

THE CHRISTMAS CRUSADER

by

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INT. SHOPPING MALL - NIGHT

A polished black boot steps onto a floor with a mirror finish, reflecting the sparkling lights of a thousand shops. Flashes of neon signs and flat-screens assault the senses.

The boot takes regimented steps under a swishing, floor-length black robe belonging to FATHER CHRISTOPHER. He is in his early 30s with a crew cut and a placid expression that betrays his kind face. A crucifix hangs from his necklace.

He walks past a flashy electronics store and takes note of a line of people sat outside its front door, sprawling past the surrounding stores and around the corner.

Just past the store, he approaches a small table from which he picks up a donation box. Out from his robes he slides a key and opens the back latch, revealing a stuffed clump of futuristic, multi-national looking currency.

He lets crack a barely perceptible smile on one corner of his mouth. He looks to see if anyone caught him peeking.

His eyes meet with a BLACK volunteer in a false white beard dressed as SANTA. He rings a bell next to a hanging donation bucket. The man waves to Christopher, smiling.

BLACK SANTA
Happy Holidays, Father Priest!

Christopher responds only by slamming the box shut and escorting it away from the table under his arm. Black Santa shrugs it off and continues ringing.

Passing the electronics store again on his way back -- its line even longer now, doubling back -- Christopher notices a sign indicating a "Midnight Release" of a new product.

He pulls back his sleeve, looking at his watch just as the hour and minute hands meet at twelve. The crowd roars.

Christopher looks up to find an EMPLOYEE unlatching the store doors from the inside. He looks afraid.

The minute the doors unlock, the crowd SLAMS against them, trampling the Employee. Christopher, donation box firmly in hand, attempts to run to his aid.

Any kind of rescue quickly proves impossible as a stampede of guests from both the back of the line and other perched locations around the mall RUSH the door, creating a violent mosh pit of angry, flailing limbs.

Abandoning any hope of reaching the bloodied Employee, Christopher turns around in an attempt to escape, but the crowd has quadrupled in size.

Christopher ducks through people with a trained physical adeptness, sliding and spinning with graceful calm.

He twirls, throwing up his arms to hold the donation box above his head, out of reach. Leaping lunatics inspire him to lower it back down, clutching it to his chest as he dashes in and out of momentarily opening spaces between runners.

Sliding down onto one knee, he limbo-bends underneath the legs of a TALL MAN, immediately hopping up and over the head of a SHORT MAN. He lands hard on one foot, regaining balance.

As the crowd continues to grow, his moves are met with brute opposition. Hands scratch at his face, elbows thrust into his gut, and a purse jams into his throat.

In a series of rabid movements, the donation box is TORN from his hands. It SMASHES into the ground, getting kicked to pieces as the money splays everywhere, lost to the crowd.

Attempts to reclaim it are only met with more frequent obstacles, escalating into a flurry of violent concussions, leaving him bruised and battered from head to toe.

A sleeve is ripped from his robe and his elbow SNAPPED as an obese woman collapses on his head, knocking him out cold.

The deafening roar dies down and the stampede's end clears the now scuffed and bloodied floor to reveal Christopher, unconscious and in a terrible state.

His body is quickly surrounded by four helmeted members of the PAPAL GUARD. They gesture and radio, creating a barrier from additional passers-by.

A robust ambulance races through the Mall with its lights flashing and screeches to a stop next to them.

Christopher is lifted inside. He is attended to by two nuns, one of them SISTER MABEL, late 30s. She obviously recognizes Christopher, her face becoming pained with worry.

SISTER MABEL

It's Father Christopher. Straight
to New Vatican City, and HURRY.

The back doors SLAM and the ambulance zooms away.

EXT. CITY - NIGHT

The ambulance passes through a sprawling, smoggy, logo-branded metropolis, weaving in and out of honking traffic.

Once through the grid-like streets of the city, the smog and traffic die down as they enter into the spiraling streets of a church district.

This is NEW VATICAN CITY.

Circular rows of churches surround the central, towering APOSTOLIC PENTATHEDRAL COMPLEX.

The Complex is an indulgent beast of a building with giant spires overlooking the city. It's a monument of ancient power set against a hyper-advanced cityscape.

INT. HOSPITAL WING - MORNING

Christopher slowly wakes to an overbearing white light.

JOSEPH

Christopher...

His eyes adjust and focus to reveal FATHER JOSEPH looking down at him. Joseph is an older man, 50s, his hair grey on the sides and longer than other priest's seen passing behind.

CHRISTOPHER

Father Joseph?

JOSEPH

I'm sorry, Christopher. I should have been with you last night--

CHRISTOPHER

Don't apologize. Your not being there was a blessing.

JOSEPH

You barely survived on your own.

CHRISTOPHER

I survived thanks to The New Priest's Holy Body Regimen. You would have been killed.

Joseph looks up and down at Christopher's wounds.

JOSEPH

Perhaps.

CHRISTOPHER

Besides, I don't feel nearly as bad
as I probably look.

He doesn't look good, bandages wrapped extensively.

JOSEPH

If you feel half as bad as you
look, she should keep you in that
bed until NEXT Christmas!

CHRISTOPHER

Be kind, Fogey Joe, I could still
show you a thing or two from here.

JOSEPH

Sister Mabel's wrappings are
showing me quite enough of you.

CHRISTOPHER

You joke, but wait and see, I'll be
sparring in The Complex by Sunday.

JOSEPH

You should take more time than you
might be inclined to recover,
Christopher, regardless of our
coming Advent responsibilities.

CHRISTOPHER

Thank you, Father Joseph, but I'll
be back in action well before the
day arrives.

Joseph stands from the bed and turns to leave.

JOSEPH

Much as I suggest you do not push
yourself, there are hopes for your
swift recovery.

CHRISTOPHER

Oh?

Joseph turns to him.

JOSEPH

Once Sister Mabel clears you from
bed rest, you've been summoned by
His Eminence.

Christopher gulps, a worried expression crosses his face as
he drifts painfully to sleep.

EXT. PLAZA - VARIOUS

A plaza in New Vatican City, under the shadow of The Complex, houses a five-story tall ADVENT CALENDAR. Citizens mull beneath it, waiting for the first door to open.

A clock bell tolls and the wooden door creaks open, an oversized candle lit behind it. Slight applause.

MONTAGE of six more doors opening as A WEEK PASSES.

INT. HOSPITAL WING - NIGHT

Christopher sits at the edge of his bed, twisting his wrist in circles. He bends his hand back too far and winces.

A newscast on an overhanging TV catches his attention:

NEWSCASTER

-- and Pope Zed has not been available for comment since last week's Midnight Mall Mauling, which nearly took the life of valiant Father Christopher of the Papal Order, who has become something of a viral sensation after security footage of the incident was leaked. Silence from New Vatican City, though, rumor has it, His Eminence is as outraged. In other news --

Christopher looks over shoulder, waits for a nurse to leave the room and pushes himself up off the bed, putting weight on his legs. He stands tall, taking a few limping steps.

Not too bad.

SISTER MABEL

At least you're not screaming.

Surprised, he spins around to see Sister Mabel standing at the end of his bed. She gives a reprimanding look. He sits.

CHRISTOPHER

Not even on the inside.

SISTER MABEL

It's a Christmas miracle, with the state you were in.

CHRISTOPHER

Then you compliment yourself, miracle-worker.

She pulls out a little, finely wrapped present and sets it on Christopher's bedside table.

SISTER MABEL
Merry Christmas.

Christopher looks resentfully down at the present.

CHRISTOPHER
Priesthood Regulations forbid the
acceptance of any personal
benefactions, Sister Mabel.

Mabel sheepishly takes the gift back.

SISTER MABEL
(under her breath)
And whatever happened to
regulations of the heart...?

She turns to leave.

CHRISTOPHER
What was the occasion?

She looks over her shoulder, back still facing him.

SISTER MABEL
You've been officially cleared for
release.

CHRISTOPHER
(surprised)
After a week?

SISTER MABEL
There'd be riots if I didn't.

She leaves in a huff. He sits guiltily.

He glances down at his watch, thinks for a beat, then snatches up his black robe and slips out of the Hospital Wing as fast as his legs will take him.

INT. THE COMPLEX - HALLWAY - MORNING

Christopher has a bandage on his forehead and wrappings on his left hand. He walks with a slight limp.

Nuns and Priests wave, nodding with admiration as he passes. He waves back with his bandaged hand, awkwardly smiling. Quickening his pace, he turns a corner toward an entryway.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - MORNING

Christopher enters a massive gym facility, white with brushed metal accents. High-tech exercise equipment fills the room.

He approaches two training Priests, Fathers SYMON and ANDY, both his peers in age. Symon has jet black hair and harsh features. Andy is the youthful picture of innocence.

Andy spots a punching bag that Symon is currently attacking.

CHRISTOPHER

You'd think that thing contained
the Devil himself.

Symon stops punching and they both look to Christopher.

SYMON

Chris! Praise be to Zed, he walks!

ANDY

How are you feeling, Father
Christopher?

CHRISTOPHER

Ready to get back on duty.

They laugh.

SYMON

Limping along. That's the spirit.
It's blasphemy what happened to
you, Chris. What has become of our
sacred holiday?

ANDY

Accidents happen, Symon.

SYMON

This was more than an accident,
Andy. This represents the decay of
our collective spirit.

CHRISTOPHER

I've wondered myself, if this would
have happened to me in a more ...
holy time.

SYMON

The world's gone to pot. Don't you
worry, Chris, there will be
recompense.

CHRISTOPHER

Have you heard anything?

SYMON

Just whispers. Enough to put in the extra hours here should I have the honor of being called upon.

ANDY

Is it true, Christopher? You've been summoned?

He nods.

SYMON

Couldn't have gone to a better Priest, whatever it is. I only wish I was the new poster boy.

Symon SLAMS his fist into the bag, catching Andy off guard.

CHRISTOPHER

Even if it came at the cost of a limp and a week in the Hospital Wing?

SYMON

If I'm right about what I think is about to be given you? Yes.

CHRISTOPHER

Care to share that theory?

SYMON

Best not speak too soon.

ANDY

Or jinx him.

Symon glares at Andy.

CHRISTOPHER

You'll both be the first to know.

SYMON

Leave it to His Eminence. You'll see. After this, he'll stop at nothing to put the Christ back in Christmas!

He lays two particularly fierce punches into the bag. It rocks off of its hook, landing with a thump on top of Andy.

EXT. COUNCIL CHAMBERS - DAY

Christopher approaches the entrance doors to the Papal Council Chambers. He takes a deep breath, gazing up at their height, at least twenty feet tall. Intimidatingly ornate.

He puts up his bandaged hand to the door, about to push. He considers it, then begins to unwrap the bandage, exposing his swollen, red knuckles, which he flexes painfully.

Tossing the wrappings aside, he slowly peels the bandage off his forehead.

Taking another quick breath, he straightens his robe and PUSHES the massive doors open with both hands.

INT. COUNCIL CHAMBERS - CONTINUOUS

The doors rumble open, allowing sunlight to spill into the dimly lit chambers.

At the end of the room, at the center of a raised platform sits POPE ZED. He's an imposing old codger with a cragged face wearing a pointed mitre hat emblazoned with a golden cross. His veiny hands lay limply off his armrests.

Six CARDINALS are sat on either side of him.

The doors close behind Christopher as he enters, leaving the room flickeringly lit by surrounding torches. The orange licks of flame cast an even more imposing air about the seated council, looking down at him as he timidly approaches.

A Cardinal seated directly to the Pope's left speaks:

CARDINAL #1
Greetings, Father Christopher.

Christopher takes his place behind a short podium facing the council. He clears his throat.

CHRISTOPHER
(nervously)
Your Eminence, I must apologize for my loss of the offering last week--

The Pope cuts him off, unleashing his hard rasp of a voice.

POPE ZED
No. No. There is no call for apology, Father Christopher.

Christopher stands agape, not knowing what to say.

POPE ZED (CONT'D)
 No apologies, no. In fact, quite
 the contrary. You are to be
 commended. For your service.

Pope Zed takes a long pause, inhaling and licking his lips.

CHRISTOPHER
 Uh, well ... thank you.

POPE ZED
 You are to be promoted from Priest
 to Cardinal of the Council.

CARDINAL #2
 Bypassing the rank of High-Priest
 entirely.

CARDINAL #1
 And put on special assignment.

Christopher looks back and forth to the speaking Cardinals.

CHRISTOPHER
 Special assignment?

CARDINAL #2
 Of the utmost urgency.

CARDINAL #1
 And highest importance. A true
 honor, in the name of His Eminence.

Pope Zed raises his hand, silencing the Cardinals. He pushes himself up out of his throne, standing to gaze directly at Christopher as he speaks:

POPE ZED
 The nature of your assignment
 concerns nothing less than the very
 salvation of every living spirit.
 (he breathes for effect)
 As you may have heard, the Papal
 Inquisitorial Committee has
 recently determined that a
 dangerous Satanic radical is not,
 as historically believed, a figure
 of myth.
 (his fervor builds)
 Incontrovertible evidence points to
 the insidious presence of this
 materialistic, paganistic,
 consumerist, secularist fiend.

The Pope's vitriol spits in the space between them, his passion quaking his body to the point of bracing himself against his throne.

POPE ZED (CONT'D)

He is single-handedly responsible for the public defaming of our most sacred ritual celebration.

(indicating Christopher)

The severity of his blasphemous influence is written into the cuts and bruises that pain you now.

(he growls)

Where once reigned righteousness, now there is only greed. Where once we celebrated holiness, now we are inundated with consumption.

(gesturing firmly)

This recent mauling indicates a catastrophe of the spirit that requires swift action.

With a chop of one hand into his other palm, the Pope sits.

CARDINAL #2

You are to be pardoned under the New Constitution of the Unification of Church and State.

CARDINAL #1

To hunt down and sleigh the terrorist known as Santa Claus.

A booming, weighty beat as Christopher accepts this.

CHRISTOPHER

Santa Claus?

Pope Zed shoots a commanding stare at Christopher.

POPE ZED

You will deliver to me his head.

CARDINAL #1

For presentation and announcement.

