



# A Yinzer Christmas in the Dark

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A Christmas Novella in the Echoes of the Night Universe

By Michael Armbrust

## Dedication

***To Scott – my ‘sister,’ my chaos twin, and proof that stubbornness is a survival skill.***

***You’ve been through hell and still manage to crack jokes like a champ.***

***If you can get through that, you can get through anything.***

***Here’s a little magic to keep you company while you heal.***

***I expect a full recovery – and at least one dramatic entrance – soon.***

# Snowfall & Sugar Cookies

\* \* \*

Snow pressed thick against the windows, blurring Pittsburgh into soft, shifting shapes of light and shadow. From the living room, the city looked like someone had thrown a blanket over the world and forgotten to tuck it all the way in.

Derek stood on a dining chair, wrestling a strand of Christmas lights like it was an enemy combatant.

"Why," he muttered, "are there three extra bulbs and two fewer hooks?"

"You're the one who insisted on the 'real' lights," Aaron called from the kitchen. "You could've gotten the net kind like a normal person."

"These look better," Derek said through his teeth. "And they were on sale."

"Yeah," Aaron said, "because they're haunted."

A sound that was almost a laugh and almost a cough came from him. Something sizzled in the oven. It did not smell promising.

Nate watched from the couch, the baby warm against his chest, one hand pressed gently along tiny shoulder blades. The small, steady heartbeat pulsed beneath his palm. It still startled him sometimes, how small the baby was—how impossibly heavy with meaning.

Snowstorm outside. Derek swearing at lights. Aaron setting fire to baking sheets. Nina on the floor, wrapping paper clamped between her teeth like a weapon.

Somehow, this was the safest the world had felt in ages.

"You're putting them too close together," Nina said around the tape. "It's gonna look like the tree's having a seizure."

Derek shot her a look. "Do you want a festive Christmas, or do you want to spend the night in the hallway?"

She spat the tape into her hand. "You don't scare me. Your tree-sense does, but you don't."

The baby made a soft sound, somewhere between a sigh and a hiccup. Nate shifted him higher, careful, steady. The kid's dark lashes brushed Nate's shirt. His small hands twitched in sleep.

Something hummed under the surface tonight. A warm, bright thread of magic that followed the baby's breaths.

Not Nate's magic.

The baby's.

He felt it most when the child twitched in his sleep. The air brightened—just a fraction—before settling again.

"Hey," Aaron called, "what's the ruling on mostly-burned cookies? Asking for a friend."

Nina didn't look up. "If by 'friend' you mean 'trash can,' go for it."

"Love the support," Aaron muttered.

The oven door groaned. A wave of heat rolled into the room. Beneath cinnamon and burnt sugar, Nate smelled ozone—sharp, clean, wrong for a winter night.

The baby shifted. His face scrunched, then relaxed.

The string of Christmas lights flickered. All at once.

Derek froze on the chair. "Tell me that was you," he said to Aaron.

"I'm in here ruining baked goods," Aaron said. "Not your wiring."

The lights steadied. The baby exhaled. They brightened again.

Nate sat taller.

"Okay," Nina said, "that was weird."

Derek tested a bulb. "We've got surge protection. Laurel checked the wards last month. Everything's stable."

"Maybe the grid is tired," Aaron said. "Relatable."

The baby laughed—small and breathy.

The lights flickered in perfect time.

Nate's pulse skipped.

"That wasn't—" he began.

"Oh, we saw," Nina said. "Not hallucinating. Haven't even opened wine yet."

"They're reacting to him," Nate murmured.

Derek's expression softened, then broke into something almost pained. "I'm trying very hard not to melt about that."

Nina eyed the lights. "Haunted Christmas tree. Baby's first supernatural flair."

Aaron emerged from the kitchen holding a tray of cookies that ranged from "questionable" to "pure carbon." "As long as the kid isn't summoning demons, I'm good."

The baby yawned. The wards in the walls gave a soft, contented hum.

Everything lined up for one peaceful moment.

Then the lights went out.

All of them.

