Strider family has grown so much this evening."

"Amen to that."

"I've always wanted an older sister. Welcome to the family, Chara."

After the hugging was over, I looked over to where the demon's body was once lying. After the ash and dust scattered off in the wind, all that remained was... a coin? I approached it, as the others grew curious by it, as well. I picked up the coin.

"A 'Revive Token?' What's that?" I asked no one in particular, since no one would likely know.

"He did hold his end of the bargain, after all. At least partially," Bail said.

"Huh, guess he did. 'Good for the resurrection of one (1) soul.'"

"So who are you gonna bring back?" Aris asked.

"My best friend?" Chara asked.

"Or yours?" ZoZo asked, as well.

I thought about it for a little bit. Who should I bring back?

TIMER: 99

REVIVE MYSTEO

REVIVE ROMY

Haha, I jest. I've already made up my mind. "Neither," I said. Everyone looked so shocked.

"But you've come so far. What do you mean?"

"I've learned to move on from grief. I'd love to see my friends again, and I will someday. But today's a new day, thanks to them. Besides, I think there's someone who's more deserving of a second chance." This was a weird night, but the good thing was that everyone was alright. Now it is 12 AM, Christmas Day. It's time for us to go home. After I went to bed, I made a wish, placed my revive token under my pillow, and went to sleep.

Coda

War Is Over

“PERHAPS THE MOST surprising Christmas miracle of all this year

was the unexplained revival of Santa Claus, who was declared dead after being an unfortunate victim caught in the fatal crossfire of a shootout in Miami five years ago. Stay tuned for more information, this is Jo E. March-Claire with Channel 6 $\frac{2}{3}$ News, thank you for tuning in to our 6:00 news.”

Christmas dinner with the Striders (featuring a Brady, two (three?) Zoestars, a Harley, and a Walker) has never been bigger. Usually it was just TC and his mom, Hinawa. Joining them this year is Zonathan Zoestar (or Alice Strider, TC’s twin sister), Doug Walker (TC’s father), Chara Brady (ZoZo’s adoptive sister), Mr. and Mrs. Zoestar (Hinawa’s first cousin once removed and his wife, she became really obsessed with DNA testing after the ZoZo incident), and Bail Harley (TC’s new fiancée). Had they known there would’ve been so many guests, Hinawa and Doug would’ve bought a lot more stuff from Fred Meyer.

“So Dad... Sorry if this is a sensitive subject, but why did you have to leave Mom and I before I was born?” TC asked his father.

“Well, son, if I’m going to be honest... It’s because I was a coward. I wanted to become a filmmaker someday, one of the greats like Spielberg or Kubrick. I thought having a child would have slowed me down, let alone twins. As the years went on, I started focusing on making comedy videos online. You may have heard of the Nostalgia Critic, my persona?” Doug explained.

“Well yeah, I knew that. When I found out the freaking Nostalgia Critic was my dad, I pretty much immediately forgave you for leaving.”

“Anyway, as the years went on, I wasn’t really feeling like myself. Channel Awesome felt like a burden, and I kept thinking about that girl whose heart I broke, leaving her with a child—or two, as I now know—all alone. I was going to return to her. And then the world ended. We met each other in the afterlife, we made amends, now we’re back, and, well, that brings us to today.”

“Thanks for clearing that up, Dad. I never knew the story.”

“TC, is everything okay? You look like there’s something on your mind,” Chara said, noticing a look of frustration on TC’s face.

“Oh, yeah. This isn’t about Dad. It’s about... Mom, I fought a demon last night. He told me, ‘The past must be paid for.’ And then he tried to take my SOUL. What’s up with that?”

Hinawa looked at TC sorrowfully. “It’s time I told you about my mother, Wendy—your grandmother,” she said. “Back when she was working for the government, she was visited in a dream by a curious creature she called the ‘Black Hiver.’ In the dream, he said he would help her

with her research for a price: her SOUL. She declined his offer and carried on without him, which, of course, ended in the disaster that was Project A.N.I.M.E.”

“Wait, I thought A.N.I.M.E. was the reason we were here. The Neko subspecies.”

“Very common misconception. I took great care to keep our family’s origins a secret. I just assumed I told you the truth... Later! I need to finish this story, haha! Anyway, the Hiver came back in another dream, basically just to say ‘I told you so.’ He would visit her every night, until around 1980, when she decided that enough was enough. With the help of a medium, she was able to seal the Hiver away somewhere it could never reach her again.”

“You.”

“Mm-hm. I forgive her, though. It seems the curse passed on to you through me, but you seem to have ended it for good.”

“But why did he visit Grandma?”

“He’s always been linked to our bloodline, even before the creation of us Nekos. My grandma Arisu’s great grandmother, Kanata, desperately summoned him when her brother fell ill. She called him Akumausagi. How do I know this? Because they made it into a movie when I was in high school, haha!”

“And I reviewed it in 2013!” Doug chimed in. The Strider-Walker-Zoestar-Brady-Harley family enjoyed the rest of their dinner with laughter and merriment. This was, for TC among others, without a doubt, the best Christmas ever.

And this concludes our very special Christmas special. What, that ending wasn’t satisfying for you? What more do you want? Siblings reunite, a family expands, a curse is

broken. And these are how things happened, after all. I think they wanted more of us. They were expecting TC to get what he wanted, and he didn't. Does it matter? He learned a valuable lesson in the end. Besides, don't lie and tell me you wouldn't rather stay dead right now. Yeah, you're right. If I came back, that would mean the end of me and TC, seeing as his other half is gonna marry Bail. Speaking of, I wonder how my other half is doing? She's not here, no matter how hard I look for her. Did she erase herself from canon? I don't think so. You're too strong to just let yourself be erased. I'd like to think she was scattered across the cosmos, becoming a silent observer of sorts. Regardless, I think we all have our happy endings, even if some of us are among the dearly departed. This is MY story, remember? Stop trying to hijack it. Anyway, dear readers, merry Christmas, and G— God bless us, everyone! HYLIADAMN IT!!!

Merry Christmas!!!