CARDINAL #2

On His Eminence's Annual Christmas Eve Address.

Christopher gulps.

CARDINAL #1

In light of media attentions, at week's end we shall televise your promotion and the official announcement of this 25th Crusade.

After standing in silence for a moment, Christopher nods politely and steps away from the podium.

The entrance doors close with a thud behind him.

INT. GRAND CHURCH HALL - NIGHT

The circular chamber features a vaulted ceiling adorned with oppressive paintings of saints surrounding the central image of Pope Zed himself, arms outstretched.

Priests fill the pews before a singing choir of nuns. Christopher sits with Symon and Andy in one of the last rows.

Joseph sits several sections in front of them, with other noble looking High-Priests. He turns to look back at Christopher, makes eye contact and nods.

Symon reaches over Andy and nudges Christopher.

SYMON

Congratulations, Chris.

ANDY

Shush.

Andy is paying close attention to the performance. Symon rolls his eyes and lowers his voice to a harsh whisper.

SYMON

Your assignment was even greater than I could have dreamed, and getting promoted to Cardinal?!

Christopher lowers his head.

CHRISTOPHER

I may refuse.

Symon's "whispers" grow more furious.

SYMON

What?! This is the highest honor that's ever been bestowed on Priests of our rank--

Andy grips Symon's knee, cutting him off.

ANDY

Would you lower your voice, PLEASE?

Symon feigns a slap, but Andy doesn't flinch.

SYMON

I would kill for the opportunity
you have, Chris. To personally
enact His Eminence's Will.

Christopher takes a deep, uncomfortable breath.

ANDY

It's okay, Father Christopher.

Andy turns away from the performance, looking to Christopher.

ANDY

I'm not sure I could do it, either.

SYMON

He must. You must, Chris.

CHRISTOPHER

What if I can't?

ANDY

I'm sure Father Joseph would
support your decision not to.

CHRISTOPHER

All the more reason to accept.

ANDY

Do you question your Advising
Father's judgements still?

Christopher squeezes the top of nose between his eyes.

CHRISTOPHER

One of too many concerns.

ANDY

The decision must be yours. Can you
live with yourself after such
deeds, even if pardoned?

SYMON

That's of no matter.

They both turn to Symon.

SYMON

Can we live with this world if he
doesn't?

(beat)

The fat man must fall.

Symon and Andy both turn to face forward.

Christopher leans back in the bench, gazing up at the overlooking painting of The Pope. The nun's song -- a macabre interpretation of "Silent Night" -- echoes off the curved image and crescendoes into him.

EXT. GARDENS - NIGHT

The moon casts a pale glow through the mist that hangs over the gardens surrounding The Complex. Knee-level shrubs line maze-like paths that cut at ninety-degree angles around trees, benches, and statues.

Christopher sits on a bench in front of a life-sized statue of Saint Nicholas, looking directly into its stone eyes.

CHRISTOPHER

Can it truly be you?

JOSEPH

Not likely. Nicholas died in the
4th century.

He twists his head to see Joseph step quietly behind, sitting down next to him on the bench.

CHRISTOPHER

I'm not sure of anything anymore.

JOSEPH

Believing only what you're told can
have that effect.

CHRISTOPHER

You doubt the committee's findings?

JOSEPH

No. I question the assignment.

Christopher dips his head down.

CHRISTOPHER

You think I'm not ready.

JOSEPH

Your assumption reveals your own doubt. You're more than ready, son, but what of the task itself?

CHRISTOPHER

You question The Crusade, after what happened to me? Look at what's become of this world. The poison of The Northern One has spread to infect the hearts of all men.

JOSEPH

Then only fear stops you.

CHRISTOPHER

Of failure. Yes. Of a too-rapid promotion.

JOSEPH

Sounds like I'm not the only one questioning His Eminence.

CHRISTOPHER

Not like you.

JOSEPH

You would if you knew him as I do.

Christopher scoots to better face him.

CHRISTOPHER

How is that?

Joseph shifts uncomfortably, deciding how much to say.

JOSEPH

We were young Priests together, and I can tell you this mission of yours is very close to his heart.

(links hands for emphasis)

He was the youngest Pope ever crowned, you know this much, but the reason for his unmatched religious fervor that inspired his meteoric rise up the Papal ranks is seldom spoken about.

Joseph leans in, attention rapt.

CHRISTOPHER

What was it?

JOSEPH

Where most become disenchanted by unanswered questions, Zed became furious. An impoverished boy, he could not reconcile Christmas lore with his faith.

CHRISTOPHER

So he escaped to The Lord?

JOSEPH

Only after being slighted, as many experience, by "Santa's ignorance."

CHRISTOPHER

At least his disappointed faith was no longer misplaced.

JOSEPH

Perhaps. But the reaction was of such evangelical rage, he became the youngest Cardinal ever assigned to the council. Until today.

Christopher almost blushes at the comparison.

CHRISTOPHER

Why did you never seek to advance beyond High-Priest yourself?

Joseph looks up, taking a breath to word carefully.

JOSEPH

My current position offers the most freedom to enact my own personal relationship with The Lord. Any higher and bureaucracy takes over.

CHRISTOPHER

You think the Council is corrupt?

JOSEPH

I simply thank God every day that I never became what Zed has allowed himself to become.

CHRISTOPHER

There is a touch of blasphemy about you, I fear.

(beat)

You can't possibly think I'm only to exact some childhood vengeance?

JOSEPH

In his eyes, and therefore the eyes
of many, your wounds alone were
enough justification.

CHRISTOPHER

Proof only of the wounded spirits
and secular filth that caused it.

Joseph stands, smoothing out his robes.

JOSEPH

For your sake, Father Christopher,
I hope the toll this will take on
your soul is in service of more
than a decades-old lump of coal.

Christopher stands to face him. He looks deeply into Joseph's
eyes with a concerned look.

CHRISTOPHER

And for your sake, Father Joseph, I
will pray for your salvation.

Joseph straightens up.

JOSEPH

Everyone finds the savior in their
own way.

Christopher turns away from him and walks off, cutting a path
through the swirling mist.

EXT. OUTER GATE - SUNRISE

Christopher walks the perimeter of the Complex alone. He
stops at an iron gate, leaning up against a side column.

A van passes through the entrance, joining a line of stopped
vehicles. Doors swing open and unloaded from them are food
and decorations. Chairs are set up across from the drop off,
beneath the front steps of the grand entrance of The Complex.

The sun rises, long shadows spilling from the gates,
bisecting Christopher's face as he observes the preparations.

He puts his head in his hands, running his fingers through
his hair and down to rest on his neck. Another delivery van
passes through, leaving him momentarily in shadow.

The gate closes with a CLANK.

EXT. GRAND ENTRANCE - DAY

The courtyard before the steps of The Complex's grand entrance is filled to capacity. Crowds of onlookers and media flank a carpeted center aisle.

At the top of the steps is sat the Pope on his high throne, a pulpit in front of him. He rises and claws it on both sides.

The crowd falls silent.

POPE ZED

Greetings, my children. As you are all frighteningly aware, a terrible incident took place that has called us here today. I am pleased to report that recovery has been swift. Allow me to introduce ...
Father Christopher!

Christopher walks out from a side holding area and takes his place at the Pope's side.

The crowd goes wild with thunderous applause.

Pope Zed raises his hands and they fall silent again. He picks up a shining brocade omophor from the pulpit.

POPE ZED (CONT'D)

Upon his promotion, Father Christopher is to be pardoned for a Holy Crusade to avenge, by my will, the wrong-doing that has thus compromised our most sacred time.

He turns to Christopher, holding the Omophor above him.

POPE ZED (CONT'D)

Father Christopher, do you accept the duties and responsibilities required of a Cardinal of the Papal Council, as well as the specific task you have been charged with?

A long beat. Christopher gazes up at The Pope, and then to the eager faces of the waiting crowd.

CHRISTOPHER

I accept your assignment of the Holy Crusade, Your Eminence. As to the Cardinalship ...

(beat)

I must decline.

The crowd gasps. The Pope lower his hands, revealing an austere expression.

CHRISTOPHER

I request that, in place of
promotion, my pardon be extended to
include High-Priest Father Joseph.

Murmuring among the crowd. Christopher looks to a stunned Joseph at the edge of the crowd. They all look to The Pope, who is exercising extreme restraint.

He takes a moment to crack a false smile as he folds up the omophor and sets it down.

POPE ZED

Granted. Your selflessness
reinforces the providence by which
you came to be assigned this duty
of spiritual justice.

(to the crowd)

And so, I hereby decree that after
a rigorous training regimen,
Fathers Christopher and Joseph
shall embark on this 25th Crusade.

(crosses with his hand)

God be with us all.

The crowd erupts again, as if on cue.

At the edge of the steps, Joseph is ushered up to stand next to Christopher in front of the press's flashing cameras.

Joseph leans in to whisper in Christopher's ear.

JOSEPH

What exactly do you call that?

CHRISTOPHER

Extending a hand.

Christopher grabs his hand to shake, smiling for the cameras.

JOSEPH

I know you'll want to train with
your peers, but I beg your
indulgence in my approach as well.

CHRISTOPHER

You stick with me on this, and I'll
take anything you throw at me.
Can't be any worse than a mauling.

Joseph tightens his grip and they both smile toothy smiles.

Underneath, punctuating the moment, a heavenly choir sings a CHORAL VERSION OF THE "ROCKY" TRAINING MUSIC.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - DAY

Christopher removes his robes, a black tank-top and high-waisted pants beneath. His toned arms are still bruised.

As he stretches out, Symon and Andy join him.

They spot him as he does a series of sit-ups and bench press sessions, working up to a punching bag throw-down.

EXT. GARDEN POND - DAY

In the middle of one of The Complex's winding gardens, Christopher and Joseph sit in meditative positions on a patch of grass at the edge of a small pond.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - DAY

Symon and Andy have replaced the punching bag with a human dummy, on which they have placed a Santa hat.

Christopher unleashes violent punches to the torso.

EXT. GARDEN POND - DAY

Joseph shows Christopher a series of Yoga-like postures. They build in complexity, and Christopher finally tumbles onto his back whereas Joseph maintains perfect form.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - DAY

Christopher knocks down the dummy with a final punch to the head, the hat flying across the room.

He grabs a nearby bo staff, beating the fallen dummy with it.

EXT. GARDEN POND - DAY

Joseph has escalated his moves into what can only be described as Über-Yoga. Christopher struggles to keep up.

Postures shift with such rapidity that they begin to naturally assume defensive positions.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - DAY

Symon and Andy pull Christopher off the dummy.

Christopher pulls out his training knives, and the other two defend themselves against his slicing attacks with staffs.

He swishes around them, skillfully twirling the blades through the air. Symon laughs, relishing the moment as Andy gives a worried pant.

Christopher growls.

EXT. GARDEN POND - DAY

Joseph stands across the patch of grass from Christopher, beckoning him with his hands to come at him.

Christopher raises a questioning eyebrow, but Joseph nods.

Lunging forward, fists swinging, Christopher can't seem to land even a single hit on Joseph, who swishes intuitively out of the path of his attacks. Christopher speeds up, but Joseph dodges right along with him.

Exhausted, Christopher falls back. Joseph goes behind him, grabs him by the shoulders, and guides him through the evasive dips.

They reposition for another round.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - DAY

Christopher slides on the floor between Symon and Andy, tripping them with his outspread arms.

He springs up after his slide, leaping into the far wall, running along it as he tosses his practice knives into targets positioned on the opposite wall. Direct hits on all of them. Almost mechanical precision.

Andy gets up to brush himself off, only to dive immediately back down to avoid another flying blade.

Christopher lands gracefully, one knee down. He raises his head slowly, looking up at them with a death stare as he crosses himself.

Andy whimpers and Symon claps enthusiastically.

EXT. GARDEN POND - DAY

This time, Joseph curls his fingers into fists, knuckles cracking. Christopher readies himself, but Joseph folds his arms behind his back.

On the ground in front of Joseph is a line of rocks. He begins to KICK them at Christopher, who dodges and ducks to evade their trajectory.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - DAY

Symon swings fisted punches at Christopher, who evades them with the same graceful moves he used against the rocks.

Joseph sits on the sidelines with Andy, smiling.

The pace of his attacks quickens to a grunting barrage as Symon wears himself out and concedes, collapsing in defeat.

Christopher raises his arms over his head with a leap.

EXT. GARDEN POND - DAY

Christopher sits in the Lotus position.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - DAY

Christopher SLAMS wrapped fists into a training mitt.

EXT. GARDEN POND - DAY

Christopher stands balanced on one leg.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - DAY

Christopher WHIPS a staff, CRACKING it in half.

EXT. GARDEN POND - DAY

Christopher folds his arms, breathing deep, eyes closed.

INT. PRIEST'S TRAINING FACILITY - DAY

Christopher exhales, toned arms WHOOSHING into attack form.

INT. PAPAL GUARD ARMORY - NIGHT

The double doors of the armory swoosh open with a flourish. Christopher and Joseph are lead in by a GUARD TECHNICIAN.

Walking down a long hallway of firearms and bladed weapons, Christopher's eyes widen. Joseph looks bemused. The Guard Tech beams proudly at his creations.

GUARD TECH

Have I got something for you,
Father Christopher! The latest in
Holy armament, designed for you
specifically.

They stop at the end of the hall. A table folds down from the wall to reveal a compact firearm with a front-loading magazine in the shape of a crucifix, ornate carvings abound.

CHRISTOPHER

What is THAT?

GUARD TECH

The SK-3000. Around here, we like
to call it "The Seckiller!"

He pulls it off of the wall, loads a round and hands it to Christopher. Joseph steps back as he handles it.

CHRISTOPHER

Beautiful, isn't she?

JOSEPH

As a last defense, I would hope.

Christopher raises his eyebrow at Joseph.

GUARD TECH

Each compact clip holds over three
hundred exploding rounds, packed
with a silver and Holy-water
compound for every contingency.

The Guard Tech slaps a button on a control panel. He points in the direction of a mechanical grinding behind them. The wall lifts, revealing a firing range. A paper target lowers bearing the iconic likeness of Santa Claus.