The apartment fell into sudden, absolute darkness.

Someone swore—Derek, sharp and reflexive.

Nate clutched the baby tighter as the child startled. A warm pulse of magic rolled out of him, brushing the walls.

Something shifted in the dark.

A pan clattered to the floor in the kitchen.

"I didn't drop that!" Aaron yelped.

"Don't move," Derek snapped. His boots scuffed toward the couch. "Everyone stay put."

The baby hiccupped.

From somewhere low in the shadows came a soft, breathy echo:  
hee.

Then again.

Heehee.

The baby giggled.

The darkness giggled back.

# The Blackout

\* \* \*

“Okay,” Aaron whispered. “Nope. No thank you.”

Nate’s eyes strained for shapes. The faint glow from the snow-muted city filtered through the windows, but inside the apartment everything remained drowned in black.

“Derek?” Nate asked quietly.

“I’m here,” Derek answered, reaching him by touch. “You’ve got him?”

“I’ve got him.”

Nina rustled near the coffee table. “If this is Larry-related, I’m digging him up and doing him in again.”

“It’s not Larry,” Nate said, feeling carefully for the quality of the magic around them. Larry’s shadows had been cold. These were warm. Curious.

Heehee.

Soft giggling drifted from the corner near the bookshelves.

“Do not like that,” Aaron muttered.

Everyone froze.

Slowly, shapes began to thicken in the dark—patches of black within black. They gathered on the walls, stretching, bulging, separating.

Small, childlike silhouettes.

Shadow-things.

They turned—not to Nate or Derek or Nina or Aaron—

To the baby.

A warmth spread through the air, tinged with static. Nate’s breath fogged faintly.

“Derek,” Nate whispered. “Do you see them?”

"Yeah," Derek said tightly. "I see them."

One shadow peeled away from the wall and dropped silently to the floor. It toddled closer, leaving a fading trail behind it.

The baby cooed. Delighted.

"Nate?" Derek said, very carefully.

"It's okay," Nate murmured. "Just... watching."

The shadow stopped at the couch. It tilted its head. Raised one small, rounded hand.

Nate felt it—an echo of a question.

Can I?

The baby reached toward it.

Warm magic burst lightly around them, brightening the room for half a heartbeat.

The shadow touched the baby's foot.

No cold. No sting.

Just pleasant, fizzy warmth.

The baby laughed.

Every shadow in the room shivered in harmony.

Heeheehee—

Nina let out a stunned whistle. "Okay, adorable. Also terrifying, but adorable."

Aaron's phone blinked on in his hand, lighting his nervous face. "Flashlight's dead. Of course it's dead. Why are things always dead when I need them?"

He brought it closer. The light sharpened the shadows' edges instead of scattering them.

Dozens of child-sized silhouettes. All clustered around the baby. Mimicking his tiny movements.

"This isn't an attack," Nate whispered. "They're... his. His magic. Projections."

Aaron squeaked as one poked his leg. "Can someone tell your son to stop exploring my personal space?"

The shadows tilted their heads toward the hallway.

Then they moved. With purpose.

"Where are they going?" Derek asked.

Nate swallowed. "Down."

# The Shadows Learn to Play

\* \* \*

The stairwell felt like a throat—narrow, cold, swallowing sound. The emergency light flickered overhead.

Nate held the baby close, the child warm and trusting against his chest. Each step felt loud enough to echo down into the earth.

Derek led, tense as a coiled wire. Aaron muttered anxieties under his breath. Nina scanned the shadows like she might punch one if it got bold.

The shadow-entities slid ahead of them, giggling softly, vanishing and reforming in deeper black.

When they reached the basement door, cold air leaked through the frame, sharp and metallic.

Derek opened it.

The basement stretched out in a wide concrete room, storage cages on one side, blackness on the other.

In the center: the ward.

Laurel's sigils overlaid older carvings. It should have pulsed gently.

Instead, a long crack split one arc of the circle.

Shadows gathered around it like curious children at a campfire.

Nate knelt, feeling the magic tremble beneath him. "This is bad," he murmured. "But not malicious. Just unstable."

Aaron peered over his shoulder. "Unstable in a 'Christmas is ruined' way or a 'we all die' way?"

Nina squinted. "Both."

Derek looked at Nate. "Can you fix it?"

"I shouldn't do it alone."

"I'll help," Nina said instantly.

"Me too," Aaron said, inching closer. "Because I'm clearly invested in my own survival."

Derek stepped forward, arms open. "Give him to me. You'll need both hands."

Nate hesitated, then carefully passed the baby to Derek. The child fussed—until Derek murmured something soft and wordless.

The baby relaxed.

Warmth traveled across the invisible bond between the three of them, settling over Derek like sunlight.

Nate placed his hands on the cracked sigil.

He reached inward—toward the center where his magic and the baby's mixed and resonated.

The baby's power poured through him: curious, bright, eager to help.

Lines on the floor glowed softly.

The crack resisted, then yielded as Nate guided the energy.

New lines blossomed outward, forming a second ring—Laurel's additions harmonizing with the original carvings.

Outer circle for the baby's magic.

Inner circle for the old ward.

Channels between them.

A compromise between generations.

Light flared briefly—

Then steadied.

The ward hummed strong and whole.

The shadows murmured in soft delight.

A moment later the overhead lights flickered on as power returned to the building.

The shadows dissolved into the restored circle—

All except one.

A tiny, cat-shaped patch of darkness remained curled beside Nate's boot, quivering like it wanted attention.

It looked up at Nate.

Then at Derek.

Then at the baby.

The baby smiled in his sleep.

The little shadow hopped closer and settled at Derek's feet.

Aaron pointed. "Did we just adopt a shadow?"

Nina grinned. "Looks like it."

Derek sighed, long and tired. "Of course. What's one more thing to protect?"

The shadow purred.

# Dawn, and Everything After

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By the time they reached the apartment again, the building felt... calm. Balanced, the way a world feels after someone whispers a promise into it.

Lights glowed softly. The wards hummed, steady and reassured.

Inside, the Christmas tree stood untouched, bright and warm.

Nina dropped onto the sofa. "Still technically Christmas."

Aaron found his burnt cookies and declared them haunted. "Not my fault. The spirits interfered."

Derek settled on the couch with the baby asleep against his chest. Nate slid beside him, shoulder to shoulder. The small shadow familiar curled protectively at their feet.

In the brighter room, its shape was more defined: pointed ears, soft tail, body made of darkness that didn't feel dangerous.

"Okay," Nina said, watching it stretch. "It's kind of adorable."

"If it talks," Aaron said, "I'm moving out."

"It won't talk," Nate said. "It's tied to him. It's harmless."

"The kid's got a pet shadow," Derek said. "Guess that's cheaper than a dog."

The baby's fingers twitched. The shadow's tail flicked in sync.

Nate exhaled slowly. "We're going to have to teach him. Sooner than we thought."

"Teach him what?" Derek asked softly.

"How to be this. How not to break the world by accident."

Derek kissed the top of the baby's head. "We'll figure it out."

"We will," Nina said. "Because nobody learns magic alone in this family."

"Family curse," Aaron said. "You're stuck with us, kid. All three of you."

Nate swallowed hard, emotions pressing warm against his ribs.

The room settled into a comfortable quiet. Snow whispered against the window. The tree glowed softly. The small shadow curled in a perfect circle, like punctuation on a promise.

"Next year," Aaron said, "we're watching a movie and that's it. No hauntings."

Nina snorted. "Sure. The universe definitely won't hear that as a challenge."

Derek closed his eyes. "Let's just get through presents first."

Nate leaned into him, letting the warmth of their small, strange, impossible family settle around him.

He looked at the tree lights. They glowed steadily—warm, gentle, unbroken.

"Happy first Christmas," he whispered.

The baby sighed, content.

The lights glowed a little brighter.

And the shadow-familiar purred.

## Author's Note

Stories are small lights we carry for each other—this one was for Scott.