Christopher cocks the gun, aims quickly, right between his rosy cheeks and FIRES.

TITLE CARD:

"THE CHRISTMAS CRUSADER"

INT. CHRISTOPHER'S QUARTERS - MORNING

Christopher enters his quarters from the adjoining balcony, which overlooks the spiral sprawl of New Vatican City below.

A package sits on the end of his bed. He pulls off the lid and peels back a layer of tissue paper. Newly tailored robes lie underneath. He lifts them out of the box and shakes them out of their folds.

The robes are of a dark, almost-black emerald with a crimson tabbed collar. He unbuttons his old robe, hanging it in a nearby closet, which houses a line of similar garments.

Sliding into the new vestment, it fits him more snugly as each button is fastened. He flexes, and it moves perfectly with every motion.

He pulls back the floor-length hem and straps a leather holster to his inner thigh. In it he secures his weapon.

He lets the robe fall down, obscuring it perfectly. He paces and does a few stretching lunges to ensure flexibility.

The door chimes.

CHRISTOPHER

Come.

Joseph enters, his own high-collared robes freshly tailored.

JOSEPH

I hope the exterior trim matches an internal assuredness.

CHRISTOPHER

Are you so free of butterflies?

JOSEPH

What will come, will come.

CHRISTOPHER

We are pardoned to be the masters of our fate now.

JOSEPH

And that of others, it would seem.

CHRISTOPHER

Shall we?

Christopher gestures to the door.

JOSEPH

His Eminence requests your presence
in the North Garage Port before our
departure.

INT. GARAGE - MORNING

Christopher walks bays of black vehicles. Vans, cycles,
ambulances, limousines, all lined in precise rows.

In the center of a row, Christopher spots the point-topped
figure of the Pope. He stands alone, white in a sea of black.

Christopher turns the aisle and approaches him briskly.

CHRISTOPHER

It is an honor to have a private
audience with Your Eminence.

POPE ZED

The honor is mine, Christopher,
seeing you off on this Crusade.

The Pope grips Christopher's upper arm, slowly but forcefully
guiding him through the aisles.

CHRISTOPHER

I hope you are not too displeased
with my denial of promotion.

POPE ZED

It was surely a surprise, but holy
and appropriate. I can't say I
would have done the same when I was
your age. I can admire that.

CHRISTOPHER

Your Eminence, do you ... regret?

POPE ZED

Not one second since I found myself
in holy step, which has taken me so
very far. Look at this around you.

He gestures to the fleet of vehicles.

POPE ZED (CONT'D)

I asked for nothing as a boy, and
nothing was what I got. I only ever
wanted for one thing then and it
never came, but look at all that
has been bestowed upon me.

The Pope stops in front of the only white vehicle: a slick car, reminiscent of a 60s Cadillac that can only be described as "badass" in its retro-futurism.

He pets his veiny hand gingerly across the shine of its body.

POPE ZED (CONT'D)
Constant reminders of the true
Lord's blessing.

He pulls a set of keys out of his robes and tosses them to Christopher, who catches them instinctively.

POPE ZED (CONT'D)
As you walk with my steps and speak
with my voice on this Crusade, so
too will you go in my conveyance.

Christopher's eyes widen.

CHRISTOPHER
The Pope-Mobile!

EXT. GARAGE - DAY

VROOM! The Pope-Mobile skids out of the garage with Christopher in the driver's seat and Joseph riding shotgun.

Christopher indulges in the smallest smile as Joseph closes his eyes and attempts to remain calm, arm clamped to the windowsill. Christopher shoves his foot into the accelerator, catching air over an exit ramp.

SPARKS as the car slams onto the pavement.

EXT. NEW VATICAN CITY STREETS - DAY

The Pope-Mobile zooms through the curving, church-lined streets of New Vatican City. The Complex shrinks behind them.

EXT. DEPARTMENT STORE - DAY

Christopher screeches them to a stop in front of a big-box department store.

Joseph looks out the window, confirming their first stop.

JOSEPH
A department store?

Christopher takes the keys out of the ignition, flipping them in his hands as he pops his door open.

CHRISTOPHER

The committee's report points to a massive underground network of Santa's Disciples.

JOSEPH

I guess the gifts must get delivered somehow.

Joseph goes to open his door, but Christopher puts a hand over his chest, restraining him.

CHRISTOPHER

Stay here.

JOSEPH

Am I to be relegated to lookout duty for the duration?

CHRISTOPHER

I'm not sure what might come out in there. I don't want you seeing that side of me until absolutely necessary.

Joseph nods.

Christopher gets out and slams the door shut behind him.

INT. DEPARTMENT STORE - DAY

A queue of parents and their children wait to get their picture taken with a morbidly OBESE man dressed as SANTA.

In the far corner of the store, Christopher waits, watching from a distance. He stares him down, observing his interactions with the kids.

OBESE SANTA

And what would you like for Christmas, young lady?

The sun sets through the store's front doors as TIME PASSES. Christopher still stands in the same spot as the last child smiles for a photo.

Obese Santa waves goodbye to the child and pulls himself exhaustedly out of his chair. He surveys the empty store, and sees nobody where Christopher had stood.

INT. DEPARTMENT STORE - BACK ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The door creeps open to the grimy back room. Obese Santa heaves himself through the door into the darkness.

He removes his heavy red coat, throwing it over a chair. He slides his meaty fingers to flick on the light switch, revealing CHRISTOPHER STANDING BEHIND HIM.

Christopher CHARGES him, slamming him up against a mirror.

OBESE SANTA
Ah! Who are you?!

CHRISTOPHER
Tell me where he is!

He has assumed a terrifying new voice and demeanor.

OBESE SANTA
Who?!

CHRISTOPHER
Your boss.

OBESE SANTA
Third floor!

Christopher tightens his grip, shoving him harder into the shards of broken mirror glass into his back, giving the shakedown to this disrobed Santa.

CHRISTOPHER
You KNOW who I mean.
(A beat. Silence.)
The Fat Man. The Northern One.
Jolly Saint Nick.
(screaming)
SANTA. CLAUS.

Obese Santa cracks a knowing, maniacal smile. Sweat drips from his forehead down to his mouth.

A beat passes, Christopher leaning in, waiting. Obese Santa folds his lips under his teeth, pressing them together to muffle a disturbing giggle.

Christopher grunts, SOCKING him across the face, knocking him out cold. The echoing punch cues a SERIES of equally violent altercations:

EXT. ALLEYWAY - DAY

On a street corner, a THIN SANTA stands manning a donation drop-off. A whistle sounds from the alleyway behind him.

He turns curiously away from his spot, peering into the alley. He leans in bit too far and get YANKED inside.

Violent noises.

EXT. HOMELESS SHELTER - NIGHT

Outside a shanty-looking shack of a homeless shelter stands a leathery HOMELESS SANTA, welcoming fellow vagrants inside, where a warm glow greets them with the promise of food.

The light of the Pope-Mobile in the distance are shut off as well as the dying sound of the engine shutting down.

The Homeless Santa looks over his shoulder to see nothing but darkness. A crunching sounds inspires him to look again, where he sees the Pope-Mobile rolling straight toward him!

Hit by the bumper, he slides over the hood to SPLAT on the windshield, screaming. Christopher turns on the light inside the car, revealing his stone face to the screaming man.

EXT. POST OFFICE - DAY

The Pope-Mobile passes a Post Office. They pass a mail truck exiting the parking lot, the MAIL MAN wearing a SANTA Hat.

Christopher eyes him curiously, but nods him past.

EXT. PARADE ROUTE - NIGHT

A long procession of floats earn the cheering attention of a mob of screaming onlookers stuffing the sidewalks along the parade route.

The final float is a massive, snowy wonderland scooting down the street. At the very top stands a SINGING SANTA, belting out a holiday tune.

Midway through an impressively held note, he is SLAMMED off his peak, dragged to the street by Christopher's leaping attack. They roll into to the gutter.

Singing Santa bellows for mercy.

INT. POPE-MOBILE - NIGHT

Christopher slumps into the car next to a waiting Joseph, slamming the door behind him. His knuckles are reddened and he breathes heavily.

An awkward silence.

JOSEPH

Why was I brought along?

Christopher squeezes the top of his nose between his eyes.

CHRISTOPHER

I wanted to help you.

JOSEPH

That's not how the traditional teacher/pupil relationship works.

CHRISTOPHER

As a High-Priest you were my Advising Father. That's not, strictly speaking, a --

Joseph cuts him off sounding almost frustrated.

JOSEPH

Yes, I know. So you thought you'd take pity on an old fogey you worry will blaze in hell without your kindly influence?

CHRISTOPHER

I just want to help you on your path.

JOSEPH

Since your path seems to include more kicking than walking, we will have to agree to disagree on what is right.

CHRISTOPHER

His Eminence agrees that, for the sake of our spirit...

He forcefully turns the key in the ignition, The Pope-Mobile roaring to life.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)

Holy ends justify unholy means.

Christopher kicks the gas pedal and they speed off.

INT. SHOPPING MALL - DAY

Joseph joins Christopher this time. They stride through the mall amid a flurry of holiday shoppers.

They pass the electronics store, and Christopher takes a moment staring at it.

JOSEPH

This is where it happened?

Christopher nods and Joseph puts a consoling hand on his shoulder. Snapping out of it, they continue.

They approach the bell-ringing Black Santa from before. He smiles at them and gives a kind wave. Christopher moves in, but Joseph holds him back, taking the lead.

BLACK SANTA

Happy holidays, Father Priests!

JOSEPH

Greetings. How goes your Christmas business, this year?

BLACK SANTA

Well, I've been ringing this bell a long time. Folks aren't so generous as they used to be.

Joseph rummages through his robes and produces a coin.

JOSEPH

Allow me to remedy their rudeness a touch. Where do you hail from?

BLACK SANTA

Up on West Cornel Street.

JOSEPH

Ever find your way up North?

BLACK SANTA

How far?

Christopher grows frustrated. Rolling his eyes, he can't take it anymore.

CHRISTOPHER

Tell us where the Disciples gather!

Joseph holds back Christopher's explosive move forward. Black Santa shudders back, gathers up his donation bucket under his arm and retreats.

Christopher turns to chastise Joseph with a wagging finger, but he redirects his focus to the Black Santa's exit route through a corridor between two stores.

Joseph and Christopher scurry after Black Santa, pushing through the doors as they slam just behind him.

INT. SHOPPING MALL - BACK HALLWAYS - CONTINUOUS

The back halls of the mall are just as much of an imposing maze as the storefronts they lie behind.

Christopher and Joseph follow just far enough behind the Black Santa to go undetected. They slink up against walls and dip into door alcoves when he looks back.

Barreling onward, the Black Santa pushes through a final door with his shoulder.

INT. SHOPPING MALL - DELIVERY DOCK - CONTINUOUS

Christopher and Joseph burst through the door, chasing past huge trucks to the rolling gates beyond.

Black Santa passes through and slaps a large red button on the wall, lowering the gate behind him. Christopher and Joseph break into a run, both sliding under the gate just as it slams shut, clipping the hem of Joseph's robe.

EXT. SHOPPING MALL - DELIVERY DOCK - CONTINUOUS

They continue to chase Black Santa through steam-filled back streets, dodging crates and bins and scattered rubbish. In the distance shines the street lamps of a main avenue.

A red bus waits parked on the side of the busy road. The Black Santa hops into its open door and the bus speeds away before he can close the door behind him.

Christopher and Joseph arrive, out of breath, just in time to breathe in its dust.

They both take note of a minimalistic logo emblazoned on the bus's side as it trails off:

A circle with a knob-topped pole at its north-most point.

CHRISTOPHER

(out of breath)

That doesn't take a Holy Detective
of the Papal Guard to decipher.

Joseph wipes his brow, nodding.

JOSEPH
Yes. And all your violence has thus
far been in vain.

Christopher catches his breath with his hands on his bent knees. He looks up to Joseph.

CHRISTOPHER
Is that so?

JOSEPH
If we had simply widened our gaze,
we would have seen that we passed
such a red bus at nearly every stop
before this.

Christopher kicks a wayward bit of trash off the road.

CHRISTOPHER
Well, now its importance is clear.
And they were not in vain. Merely a
rehearsal for the main event.

JOSEPH
An event for which I am
increasingly troubled to have a
front row ticket.

Christopher turns his back on him to head down the street.

CHRISTOPHER
No refunds.

INT. PAPAL RESEARCH FACILITY - NIGHT

Christopher sits behind a computer terminal with the Guard Tech from the armory. He is now bespectacled, his glasses bearing crosses on their frame.

On a touch screen tablet, Christopher sketches out the logo and it appears in real-time on the Tech's monitor.

GUARD TECH
Perfect. I'm going to interpolate
the design into a searchable vector
that we can cross-reference with
images from our global surveillance
program's live feed.

Projected on the wall behind them are tens of thousands of small video feeds from all around the world.

Christopher admires the web of global information.

CHRISTOPHER

It's breathtaking. Live from the entire world?

GUARD TECH

Every corner of His influence.

CHRISTOPHER

You have truly found God in the machine.

GUARD TECH

That is our motto here, Father.

A beep issues from the Tech's fresnel-magnified monitor. The chaos of a thousand flashing images slows to a halt, prominently displaying three images.

CHRISTOPHER

Have you got a match?

GUARD TECH

Looks like two false matches, but look at this one.

He brings up the third match and enhances. The image shows the same logo, adorning the side of an object partially obscured by a pier.

CHRISTOPHER

Where's that feed coming from?

GUARD TECH

Uh, it's a dock, about three miles northwest of the city.

Christopher jumps out of his chair, leaning over the Tech.

CHRISTOPHER

And you're sure this image is live?

The Tech nods and turns around, but Christopher is already gone, the lab door closing with a swish.

GUARD TECH

You're welcome.

Kicking his feet up on the desk, the Tech pulls up the live feed from the garage and watches Christopher join Joseph, who is leaning on the Pope-Mobile eating an apple.

EXT. DOCK - NIGHT

The Pope-Mobile arrives at the dock. Christopher slows to a stop and shuts off the headlights in front of a chain-link fence surrounding the area, which encompasses both the pier and an adjoining warehouse.

Joseph rolls down the passenger-side window, observing that a light snowfall has begun. He sticks his hand out to catch a few flakes.

Christopher takes notice.

CHRISTOPHER

We've got to focus. This is it.

He stealthily exits the car, leaving Joseph to brush off his hands and follow suit.

Christopher leaps over the fence. Joseph scales it successfully with some effort, making more of a noise than it is evident Christopher would prefer.

They crouch and approach the pier. As they inch closer, the logo-bearing object is revealed: a surfaced SUBMARINE.

Under the logo, Christopher can make out the word "Dasher." He snickers in disapproval.

Footsteps in the distance.

They both leap behind a nearby crate to take cover. After a moment, they peek over the top of the crate to see the identity of the approaching step:

A slender figure in a hooded red cloak with white fur trim strides down the walkway to the pier, legs in green stockings sliding in and out of the billowing cover. Yellow tufts of hair protrude from the low-hanging hood. This is MINXIE.

Out from the top hatch of the submarine pops a bearded SAILOR with a red cap.

SAILOR

Let's get a move on, Minxie! Some of us onboard are in a hurry.

MINXIE

Apologies for my lack of haste. These are never long enough, for my taste.

She has a soft, feminine voice, but a strength of conviction with her speech that seems to annoy the sailor.

Minxie quickens her pace and hops from the pier to the submarine. She slinks down the hatch after the sailor, shutting it with a CLANG behind her.

Christopher and Joseph break into a run as the sub's engines start to roar. It lurches forward, Christopher gaining along the pier. He turns to see Joseph lagging behind.

His pause gives the sub enough time to move beyond hope of catching it. They watch as it submerges.

JOSEPH

I'm sorry.

CHRISTOPHER

This is not a dead end yet.

JOSEPH

Well, it certainly looks it.

Christopher runs to the end of the pier, spreading his arms.

CHRISTOPHER

Have faith!

Without warning, he LEAPS into the water, heading in the direction of the sub. Joseph runs to the end of the pier, gazing worriedly into the black water. Only his flickering reflection in the waves stares back.

After a few too many seconds of silence, Christopher gasps to the surface. Joseph sticks out his hand and helps him up.

JOSEPH

Why in God's name did you do that?

Christopher produces from his sopping robes a small device with an antenna that blinks red.

CHRISTOPHER

Now we can track it.

EXT. THE OCEAN - DAY

A crucifix-emblazoned airplane soars over the ocean.

It's a small, two passenger plane. Joseph sits in the pilot's seat. Christopher is deep in prayer as snow pounds the front canopy, clouds darkening on the horizon.

INT. POPE-PLANE - DAY

Snow pounds the canopy as Christopher whispers inaudibly into a sleek Prayer-Phone between his upward pointing hands.

Joseph, hands on the joystick, peeks over to him. Christopher lowers his hands and looks to him.

CHRISTOPHER

Father Joseph, forgive me, but I
have noticed your distinct lack of
Prayer on this Crusade.

Joseph glances at him as he continues to adjust and steer.

JOSEPH

Christopher, I believe that one day
your consciousness will allow for a
near-constant state of prayer.

Christopher looks confused, he holds up his Prayer-Phone.

CHRISTOPHER

I feel I make as much time as I --

JOSEPH

Without the need of any crowd-
sourced cathedral link or
amplifying apparatus.

CHRISTOPHER

The Prayer-Phone allows us to unite
our communions in a more powerful
global worship.

JOSEPH

Have you ever considered that
Prayer was meant to speak within,
not plead without?

CHRISTOPHER

I don't understand you.

JOSEPH

There are parts in the untouched
depths of you that, when awakened,
will understand.

Christopher grabs the tracking device, noting that the beeping light has stopped.

The storm parts in front of them, revealing:

EXT. CHRISTMAS TREE ISLAND - DAY

A single, snow-capped peak occupies most of the island. Past a line of peculiarly non-tropic trees at its base is a pier where the submarine surfaces.

CHRISTOPHER (O.S.)

This can't yet be it.

Joseph circles the plane for their descent.

Christopher looks out the window as they tilt, seeing a rag-tag line of PASSENGERS issue out of the sub's top hatch. An eclectic mix of short and tall, squat and lanky, all extreme.

A still-hooded Minxie files anonymously among the boldly-colored bunch, but his eyes pick her out almost immediately, watching the sway of her cloak as Joseph pulls the plane out of view for a water landing.

The plane's floats lower as they glide along the coast, around a bend from the pier. They touch down smoothly, skidding along the water with jutting splashes.

Christopher unbuckles himself out of his seat quickly as Joseph takes his time powering down the plane.

Sliding out of the passenger door, Christopher jumps from the plane's float onto the rocky shore next to them.

Joseph takes the time to extend a ramp, joining him casually as he peers through the brush at the pier. The Passengers line up single file, led by the bearded Sailor.

JOSEPH

Now there's a loud looking bunch.

CHRISTOPHER

Not what I had imagined.

The last member of the passenger line disappears into the forest at the mountain's base.

JOSEPH

Where are they going?

CHRISTOPHER

One way to find out.

They chop through the brush, running past the pier and heading in the direction of the group.

Without hesitation, they charge into the tree's darkness.

EXT. CHRISTMAS TREE WOOD - CONTINUOUS

Joseph and Christopher slow for moment to allow their eyes to adjust to the light. They've lost their targets.

Christopher goes into tracking mode, checking for footprints and snapped twigs, as Joseph observes the trees. They are a jarring variety of cypresses, spruces, firs, and pines.

Yep. Christmas trees.

He steps closer to one, his eyes widening in awe as he notices that these trees have NATURALLY OCCURRING DECORATIONS adorning them!

JOSEPH

My God, look at the trees.

Christopher calls out from deeper in the wood.

CHRISTOPHER

Come on, this way.

Joseph pulls himself away, gaze still locked on the massive trees looming over him. He moves to rejoin Christopher.

In the distance, they hear a mechanical CHURNING noise.

JOSEPH

What is that?

CHRISTOPHER

Did you leave the plane running?

JOSEPH

No.

CHRISTOPHER

Were the keys left behind?

Joseph pulls out the keys, jingling them in response.

The churning is drowned out by a closer, more organic RUMBLE. Christopher and Joseph circle around, backs to each other.

Nothing. Just the trees.

RUMBLING and CRUSHING continue. For the first time, Christopher fondles his weapon, threatening to draw.

They pull closer together, backs touching. A wind cuts through the now deafening growl, sending spurts of leaves and dust circles around them.

The earth shakes beneath them, soil exploding from the ground as the CHRISTMAS TREES BEGIN TO DE-ROOT THEMSELVES.

Branches separate into the form of claws. Openings form into intimidating grimaces. The tentacled roots slither out and draw the hulking trees forward, surrounding the priests.

CHRISTOPHER

What dark magic is this?

JOSEPH

We are not welcome here. I'd call it a first line of defense.

A tree SWINGS its branch arm, Joseph lunges to evade, landing in a dirt-puffing roll. The other trees join in, slicing with their outstretched claws.

Joseph continues to duck and hop as the wooden struts jab and swoosh around him. He dips beneath one, swerving to skip over another, when a third SLAMS his chest harshly, sending him falling into an open pit left by one of the freed trees.

CHRISTOPHER

Joe!

Christopher SCREAMS, whipping out his weapon instinctively.

BLAM. He rains a barrage of gunfire on the plant creatures. Branches explode in a flurry of wood shards and pine needles.

He twirls his gun, cocking it mid-spin for another wave of explosive destruction. The trees groan and growl deeply.

Christopher aims at the squiggling roots of a tree when another GRABS him from behind, tightening his wooden grip around the priest. It pulls him up to its "face", needles gaping open in its mouth hole.

CHRISTOPHER

"Leaves unchanging" my ass!

He breaks his arm free, taking a straight shot into its mouth, effectively BLASTING its head off. Its grip released, Christopher lands with cat-like ease as the giant beast lumbers to the ground with a dusty THUD.

Scores more trees approaching, Christopher swings on a ripped vine arm, pulling himself up. He kicks off an attacking tree, swooping in to scoop up Joseph from his de-rooted soil grave.

They link hands, Christopher pulling him up over his shoulder as they swing between two trees and out of the frenzy.

CHRISTOPHER

Gotcha.

They land at the inner edge of the wood.

JOSEPH

(worn)

Their branches are not so lovely as
has been sung.

Beyond them, just before the slope of the central mountain,
lies a dirt RUNWAY on which rolls a MASSIVE RED AIRPLANE with
rows of propellers moving it forward for takeoff.

EXT. RUNWAY - CONTINUOUS

Christopher holsters his weapon and RUNS, Joseph still over
his shoulder. The trees behind them begin to pursue, but
their size prevents them from gaining any speed.

Sweat pouring off his head, Christopher legs blur as he comes
just behind the plane's ten-foot wheels, spinning dangerously
in front of him.

The wheels touch off the ground and Christopher LEAPS,
heaving Joseph into the landing gear opening. He jumps up
himself as the tire retracts, gate shutting behind him.

The plane soars away from the runway, trees shaking their
pointy fists in the air. Christmas Tree Island shrinks into
the stormy sea behind the zooming juggernaut.

INT. CARGO HOLD - NIGHT

Christopher and Joseph sit in the lower hold, surrounded by
brightly colored crates with fanciful foreign stampings.

CHRISTOPHER

Have you ever faced such demons?

JOSEPH

Of the inner variety.

CHRISTOPHER

It seems Satan can infect more than
just man and beast.

JOSEPH

Tell me which you find more holy:
the cat or the mouse? To those
creatures, we are the demons.

CHRISTOPHER

You were almost killed! Surely only a devil would attack a holy man.

JOSEPH

If that "devil" thinks himself holy, his attack is justified, no?

CHRISTOPHER

The divine is the only undiluted perspective. You take The Sight for granted.

JOSEPH

No, I take that it IS granted. For all creatures.

Christopher leans forward, gesturing passionately.

CHRISTOPHER

Santa, Satan, even their NAMES are linked by simple letter inversion.

JOSEPH

Language divides. Do you find nothing devilish in your own actions, CHRISTopher?

Christopher's lip quivers.

CHRISTOPHER

I have been ... pardoned.

JOSEPH

Yes, you've been holy pardoned, but have you wholly pardoned yourself?!
(beat)
Can you do it?

Christopher lowers his head, hands through his hair.

CHRISTOPHER

Left to its own sin, the outside world will crumble. Something must be done. I have been chosen.
(beat)
I can do it. I WILL do it.

Joseph leans back on his crate.

JOSEPH

Who are you convincing?

A rumble shakes them, indicating a successful landing.

INT. LANDING GEAR - CONTINUOUS

Christopher and Joseph walk to either side of the landing gear, which lowers between them, the opening gate letting it puffs of snow.

They listen to the scuffling above, waiting for the last passenger to make their exit.

Christopher digs into a pile of luggage next to them. He finds two bright green cloaks and tosses one to Joseph.

They both slide into them, topping off their disguises with a couple of fuzzy scarves. They nod to each other, positively and hilariously incognito.

CHRISTOPHER

Should we establish a cover story?

JOSEPH

We'll improvise.

They both hop out of the plane and into the snowy unknown.

EXT. NORTHERN LANDING STRIP - NIGHT

Wind whips around the landed plane, with nothing but white visible in any direction. A snowy expanse to the horizon.

Christopher and Joseph hold their windswept cloaks closely as they join the group, attempting to not look conspicuous. The line of passengers winds to a barely visible entrance arch.

As the procession moves through the storm, the iron words above the arch become readable: NORTH POLE RAIL STATION.

Joseph looks to Christopher from beneath his hood, snowflakes stuck to his raised eyebrows. Christopher leans in.

CHRISTOPHER

The North Pole. We made it!

Indicating a gap in the line in front of them, Joseph pushes Christopher. They both gaze up as they pass under the arch.

Looking down, they see the group is headed toward a small station with warm light glowing inside. Each step brings them closer, revealing the building more clearly.

The Christmas-time charm of its design is immediately evident. Vibrant brick and dark, rich woods.

INT. NORTH POLE RAIL STATION - NIGHT

The group issues into the indoor waiting area, filling up richly upholstered benches and armchairs to escape the cold. A wood fireplace burns brightly in the corner.

Joseph and Christopher sit on a sofa. Their heads are lowered. Christopher peeks up from under his hood, and sees Minxie on the other side of the room.

JOSEPH
(whispering)
We should keep our heads down to
discourage social interaction.

Christopher nods. He ever-so-lightly lifts his head so that his eyes clear the top of his hanging hood. His eyes find Minxie again. Her eyes hidden from view, he can't help but fixate on her lips and the yellow hair falling at her cheeks.

SQUAT
Hey, scoot it!

Christopher's stare is broken by a SQUAT citizen shoving himself onto the sofa between himself and Joseph.

CHOO! A train whistle sounds as its bell rings.

Smiles all around as everyone in the station hops up from their seats, streaming out onto the platform.

Christopher attempts to weave toward Minxie, but the crowd proves too squished to traverse. She makes it to the platform before them.

EXT. RAIL PLATFORM - CONTINUOUS

It's a beautiful old steam locomotive, bright red from its engine to its caboose, a half-dozen passenger cars in between.

Minxie hops on the second car back as Christopher and Joseph make it onto the platform. Christopher attempts to push through hobbling boarders, growing frustrated at their pace.

Joseph puts a calming hand on Christopher's shoulder.

He slows reluctantly and they are the last passengers to board. Despite a visible fullness, he steps onto the second car. Joseph follows and the door swishes shut behind.

INT. TRAIN - CONTINUOUS

Joseph and Christopher squeeze into a back-facing seat at the front end of the car.

Their fellow travelers begin taking off their hats and scarves and they get their first really good look at them:

Most of them are ELFS, fair of complexion with jet-black hair and gently pointed ears. Christopher looks disturbed as Joseph cracks an amused smile.

The train lurches forward, chugging sounds from outside.

Looking over the sea of sparkled cheeks and dark hair, it doesn't take Christopher long to spot Minxie.

She pulls her hood down, and he sees her for the first time. She's an Elf, and noticeably the only one on board with blonde hair. He gulps.

Joseph quietly takes notices under his hood, smirking.

A large TRAIN MAN enters the car and Christopher gives a worried look at Joseph.

CHRISTOPHER

(whispering)

Tickets?

He shrugs. Christopher breaks a sweat, his eyes flitting nervously to the Train Man. Tension mounts to a trembling crescendo, until ...

The Train man turns to reveal a cart of sweets behind him. Cookies and Coco are doled out generously to the passengers.

Christopher exhales, relieved, and Joseph tries not to laugh.

Steaming cups, bags of treats, and plates of fresh cookies are distributed from the center aisle. The Train man makes his way down and finally ends at Christopher and Joseph.

TRAIN MAN

Can I charm you chaps with
cranberry caps? Cup of Coco?
Chocolate chip cookie?
Complimentary caddy of candies?

Christopher puts on an inappropriately effeminate voice.

CHRISTOPHER

No, uh, thank you. Nothing for us.

Joseph coughs to cover up a giggle.

JOSEPH
I'd love a Coco, actually!

Joseph speaks obviously in his normal voice as an example.

TRAIN MAN
Coming right up, fresh from the
jar. Some cream in the cup, and
there you are.

The Train Man sprays a tower of whipped cream on top and hands it over to Joseph. He takes a sip, the cream tickling his nose.

JOSEPH
Oh, that's heavenly. Christopher,
you really should try some.

His cheeks warm and he lowers his hood.

Christopher does the same so as not to arouse suspicion. Looking around he notices that they aren't terribly out of place as the passengers include more than just Elf-kind.

As he looks a Troll up and down, he thinks he catches Minxie glancing at him but she looks away when he turns to check.

An overhead intercom crackles.

CONDUCTOR (O.S.)
(filtered)
Merry Christmas, railmates! We've a
journey this eve. The dining car
awaits. Enjoy your reprieve!

Most of the passengers get up and excitedly leave the compartment. Both still seated, Joseph notices Christopher staring at Minxie as she exits.

Joseph clears his throat.

JOSEPH
I wonder if you wouldn't terribly
mind going and grabbing me a pastry
or two?

CHRISTOPHER
No, um, yes, of course.

Christopher nods timidly and follows the crowd. Joseph remains seated with a knowing smile.

INT. DINING CAR - NIGHT

The dining car has a center aisle with a buffet table on one side stretching the length of the car, delicious looking edibles piled high. Booths and tables occupy the other side.

Some of the more unpleasant passengers are having a field day, stuffing their bulbous faces.

Minxie stretches her arm past a SCARFING TROLL to grab a white-chocolate covered strawberry. She accidentally bumps him with her elbow. He BLOWS UP with anger.

SCARFING TROLL

Watch where you're gropin', you
Elfen bit--!

CHRISTOPHER

That's quite enough.

Christopher slides between them, his eyes in a death lock. The Troll stares right back, leaning in closer. Christopher does not back down, leaning right back until their noses are inches from each other.

The Troll snorts and waddles off, leaving Minxie and Christopher looking right at each other.

MINXIE

Thank you. What's your name?

CHRISTOPHER

I'm Fa--um, Chris.

MINXIE

Hello, Chris. I'm Minxie.

(awkward beat)

Well, it's nice to meet a Man who
would stand up for an Elf.

(smiles)

Even if only to a Troll.

CHRISTOPHER

You're welcome. One must speak for
those who cannot speak for
themselves. Not to say you can't
speak for yourself...uh, I'm sure
you can sp--

She puts her hand on his arm, stopping him.

MINXIE

Would you like to sit with me?

Christopher looks down at the two pastries in his hand.

CHRISTOPHER

(sotto)

He doesn't even like pastries.

He smiles.

MINXIE

What?

He looks back to her, thankful.

CHRISTOPHER

I'd be delighted, Minxie.

They sit down at one of the booths. Winter zooms past the window behind them.

MINXIE

I don't think I've ever seen you on the Rail before.

CHRISTOPHER

First time.

MINXIE

Really? How exciting! The Polatial Capital, I assume. What brings you?

CHRISTOPHER

Business, I'm afraid.

MINXIE

Same with most of us. Do you enjoy your work?

CHRISTOPHER

It's been...eventful.

MINXIE

Yeah, that time of year, up here.

CHRISTOPHER

What's life like, up North?

MINXIE

Honestly hard for me to say. It's both exactly what I want, and somehow not right. Not enough.

CHRISTOPHER

That's not a popular opinion, I gather.

MINXIE

Don't get me wrong, it's a perfect wonderland. You'll love it. I'd kill to see it through new eyes again. It's just, I can help feel there's more.

(beat)

Not in an over-the-rainbow type way, but...more to be felt. I don't know.

He leans across the table.

CHRISTOPHER

I do. Like there's something just beyond your reach.

MINXIE

As if everyone else has it.

CHRISTOPHER

But you can't.

She slouches back in the booth, relieved.

MINXIE

Maybe everyone feels that way then.

CHRISTOPHER

We can safely account for two.

MINXIE

And that's something. Especially considering--and I'm not sure I should even say this--you're the first person I've talked to on this ride in years.

CHRISTOPHER

And you're the first Elf I've talked to. Ever.

MINXIE

I hope I haven't put you off of all Elf-kind. We're not all like this.

CHRISTOPHER

It's easy to write something off when you've never seen it. I know that more than most.

He rubs his forehead.

MINXIE

What's your line of work, Chris?

CHRISTOPHER

One that makes it difficult to accept that I've had to travel to the snowy ends of the earth to find someone who knows how I feel.

The intercom crackles again. Christopher leans back to hear.

CONDUCTOR (O.S.)

(filtered)

Merry Christmas, travelers! Due to concerns of security, The Polar Brigade will be conducting random searches and inquiry. For any inconvenience, we apologize deeply.

The Conductors cheery tone betrays the threat. Christopher overhears a couple behind him.

ELF WIFE

My dear, I'm afraid. Could it be a Papal raid?

ELF HUSBAND

(kisser her head)

Of course not, dear. You've nothing to fear.

Christopher turns back to Minxie.

MINXIE

Everyone's a little on edge lately. Whispers of an attack have been circling The Pole for weeks.

Christopher slides out of the booth.

CHRISTOPHER

Please excuse me.

He dashes out of the dining car, leaving Minxie looking particularly concerned, hearing the couple in the next booth.

ELF WIFE

For our children I hope, no more nightmares of The Pope!

Minxie thinks to herself. She turns to look in the direction Christopher left, a hypothesizing look on her face.

INT. TRAIN - NIGHT

Christopher passes three Officers of the Polar Brigade wearing padded armor vests as he makes his way down the aisle to Joseph. They're occupied with a group of Trolls by the door. Christopher slips by undetected.

He sits back down next to Joseph, nervous. He leans in.

CHRISTOPHER
(whispering)
What do we do?

JOSEPH
Remain calm.

A Brigade officer pulls away from his partner, stomping down the aisle as he scans the car. Christopher lowers his head, which catches his attention. He walks down the aisle, passing several occupied seats, heading straight for them.

Imposing boots stride into Christopher's line of vision. He looks up to find the officer smiling behind a clear visor.

BRIGADE OFFICER
Merry Christmas, Merry Men!

Christopher nods.

JOSEPH
Merry Christmas, Brigadier.

BRIGADE OFFICER
Where aims your leave this eve?

CHRISTOPHER
North. Uh, The Polatial Capitol.

BRIGADE OFFICER
Having Men aboard is rare. What's
your business there?

Christopher looks to Joseph, who does not hesitate.

JOSEPH
I'm a carpenter.

BRIGADE OFFICER
Terrific. Can you be more specific?

JOSEPH
I'm afraid I can't.

The officer squints his eyes, holding for a beat.

BRIGADE OFFICER

My father was a wood-former. I understand that. Never know what you'll be working on or where at.

Joseph smiles. Just as Christopher starts to relax his tense shoulders, the Officer turns back to him.

BRIGADE OFFICER

And you, too?

CHRISTOPHER

Me? I, uh, um...

In an attempt to remain casual, Christopher crosses his legs under his cloak. A loud metal CLICK catches the Officer's attention.

BRIGADE OFFICER

Forgive the force we invoke, but could you please stand and remove your cloak?

Christopher stands slowly, his arms at his side.

BRIGADE OFFICER (CONT'D)

Apologies for this imprudent imposition. We're trying to weed out any Papal sedition.

Joseph notices Christopher's jaw clench. He attempts to reach out to Christopher, who shakes off his grasp.

BRIGADE OFFICER (CONT'D)

Sir, could you cast off your cloak?

Christopher stares down the guard. This is it.

CHRISTOPHER

Gladly.

In a sweeping move, Christopher removes his cloak, revealing his robes and crucifix as his other arm draws his weapon, aiming it squarely at the Officer's shocked face.

The two other members of the Brigade draw their crossbow pistols, aiming them at Christopher and Joseph, who removes his own cloak, standing to join him.

JOSEPH

Consider your actions, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER

We are here for one reason. The task we were charged with beings NOW.

SLAM. Christopher swings his weapon around, hitting him in the face with the butt of its grip. The Officer falls to the ground as he kicks of a seat behind him.

Christopher dashes around the compartment, evading the fire of the other Officers. He leaps between the remaining two, causing one to shoot other.

Green Elf blood SPURTS on nearby passengers. The third Officer gets his bearings and fires at Christopher, who continues to evade, running along the walls. His boots smack against clattering window glass.

Sliding down into a far seat, Christopher sees Joseph kneel over a fallen passenger, visibly saying a prayer over them.

He finishes his slide into the third Officer, toppling him over and deflecting his last shot. He falls and Christopher KICKS him up and over, falling unconscious the other way.

Christopher turns away from the fallen bodies and gasping passengers to see another squad in the adjoining compartment running toward him.

He spins and SLAMS the door shut between them, the Officers squashed up against the glass.

Turning back to the compartment to check on Joseph, he finds all of the Elfen passengers staring back at him, cracking their knuckles.

He smiles nervously, ducking the first punch which BREAKS the glass of the door behind him, sending shards into the pressed Officer's screaming faces.

Christopher rolls down the center aisle, avoiding clumsy attacks as he heads toward Joseph. They meet, facing the oncoming crowd back-to-back.

CHRISTOPHER

It's been great traveling with all of you, but this is our stop.

Christopher raises his weapon into the air. BLAM. He blows a massive hole in the roof. The compartment is filled with snow rushing in as the priests leap up and out.

EXT. TRAIN - CONTINUOUS

Christopher and Joseph land gracefully on the top of the train, snow rushing past them. They balance themselves with their arms out, making their way toward the engine.

Their robes ripple in the roaring wind, which is cut through by a loud THUD. They stop moving, looking around. Nothing.

Another THUD, from behind them. They spin, almost losing their footing. Nothing.

A third THUD and three armored Polar Brigade Officers leap from between the two cars, facing them. Their boots stick to the train, magnetized. With each step, they release with a whoosh and THUD back down.

CHRISTOPHER
(screaming over the wind)
Nice clogs.

The front-most Officer makes with no pleasantries, charging forward with a series of thuds, drawing a crossbow pistol in one hand and a baton in the other.

Christopher pushes Joseph back, squaring off with the approaching Officer. They both hold out their respective weapons, waiting for the other to make the first move.

Facing opposite the train's direction, Christopher has the advantage, wind at his back as snowflakes prick against the Officer's visor. The Officer attempts to wipe his visor with the top of his baton-clutching fist.

Seizing the momentary aiming block, Christopher SLIDES across the metal roof, taking out the first Officer, propelling him off the side of the train with his arms and feet.

The other two Officers spring to life, aiming their pistols.

They FIRE at Christopher, who is YANKED back by Joseph just in time to leave a trail of arrows where he had been.

Christopher twists off the side of the train, passengers gasping as he passes their window. He uses Joseph's grasp as a line to SWING up and around, KICKING into the second Officer's face, who topples back into the third.

The Officers tumble over each other, one falling between the cars, hitting his gut on the connecting bolt and into the white abyss. Christopher stares down the remaining Officer.

He raises his weapon, aiming squarely at the Officer's head.

The Officer gulps, aiming his own pistol right back at him. Christopher juts out his other hand to Joseph.

CHRISTOPHER

Again!

Joseph links hands with him and Christopher leaps off the edge of the train, sliding past a window, his crucifix blowing in the wind behind him.

This time, Minxie is looking out the window and spots him. He sees for a quick flash her shocked expression.

He swings up and back onto the roof, kicking the pistol out of the Officer's hand and into oblivion. The Officer charges with his baton, Christopher evading as he gets his footing.

INT. TRAIN - CONTINUOUS

Minxie slumps back in her seat, mouth agape.

MINXIE

(sotto)

He can't be.

She takes a thoughtful moment, a look of determination dawning on her face. She swallows her fear and gets out of her seat, making her way through panicking passengers.

She crosses cars, weaving through another batch of utter pandemonium. Elfs press their noses against the windows, hoping for a peek of the action. At the end of the car, she knocks on a door marked "Conductor's Station."

The door slides open, revealing the CONDUCTOR, a short, older Elf with a scruffy beard.

MINXIE

You've got to stop the train!

She forces her way into the compartment.

CONDUCTOR

I assure you, Miss, we're almost to our destination, where there will be a full investigation.

A loud scuffle from overhead, they both look up. She gives a worried look, scanning the compartment. Pushing past the conductor, she throws herself on the break lever!

EXT. TRAIN - CONTINUOUS

Christopher engages in hand-to-hand combat with the Officer over the gap between the engine and the first car.

The Officer swings his baton, Christopher ducks to evade and returns with a punch to his gut.

A metal SCREECHING sounds and the train abruptly slows, sending them sliding onto the train engine. Joseph holds on to the edge of the first car and the The Officer tumbles, disappearing into the smokestack.

INT. TRAIN - VARIOUS - CONTINUOUS

Passengers LURCH forward, slamming into the seats in front of them. Standing passengers are thrown to the ground.

In the dining car, food slides off tables, crashing into a chaotic mush.

EXT. TRAIN - CONTINUOUS

Joseph loses his grip and slides off the edge of the train, but Christopher jumps off the Engine and grabs him just in time, pulling him back up just as the TRAIN BEGINS TO DERAIL.

Behind them, the end cars begin to topple over each other, piling like dominos as the engine attempts to brake, steam issuing from its chugging wheels. It's just moving too fast.

With a startling vault, the train is free from the tracks entirely. The locomotive begins to ROLL.

Christopher and Joseph run as if atop a spinning barrel.

INT. TRAIN - VARIOUS - CONTINUOUS

Passengers fall from their seats, slamming into the window and then up to the ceiling, the world spinning outside.

EXT. TRAIN - CONTINUOUS

Christopher sidesteps just far enough to reach through the conductor's window. He waits, running next to it and throws his hand in, snatching Minxie out!

The three of them LEAP off the crashing train just as it plunges into the snow, wrecked.

EXT. THE NORTH POLE - NIGHT

Silence as the three of them lay sprawled out in the snow for a long beat. Christopher opens his eyes to the sound of crunching snow.

He looks over to see Joseph making a snow angel.

Christopher and Minxie sit up. She looks at him, but he's distracted by the sight before them:

THE NORTH POLE. A vast city, sloping up to a crowning PALACE of the same majestic design displayed at the train station. Snow-covered brick and wood evoke holiday iconography at its purest. A line of trees surround its perimeter wall.

Inspired by the sight, Christopher hops up, primed to charge.

Joseph hops up from his snow Angel, stopping him.

JOSEPH

Be patient, Christopher. We have no idea what we are up against. I'm sure The Polar Brigade was just the beginning.

MINXIE

And they were only routine transport security.

They turn to her.

JOSEPH

What can we expect?

She and Christopher lock eyes.

MINXIE

You're a zealot. Why did you save me?

CHRISTOPHER

Your words weren't so harsh back in that dining car.

MINXIE

Forgive me, but I didn't know you were the assassin sent to destroy everything I love.

CHRISTOPHER

This Sodom is no place of love.

MINXIE

So I'm damned simply for what I am?

Christopher steps toward her.

CHRISTOPHER

I can save you from this blasphemy.

MINXIE

Why?

CHRISTOPHER

Because you are different.

MINXIE

I think you'd find most are.

Joseph coughs.

JOSEPH

We should probably get a move on.
Is there a back entrance?

She nods.

CHRISTOPHER

Please. Show us the way.

MINXIE

And risk my life?

CHRISTOPHER

I will protect you.
(beat)
After all...I'm The Christmas
Crusader!

She considers, trying to hide a smirk.

A RUMBLE from the train wreckage. A bruised Officer rolls out of a broken window. Joseph and Christopher break into a run.

Minxie hesitates.

Christopher turns as he runs.

CHRISTOPHER

Come on!

A crossbow shot whizzes past her ear and she turns to see the Officer's furious face. She runs.

BRUISED OFFICER

Traitor!

EXT. BACK ENTRANCE GATE - NIGHT

They've slowed to a brisk walk. Headed to the perimeter gate along the train tracks, the city grows larger before them.

A long silence bids Christopher speak.

CHRISTOPHER

Thank you.

MINXIE

I'll remind you that self-preservation is not the same as complicity.

Christopher nods quickly and agreeably.

JOSEPH

(sarcastic)

Of course not. You're our prisoner!

She laughs. They join in.

A crackle and a beeping sound cut through their good spirits. It's coming from underneath Minxie's cloak. She's surprised and pulls it open to reveal a blinking device on her belt.

Christopher looks livid.

CHRISTOPHER

You--!

SLAM. A leather-booted foot knocks Joseph to the floor. SLAM. A second does the same to Christopher.

Opening their eyes from the ground, they see five female agents of the ELITE POLAR SQUAD zip-line in around them.

MINXIE

No! Don't!

Christopher and Joseph stand, encircled by the Squad.

Minxie stands separated, outside the circle. Christopher stares her down with contempt as the SQUAD LEADER approaches.

SQUAD LEADER

Well, if it isn't Father Christopher, the Mad Priest.

His lack of attention catches hers. She sees that Minxie is the object of his stare.

SQUAD LEADER (CONT'D)
Trust me, right now, she concerns
you least.

The Squad Leader leans in to Christopher, the other Agents holding their bows to Joseph.

AGENT #1
It's us you should fear.

AGENT #2
You pious little dear.

AGENT #3
You're right in our scope.

AGENT #4
You and your bloody Pope.

The last Agent spits.

Christopher's lip trembles. The final straw. He WHIPS out his weapon. Not quick enough, The Squad Leader FIRES an arrow.

Joseph LEAPS in front of it, TAKING THE ARROW IN HIS CHEST.

Christopher screams, unleashed, firing rounds into the Agents. Minxie screams and runs for the gate. One of the remaining Agents chokes her radio.

AGENT #1
Backup! We need backup at the back
gate!

The Agents put up quite a fight, drawing and firing bows rapidly, but Christopher is pulsing with an animalistic precision. He dodges their fire while aiming perfectly.

BLAM. He takes down two more Agents, spinning and rolling from one to the next, only the Squad Leader remaining.

He blows out her knees with a single shot. She falls.

Christopher lowers to his knees, dropping his weapon. He cradles Joseph in his arms.

CHRISTOPHER
Father Joseph, I--

Joseph, shaking, raises a silencing finger.

He clutches Christopher's collar and pulls him in close.

JOSEPH
(gurgling blood)
We all find him, Christopher.
In...our own way.

Christopher nods, tears streaming down his cheeks and onto his mentor's face. Joseph falls limp in his arms. He lays the body down gently, crossing himself before he stands.

A fury rages within him. He picks up his weapon and walks to the fallen Squad Leader, who trembles in the cold.

His voice is the gravely angel of death.

CHRISTOPHER
There was a point. Not even an hour ago. When I would have let you live. Or perhaps. Just bleed out. In peace.

SQUAD LEADER
P-please. H-have m-mercy.

CHRISTOPHER
Don't interrupt me.
(cocks his gun)
Before. I questioned. If I could do. What I'm here to do. But now. It's clear.

He raises the weapon to her weeping face.

CHRISTOPHER
I will strain this pardon to the gates of Hell.

CLICK.

He pulls the trigger. Nothing.

He spins the weapon around, tossing out the empty magazine and reloading with another from the belt beneath his robe.

Taking aim at the Squad leader again, she closes her eyes, accepting her fate.

He stops, lowering his weapon as he hears a tapping in the distance. It grows quickly to an echoing clack. Seconds later, a massive marching sound.

He turns around, squinting to see through the snow between him and the back gate. He raises a hand above his eyes.

The windswept snow parts to slowly reveal:

An army of marching NUTCRACKER SOLDIERS!

Each is no more than two feet tall. They break into waves, the first quickening its pace.

They RUSH toward Christopher, but rather than attack, the first wave encircles Joseph's body, lifting it out of the way. Christopher runs forward, attempting to stop them.

He grips their tiny wooden bodies, tearing them off of his fallen friend, but there are too many of them. They consume Joseph's body as a second wave pulls Christopher away.

CHRISTOPHER

Stop! Leave him!

The swarm pulls away, continuing to lump around the obscured body as they retreat.

Christopher EXPLODES, thrashing out his limbs to break free of the chomping soldiers. He cocks his weapon, unloading into the swarm.

CHRISTOPHER

Heathens.

His loaded rounds destroy the soldiers into cascading wood chips in the snow. He turns to face the oncoming storm.

Six more waves of Nutcrackers march toward him.

He CHARGES forward, sliding his gun to cock it mid-spin. JUMPING over the first three waves, he lands in the middle, and they all rotate to face him.

Chaos ensues as the disturbed ranks circle him, jumping over each other to make their attacks. He spins, shoots, kicks and punches the coming onslaught. The weapon becomes an extension of his arm, one of several deadly limbs. He's a monster.

He uses every moment to his advantage, sliding through the crunching snow to fire at them from below.

Springing back up, he catches a grouping by surprise, blasting them from behind before they can turn to see him.

The rest catch on, clumping closer together as they circle him. He pops off their heads in succession, the rat-a-tat of his gunfire lending a beat to the madness.

As the numbers of Soldiers decline, fallen into ashen piles of sawdust, Christopher can hear a familiar rumble.

The trees surrounding the entrance begin to de-root as did those on Christmas Tree Island. They lumber toward the vicious battle for a piece of the action.

From behind them, another FIVE SQUADS of agents zip-line down on streams of tinsel.

Chopping through the sky above, air support arrives, security Officers repelling down from three Polar Cruisers.

Christopher leaps up from the swarm of ravenous Nutcrackers, climbing up the swinging arm of a Christmas Tree, propelling himself up to the descending Officers.

He grabs one, falling to the snow below in a violent embrace. They hop to their feet, punching and parrying as the swipes of their fists leave swooping trails in the falling snow.

The other Officers hit the ground. He knocks out the first and makes his way through the line, sending two to the ground with a sprawling simultaneous reach of his arm and leg.

He twists back to the reformed marching lines of the Nutcrackers, sliding under the slithering tentacle roots of a tree, blasting a round up its skirt.

The tree falls, slamming into one of the floating Cruisers, which crashes next to them, flaming shrapnel taking out another tree and scores of Nutcrackers.

Switching his weapon to "full auto" he lets out a continuous blaze of machine fire in a circle around them, the flares lighting his face with a rapid staccato. He grits his teeth.

CHRISTOPHER
I'M Father Christmas!

Even more trees arrive, the leafy openings of their faces snarling. They raise their arm branches for attack.

Christopher evades their pounding claws, darting around so they fall on chasing Nutcrackers, squashing them.

More marching waves arrive through the crawling trees, encircling Christopher once more. He takes a firm stance in the middle of a vast coliseum of opposition. Cocking his gun finally, he holds it up, out of breath.

Click. Empty. He swings it around, gripping the barrel. He attempts to bash the surrounding Nutcrackers. Between their chomps and the stomping of the trees, he loses his footing.

Christopher is overwhelmed by the variety of attacks and finally falls, under a dog-pile of the remaining Nutcrackers.

INT. HOLDING CELL - DAY

Christopher awakens slowly on a cot. Groggily, he sits up and looks around the room beyond the bars of the cell, seeing no guard. Beams of snowy daylight shine through a small window.

His confiscated weapon sits on a desk at the far end of the room with his crucifix next to it.

A muffled conversation grows nearer through the entrance door. Christopher lays back down on the cot, feigning sleep.

An Elfen SHERIFF opens the holding room door.

SHERIFF
 Congratulations on finding the
 traitorous rat.

Christopher peeks through one eye, seeing Minxie being escorted to the neighboring cell by the Sheriff's DEPUTY.

DEPUTY
 And we're going to see that car of
 yours gets impounded, traitor.

They lock her in and exit the room.

Christopher sits up, but does not face her.

CHRISTOPHER
 They've got the traitor part right,
 they just missed for which side.

MINXIE
 I'm sorry, Chris, I didn't mean to--

He raises his hand.

CHRISTOPHER
 No. You led them straight to us,
 and now Joseph is dead.

MINXIE
 Dead?

Christopher lowers his head.

CHRISTOPHER
 I never should have brought him.
 Thought I could save every last
 soul, except my own.

MINXIE
 Is it too late for you?

CHRISTOPHER

I've done...I can't turn back. Not now. There must be recompense. One blackened soul for the sake of the rest is a small cost.

(beat)

I'm honored to pay it.

She takes a moment, considering him.

MINXIE

You promised to save me. I do the same for you.

CHRISTOPHER

Your boss is the only one that is going to need saving.

MINXIE

That means you need me all the more, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER

You don't sound like the others.

MINXIE

That's by choice. I visit your world as often as I can, and I'd rather not sound like a Northern bumpkin. The alliteratives, the rhyming, it's not my style.

CHRISTOPHER

Not that.

(beat)

You sound like Joseph.

MINXIE

Is that such a bad thing?

CHRISTOPHER

Let's just say if it wasn't for me, he'd probably be sitting in a cell like this in New Vatican City.

MINXIE

If it wasn't for you, he'd probably still be alive.

He winces. She's right. Doesn't mean he has to like it.

CHRISTOPHER

Guards!

In walks LT. PAIX, a muscular Elf with an intimidating hat.

CHRISTOPHER
I request that either I or my
neighboring prisoner be moved.

Lt. Paix stares through the bars at Christopher.

LT. PAIX
Is that so?

He steps over to Minxie.

LT. PAIX (CONT'D)
Minxie, hello.

MINXIE
(nodding)
Lieutenant Paix.

LT. PAIX
No, formality, dear, please. Would
you prefer relocation or release?

MINXIE
Do I have a choice?

LT. PAIX
A choice, if you catch my drift, to
go out with me after my shift.

MINXIE
You want me to--?

LT. PAIX
Choice is yours, accept or decline.
You'll be waking in this cot, or
mine.

She looks over to Christopher. He sits with his arms crossed.

MINXIE
Alright, let's do it.

Lt. Paix unlocks the cell and escorts her out, eyeing her
ass. Christopher is fuming as they go. He sits for a moment,
grumbling in the empty room.

He hops up, grabbing the bars with both hands, pushing and
pulling to no avail.

Lt. Paix reenters, alone.

He walks up to Christopher's cell.

LT. PAIX
 Father Christopher. I'm Lieutenant
 Paix. Mind telling us what you're
 up to these days?

CHRISTOPHER
 Sight-seeing.

LT. PAIX
 Drop the act, Priest Man. We know
 all about your plan.

CHRISTOPHER
 Is that so?

LT. PAIX
 Specifics weren't said, in all the
 commotion, but a lot can be gleaned
 from a public promotion.

CHRISTOPHER
 Which I declined.

LT. PAIX
 Ah, but the mysterious crusade! And
 all your cannonade.

Lt. Paix walks over to his desk and picks up Christopher's
 weapon, admiring it.

CHRISTOPHER
 You'd know. Quite the defensive
 system for a toy factory.

Lt. Paix laughs.

LT. PAIX
 With what we hold so very dear, no
 less could be expected. The Father
 of this time of year should always
 be protected.

CHRISTOPHER
 Drop the rhyme and TALK TO ME.

LT. PAIX
 My accent offends you? Very well.
 To put it plainly, you will be held
 until after the 25th, at which time
 you will be tried before the Polar
 Courts. That is, of course,
 assuming you survive the night.

Lt. Paix grabs Christopher by his collar and SLAMS him back into the bars. His nose bleeds.

He goes in for another attack as they both pause in reaction to a WHIRRING sound. It grows louder until...

BAM. The bricks behind Christopher EXPLODE forward from the impact of a hot red car, Minxie behind the wheel. Lt. Paix fumbles for his keys, separated from them by the cell bars.

The dust hasn't settled as she kicks open the passenger door.

MINXIE

Get in.

Christopher coughs, checking out her ride. It's a sleek compact with a whimsical design. This car's got curves.

Lt. Paix finds the keys, running toward the cell door.

Christopher hops into the passenger seat, slamming the door behind him. Minxie speeds out, leaving Lt. Paix in the dusty rubble.

EXT. NORTH POLE HIGHWAY - DAY

The sun is diffused through clouds as a light snow falls.

They drive.

INT. MINXIE'S CAR - DAY

Christopher brushes himself off.

CHRISTOPHER

Alright. We're even.

MINXIE

Not quite.

He raises an eyebrow.

CHRISTOPHER

You'd rather be lying unconscious in that train?

MINXIE

I cleverly broke out of jail--

CHRISTOPHER

That what you call that?

MINXIE

With my Elfen wiles, yes, but I
also broke back in. That's two.

CHRISTOPHER

I sense a request or favor or
something I'll hate coming on.

MINXIE

(smiling)

I'm taking you on a date.

His eyes bug out.

CHRISTOPHER

The Papal Code has Strict
Priesthood Regulations against
personal atta--

MINXIE

You're unarmed. You're exhausted.
You're in a foreign land. That puts
ME in control and I'm taking you on
a DATE.

His head falls back against the seat, defeated.

EXT. NORTH POLE HIGHWAY - DAY

Minxie's car zooms down the highway. Wreaths line the
dividing median and side shoulder. The massive Palace looks
down at them from above. She takes a double-curly-cue exit
ramp and speeds down a side road.

INT. MINXIE'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Christopher has his arms reluctantly crossed, but he peeks
out the window without turning his head.

She looks over and catches him.

EXT. ICE RINK - SUNSET

Minxie pulls her car up to a multi-level ice rink, its floors
connected by sweeping slides. Elf families laugh and play,
the setting sun reflecting off the ice.

She gets out of the car, but he says inside. She dips her
head inside, and he shakes his head. Not happening.

EXT. ICE RINK - NIGHT

Christopher sits in the car and watches as Minxie skates. She spins around, sliding to a stop. She smiles and waves at him.

He leans forward, reaching his hand up to the door latch. He hesitates, then retracts. He folds his arms again.

EXT. MISTLETOE PARK - NIGHT

Minxie and Christopher walk down a paved sidewalk under a canopy, which has mistletoe hanging down throughout.

Christopher keeps his eyes fixed firmly upward, avoiding passing under the plants at all cost. He skips side to side on his tippy toes, much to Minxie's amusement.

INT. OPERA HOUSE - NIGHT

Christopher and Minxie sit in a box seat on the left side of the theater, watching The Snowmen Ballet dance on the stage below them.

Minxie watches him for a reaction, which he only gives in the form of scooting forward when the Snowmen dance out of his sight line.

EXT. RACETRACK - NIGHT

Christopher and Minxie sit in the grandstands of an outdoor amphitheater watching The Reindeer Races.

Eight reindeer make their way around a snow-covered track. Each pulls a chariot with a single uniformed driver onboard. Minxie cheers.

One of the last reindeer pulls their way to the front and Christopher ever so slightly pumps his fist.

EXT. ICE CREAM PARLOR - NIGHT

Christopher leans against the car parked out front. Minxie exits the parlor holding two cones.

She licks her own and shoves one into Christopher's hands. He has to take it to prevent it splattering on his robes.

Minxie gets in and starts the car. Christopher takes a single, tiny lick with the tip of his tongue.

Just as his tongue touches the cold ice cream an arrow SHOOTs through the cone, blasting white everywhere and shattering the Parlor window behind them.

Christopher turns to see the arrow's source:

Lt. Paix, sitting the driver's seat of a Polar Squad Car, his pistol aimed out the passenger window. Christopher DIVES through the open window of Minxie's car.

CHRISTOPHER

Drive!

She floors it, skidding out of the parking spot, peeling around and gunning it at high speed. She SLAMS directly into the headlight of Lt. Paix's oncoming Squad Car.

Ripping right through, she speeds out of the parking lot as Lt. Paix turns on his siren lights and pursues.

EXT. NORTH POLE HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Back on the wreath-lined highway, Minxie weaves her way through whimsical-looking traffic. Cars honk and brights flash as they swerve through lanes.

Lt. Paix follows quickly behind, other cars clearing a path.

INT. LT. PAIX'S SQUAD CAR - NIGHT

Lt. Paix grabs a radio from his dash.

LT. PAIX

Base, tell the boys to wrack up,
I'm going to need some backup.

(pause)

And possibly air support.

EXT. NORTH POLE HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Minxie slides into the center median, bypassing several lengths of traffic before swerving back in as an opening appears. Lt. Paix does the same.

He's gaining on her, cars continuing to make way around him.

They pass a highway exit, and from the entrance ramp race THREE MOTORCYCLE ELFS. They merge with traffic, pulling up alongside Lt. Paix.

He does a forward sweeping hand gesture and they race ahead.

INT. MINXIE'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Minxie grips the steering wheel with both hands, jarring it to the left and right as she peeks in her rear-view mirror.

A trio of bright lights flash in the mirror and onto her eyes. She turns to look, seeing the Motorcycle Unit behind her, their sirens flashing. She looks down at her gauges, thinking. The look of a plan on her face.

SLAM, she shoves her foot into the break pedal.

EXT. NORTH POLE HIGHWAY - CONTINUOUS

Minxie's Car breaks in the middle of the speeding highway, steam issuing from her wheel drums.

Two of the cycles SMASH into the back of her car, the riders flinging off their bikes and over her car, falling and rolling on the pavement.

The third motorcycle spins to face her, against traffic. She accelerates, the two barreling toward each other. Neither is pulling away. Just before impact, the cycle pops a wheelie, driving OVER the car, landing with a CRASH behind.

The bike spins out of control and onto the median, leaving only Lt. Paix's squad car behind them.

INT. MINXIE'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

CHRISTOPHER

I want to ask if this is your first police chase, but I can't decide if that would be a good thing or not.

She grins, smothering the accelerator with her heeled foot.

MINXIE

I know just where to lose him.

EXT. NORTH POLE HIGHWAY - CONTINUOUS

Minxie pulls off the highway onto a busy street approaching The Palace courtyard. In traffic, she gains distance ahead of the Squad Car and shuts off her car's lights. She pulls into a small wooded area on the side of the main street.

She takes a winding dirt road that leads up a hill.

EXT. FROSTY BLUFF - NIGHT

Minxie and Christopher sit on the hood of her car, parked at the edge of a bluff overlooking the main entrance to The Palace. Night brings it to life, lights twinkling in every window. Before the entrance is a busy public square.

CHRISTOPHER

Evasive maneuvers aside, I should thank you for the tour of heathen atrocities.

She laughs.

MINXIE

I think you enjoyed it.

CHRISTOPHER

You're projecting.

MINXIE

Is that so?

(raspberry)

No, sir. I was watching you.

CHRISTOPHER

There must be a better target for your gaze.

Her voice goes soft with sincerity.

MINXIE

I'm not convinced.

CHRISTOPHER

Why did you do all this?

MINXIE

You needed to recoup.

CHRISTOPHER

Bull. Sleep tends to do that best.

She leans back, propped up on her hands.

MINXIE

I hoped that you seeing this place would help you understand it. Like you saw me.

He looks to her.

CHRISTOPHER

I'm not meant to understand this.

She sits up, leaning into to him.

MINXIE

It's not hard, Chris. Please, just for minute, drop the bias of your upbringing.

CHRISTOPHER

Whatever you're seeing, whatever you think you see in me, you've invented it. I chose this life.

MINXIE

But do you choose it?

CHRISTOPHER

I'm here, aren't I?

MINXIE

And I believe that's for a reason. That in every moment of every day, you can decide.

CHRISTOPHER

There is nothing to decide.

MINXIE

There are questions we all have to ask. This is just one most hope they never have to have to answer.

CHRISTOPHER

Which is?

MINXIE

Can you kill a man in cold blood?

CHRISTOPHER

If the cost of letting him live is the preservation of everything I've ever known? Ever loved?

She gulps, hanging on his words.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)

Yes.

SHOOM. A bright white SEARCHLIGHT shines down on them from a passing cruiser. It hovers above them, squawking.

Christopher draws an ornate, cross-shaped knife from his boot and holds it to Minxie's neck.

She trembles.

MINXIE

I didn't--

CHRISTOPHER

Your credentials.

MINXIE

What?

CHRISTOPHER

Hand them over.

A tear runs down her cheek. Her hands shaking, she produces them from her pocket and hands them to him. He swats them out of her hand and hops off the trunk toward the cliff.

He turns toward The Palace, looking down at the entrance.

MINXIE

(crying)

I would have given them to you...

He looks over his shoulder to her.

MINXIE (CONT'D)

If you had asked.

His expression goes stone cold.

Turning away, he LEAPS off the cliff, robe billowing behind.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

The searchlight follows Christopher as he lands rolling in the courtyard below. Citizens scatter, gasping.

A pack of Officers approach him, crossbow pistols raised.

Squinting his eyes almost entirely, he assumes a calm that allows him to cut them down with ease. He slices through all four, evading their fire and moving toward the entrance.

A squad of Agents block the gate to The Palace.

He springs above them, twisting in the air to dodge the arrows from their bows. He comes down, swiping through their weapons as they reach to their quiver to reload.

He strides with a godly confidence as he enters The Palace.

INT. PALACE LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

A mixed group of a dozen armored Officers and Agents descend the grand staircase in front of Christopher.

They raise their weapons, poised to attack.

CHRISTOPHER
Angel of God...

He kicks his other boot, a second knife flying into his hand.

CHRISTOPHER
My guardian dear...

He spins the two knives, one in each hand.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)
To whom God's love commits me
here...

The dozen take a step back up the stairs as he moves forward.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)
Ever this day be at my side...

He pumps his arms down at his side, blades outstretched.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)
To light and guard...

They take another step back. He looks to them.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)
To rule and guide.

He JUMPS off the marble ground, deflecting their fire with lightning fast swishes of his blade.

Landing between them, he THROWS both blades, they spin, each cutting through six targets before bouncing off the stair posts and returning to his grip.

He crosses the blades over his chest, head down.

He breathes in, slowly, satisfied.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)
Amen.

INT. PALACE TOWER STAIRCASE - NIGHT

Christopher runs, three steps at a time, up a spiral staircase, sending foes tumbling down in his wake.

An arrow fires from around the corner. He ducks into a window cubby, emerging to clothesline the charging enemy with his flexed arm as he continues up the stairs.

Two more turn the bend to him and he shimmies up the narrow walls slicing as they pass beneath him.

He reaches the top of the spire which has an observation deck on one side and a bridge on the opposite leading to the central tower.

EXT. TOWER BRIDGE - CONTINUOUS

A line of readied foes stand along the entire bridge, waiting. He wastes no time, starting with the first.

The bridge is narrow enough for him to give them each personal attention. Taking one across the chest, another at the knee, yet another down the face.

WIDE on the bridge: limp bodies are thrown off the bridge in succession like a typewriter.

The last one at the central tower's edge falls and Christopher enters. Through the arch can be seen an entire room of eager defenders.

EXT. CENTRAL TOWER - NIGHT

A series of beautiful windows circle the outside of the central tower, just below a grand balcony at its top.

Out from the tower come screams and yelps. The windows are splattered one by one with green blood.

INT. CENTRAL TOWER - NIGHT

Christopher stands in the center of the room, surrounded by the bodies of his fallen victims. Before him, a massive set of wooden red doors. He sheaths his knives.

Approaching the doors, he breathes steadily and pushes them open with great force.

He enters. Nutcrackers begin to tend to the fallen bodies as the doors close behind him with a echoing THUD.

INT. THRONE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The Throne Room is lined with bookshelves, a fireplace to one side and a ceiling-height stained-glass window at its end.

There is a tall chair facing the window. Snowflakes slap against it, making the colorful art shimmer, as if alive. Christopher walks across the room, approaching the chair.

The chair rotates, revealing SANTA CLAUS.

It's him. In the flesh. White beard, rosy cheeks, all the attributes in a startlingly authentic reality.

He smiles at Christopher.

SANTA

Hello, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER

You speak familiarly, but we have not met. I am Father Christopher, Priest of the Papal Order, pardoned by His Eminence Pope Zed the first of New Vatican City, who does so charge you with spiritual crimes against his Holy Reign, namely the secularization and induction of materialistic, consumerist values into our most sacred of Holidays: Christmas.

Santa listens attentively. Christopher slowly steps forward for emphasis as he speaks.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)

You have poised yourself a false idol, poisoning the hearts of men at the detriment and replacement of our savior, Jesus Christ.

Santa lets the name hang in the air for a moment.

SANTA

My dear Christopher. You have strayed so very far.

(beat)

You really don't recognize me?

Christopher looks confused.

CHRISTOPHER

You are Santa Claus.

He nods.

SANTA

Yes. And?

CHRISTOPHER

And we have no...relationship, as you seem to imply.

SANTA

Yes, I see that this, too, is true, I am very sorry to say.

Santa stands up from his chair. He walks up to Christopher, who looks him straight in the eye.

SANTA (CONT'D)

That was not always the case, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER

I have no history with you, Northern One. No late-night childhood sightings or broken dreams. No memories sat on your lap or writing you letters.

(beat)

Our only relationship will be that of Death and his passenger.

Christopher draws his knife with a loud SHING that echoes through the room. Santa lets it dissipate in the air.

SANTA

These words are not yours, Christopher. Nor is the blade, nor the intention.

(beat)

Look past the rosy cheeks. Look past the white beard. Look past me as the target of your crusade. Bring forth what is within you. Feel.

(beat)

You truly do not recognize me?

Christopher stares back at him blankly.

Santa lowers his head. He removes his leather gloves and presents his palms to Christopher, revealing:

THE STIGMATA.

Christopher stands in shock. His mouth, agape. His lips, quivering. Santa moves Christopher's hands to touch his own.

SANTA

Feel my reality. I am Him. The
Second Coming. I and the father are
one. I am the alpha, and the omega.
The Word made flesh. The way, and
the truth, and the life.

(beat)

And I am with you, always.

Santa reaches his hand out, touching Christopher's chest.

Christopher is overwhelmed with emotional resonance, a rapturous conflict painted across his face. He looks Santa in the eyes...and PASSES OUT.

Unconscious, he falls to the ground, slamming his head on the floor, his crucifix necklace falling next to his face.

INT. POLAR HOSPITAL - DAY

Christopher awakens to a bright white light. His eyes focus, adjusting to the light. He sees Joseph looking down at him.

CHRISTOPHER

(mumbling)

Joseph...I'm sorry...

Joseph shushes him.

Christopher's eyes focus further and the detail of a surrounding hospital come into focus. An ELF NURSE approaches them, smiling at Joseph.

ELF NURSE

Well, Joseph, it looks like your
boy has finally woken up.

A realization that he is not dreaming comes over Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER

You're not--

JOSEPH

No.

Christopher puts his hand on his head.

CHRISTOPHER

You've been here before?

Joseph smiles.

JOSEPH

I told you: Everyone finds him in their own way.

CHRISTOPHER

When?

JOSEPH

A very long time ago. The world was different. Before Zed, this was not so arduous a journey.

(reflecting)

I will admit, though the destinations were the same, my path was not quite so bloody as yours.

(laughs)

Thankfully, the Nutcrackers have seen to that, as they saw to me. You've no need to worry.

He puts a comforting hand on Christopher's arm.

CHRISTOPHER

How did--

Joseph shushes him again.

JOSEPH

Rest. Take care. Prepare. We don't want you fainting again. Tonight, at dinner, all of your questions will be answered.

Christopher nods, closing his eyes. He drifts off to sleep.

INT. POLAR HOSPITAL - SUNSET

Christopher convalesces on a hospital balcony overlooking the bustling city. Wrapped in a white robe, he drinks from a mug.

Steps behind him announce a visitor. He turns to see Minxie, her arms behind her back.

CHRISTOPHER

Minxie. I'm so sorr--

She shakes her head.

MINXIE

No.

She takes out a perfectly wrapped gift from behind her back and presents it to Christopher. It looks very inviting nestled in her hands.

He puts down his mug, thinking for a moment. He opens his mouth to say something, but stops himself.

CHRISTOPHER

I, uh...sorry.

(breathes)

This is very new for me.

He reaches out slowly to accept the gift. His hand grazes hers in the transfer. Their eyes lock.

Magic.

INT. THRONE ROOM - NIGHT

Christopher enters the throne room, nodding to an attending nutcracker as the doors shut between them. Christopher wears a crimson Northern tunic.

A small, neatly-set table now occupies the center of the room. Christopher is alone. He takes the opportunity to examine the room.

He slides his fingers along shelves of books containing texts ancient and new. He peers at displayed artifacts that he dare not touch. He makes his way over to the tall chair at the end of the room and the window beyond.

Christopher looks up at the stained-glass masterpiece: It's a depiction of Santa, arms outstretched with joy, evoking the cross. Presents at his feet and sunbeams shine from behind his head. It's an imposingly beautiful work of art.

A grandfather clock chimes.

Santa enters from his antechamber, his boots clacking on the wood flooring. Christopher turns to him. Santa sits at one end of the table, gesturing for Christopher to join him.

CHRISTOPHER

Thank you.

He sits.

SANTA

It's the eve of Christmas Eve. As you can imagine, tomorrow night is a big one for me.

Santa picks up a water pitcher and pours it into a wine glass. Yep. Wine fills it.

He lifts the pitcher, offering to fill Christopher's glass, but he shakes his head. Santa gives a little chuckle.

SANTA

Forgive me. I usually like to begin with a little gag, but you must have many questions, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER

Oh, yes. So very many. About so much. The one it comes down to is: How?

Santa nods.

SANTA

That does beg some explanation, I suppose. Especially considering you come from a world where my two lives are pitted against each other. I assure you, they are hardly irreconcilable.

Santa sips from his glass.

CHRISTOPHER

So, the Second Coming, then?

SANTA

Yes, many are still waiting for it, I know, but it happened a very long time ago. I returned, as was foretold. What I found, the progress of humanity, so inspired me, so touched me, so delighted me, that I decide right then and there: I would devote the rest of my days to giving you all presents!

CHRISTOPHER

Impressed? With us?!
(scoffs)
What of war? Famine? Disease?

SANTA

You've risen to those occasions more beautifully than I ever could have imagined. I know its hard to see without such a perspective as mine, but you really have come so very far.

Christopher looks to have trouble understanding.

SANTA (CONT'D)

Suffering will always exist. It must. If only to allow for the light. This is the nature of your world. It can't exist otherwise.

CHRISTOPHER

And beyond our world?

SANTA

I can't speak of the unspeakable, Christopher. You know that.

CHRISTOPHER

But is it there?

SANTA

No, Christopher, it is HERE! The Kingdom of The Father is now. Spread among you. In time, I know you will see it. It's not "out there." It's here...

He points to Christopher's chest.

SANTA (CONT'D)

I know you have felt it. A moment out of time. Touching that which is not bound by what is here. There is your eternal life.

CHRISTOPHER

Then what of these "presents" of yours? Material goods? Really?

SANTA

Ah, yes. The inspiring point of your quest that brought you here. Zed mistakes the object for the subject. It's not the gifts.

(pause)

It's the giving. Giving, at the root of everything, was the hallmark of my first time here, and was to be the physical act of my second. Thus, "Santa" was born.

CHRISTOPHER

A sort of mask?

SANTA

Not a mask, no. A version of myself
for a new age. The age of words had
passed. The age of deeds is upon
us. The message is the same. The
love is the same. Just shown
instead of spoken. Inspired in the
individual hearts rather than the
grown minds, it knows no borders.

Santa takes another sip from his glass, leaning back.

SANTA (CONT'D)

And so, I sat and watched as my
past life's work was twisted and
perverted into the Papal
Dictatorship that currently is.

Christopher leans forward.

CHRISTOPHER

What would you have me do?

SANTA

I know you will not stay,
Christopher. I ask only one thing.

CHRISTOPHER

What is it?

SANTA

I ask not for a crusade of my own,
nor for your allegiance, as has
been requested of you before.
Simply deliver a long overdue gift
for me, to that same requestor.

Christopher nods his acceptance. A lost, conflicted look is
plastered on his face. Santa leans forward to him.

SANTA (CONT'D)

And I make you one last offer.

Christopher looks up to him. Santa produces Christopher's
knife, sliding it across the table to him.

SANTA (CONT'D)

As I gave my body once before, I
now offer you my head, should you
choose.

Christopher reaches out, picking up the knife.

He considers it in his hand.

EXT. GRAND ENTRANCE - DAY

Crowds cheer below the Grand Entrance of the The Complex at New Vatican City. Media and onlookers are all abuzz, waiting eagerly for The Pope's annual address.

There sits Pope Zed at the top of the steps, anxiety showing on his cragged face as he glances at the clock tower. Father Symon stands on his right, both flanked by the Cardinals.

From behind them, the chamber doors swing open. There stands Christopher, Joseph close behind. The crowd goes wild.

The Pope smiles and stands to face Christopher.

POPE ZED

There he is! Father Christopher!

The cheers grow even louder at the mention of his name.

CHRISTOPHER

For you.

Christopher presents The Pope with a green draw-string bag, certainly the size of a human head. The Pope's eyes light up as he accept the bag in his hands, clenching it. Wild-eyed, he turns to the crowd.

POPE ZED

Citizens. I have an announcement.
Thanks to Father Christopher's
tireless efforts, I hereby declare
the 25th Crusade a VICTORY!
(pause for cheers)
Yes, a spiritual victory against a
Satanic radical who threatens our
holiday no more!

He hoists the bag from its bottom, shaking out the contents. Onto his pulpit plops...a small, gift-wrapped box.

The Pope furrows his brow, looking into the empty bag, then back to the gift. He turns over a small paper tag attached to the box and reads, "To: Zed, From: Santa."

A fire burns in The Pope's eyes as he looks to Christopher.

POPE ZED

Have you turned on me, Christopher?
To the heathen ways of The North?
Have you BETRAYED me? Have you?
Traitor?!

The Pope's entire body shakes as he screams at him.

CHRISTOPHER

Open it.

This gets him even more angry.

POPE ZED

Open it?! You want me to OPEN IT?!
After all I gave you, boy? Is that
what you want? To open the Devil's
box? YOU WANT ME TO OPEN IT?! FINE!

In a blind fit of rage, he decimates the top of the box,
sending shreds of wrapping paper into the air.

He stares into the box and...his face transforms.

Tears stream into his wrinkles in a profound appreciation of
what he sees in the box. He openly weeps, staring into it. He
looks up at Christopher in bewildered amazement.

A smile cracks on a face that has not smiled in decades.

POPE ZED

How? How did you know?

The Press goes wild, their flashbulbs begging for a peek of
what's inside the box, their arms reaching over the barrier.

The Pope takes off his hat and sets it down on the pulpit
next to him. He clears his throat and addresses the crowd.

POPE ZED

I hereby resign the Papacy! Well,
that's quite a surprise, isn't it?!
As my final act, I offer full
transition of my power to the far
more able hands of FATHER
CHRISTOPHER!

The crowd roars. Zed picks up the hat holding it out to
Christopher, who approaches the pulpit.

CHRISTOPHER

As before, I must decline.

Gasps from the crowd.

CHRISTOPHER

And as before, I must humbly
request my offer be extended...to
Father Joseph, without whom I would
not be standing before you now.
Joseph?

The Pope hands over the hat, more interested in his box.

Joseph kneels before Christopher, who places the hat upon his head. The crowds break out in a round of applause.

CHRISTOPHER

Rise, Pope Joseph. Say a few words?

Pope Joe makes his way to the pulpit. Zed stands next to him, lovingly cradling his box.

JOSEPH

Firstly, as Zed's final act, I must know. What is in that box?!

Zed smirks with childish pride. He closes his eyes and begins to laugh a joyous laugh with anticipation as out from the box he pulls...a SLINKEE.

He lets it fall back and forth between his hands and laughs even more uproariously! He skips away from the pulpit, sitting with his legs crossed at the top of the steps, trying to get it to slink off.

CHRISTOPHER

(sotto)

Unbelievable.

Symon escorts Zed out, shooting Christopher a scornful look.

Joseph clears his throat.

JOSEPH

Ladies and Gentlemen, my inaugural decrees shall be: Firstly, the full pardon of Santa Claus. Unfairly treated by previous leadership, since converted. We welcome him into our holiday celebrations with open hearts.

(beat)

Secondly, taking a cue from our newly pardoned friends up North, the de-segregation of the Elfen-kind shall take immediate effect.

(beat)

And finally, I announce my intent to begin the process of the de-unification of Church and State. We've got a bright tomorrow ahead of us, and it's time we started shaping what it will look like.

The crowd flips out, jumping, clapping and screaming.

Joseph turns to Christopher.

JOSEPH
Does our valiant crusader have any
words?

Christopher leans into the pulpit.

CHRISTOPHER
Just, Merry Christmas to all. Oh,
and also...
(clears his throat)
Happy Birthday, Santa Christ!

INT. HOSPITAL WING - DAY

Christopher walks smiling to the Hospital Wing. He approaches Sister Mabel, who is cleaning medical tools.

CHRISTOPHER
Merry Christmas, Sister Mabel.

She looks up.

SISTER MABEL
Father Christopher, well! Merry
Christmas to you, too.

CHRISTOPHER
I owe you an apology.

SISTER MABEL
Is that so?

CHRISTOPHER
Yes, very much.

SISTER MABEL
Alright then, let's hear it.

CHRISTOPHER
Not something to be heard, but to
be shown.

Christopher moves his arms from behind his back and presents her with a shoddily but lovingly wrapped gift.

She just about jumps out of her shoes, throwing her arms around him in a hug which crushes the gift between them. They both laugh loud and joyously.

INT. THE COMPLEX - HALLWAY - DAY

Joseph approaches Christopher in his new Pope Robes. He's made some modifications, and appears much more casually than Zed did before him, with a more humbly sized hat.

JOSEPH
Father Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER
Your Eminence!

JOSEPH
Don't you start with that, or you'll forever be called "The Christmas Crusader."

CHRISTOPHER
There are worse monikers.

JOSEPH
At least yours was chosen.

Christopher looks him up and down, checking out his new duds.

CHRISTOPHER
But, I must say, this suits you.

JOSEPH
I'm still not convinced.

CHRISTOPHER
Someone's got to do it.

JOSEPH
Well, we'll see about that. There's a lot to be done. In the meantime, Merry Christmas.

Joseph throws him something that he catches with one hand and looks down to see:

The keys to the Pope-Mobile.

JOSEPH
Oh, and, fair warning: a friend of yours suggested some modifications.

Christopher Smiles.

CHRISTOPHER
Merry Christmas, indeed.

INT. POPE-MOBILE - NIGHT

Through a snowy mountain path, Christopher drives the Pope-Mobile. His hand on the shifter, another hand falls on top of his, their fingers intertwining.

Minxie smiles at his side, leaning her head lovingly on his shoulder. She leans in for a kiss as he SLAMS his foot into the accelerator, sending them ZOOMING down the road.

EXT. SNOWY MOUNTAINSIDE - NIGHT

PULL BACK to reveal: the Pope-Mobile has been painted with red candy-cane stripes on its white body. It glides around the curves of the mountain path, snow whipping past.

They race into the distance as sleigh bells ring overhead, Christmas lights illuminating the houses below.

The perfect Christmas, crusaded.

THE END.