

Scott stood in the middle of the playground, feeling foolish. The full moon played down through the jungle gym and cast geometric shadow patterns on the ground, where countless sneakers had worn the grass out of existence. His own feet had contributed to the lack of green here, but that had been a long time ago. Almost to prove this to himself, he reached out and grasped the highest metal rung of the jungle gym, which once had been something he had to climb to reach. Now, it was within his grasp with no effort.

At this moment, though, it was about all he could claim as such.

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and shook one loose. Zippo lighter out, then a flash of fire and clink, the device was gone again. The embers glowed orange, doing his bidding, taking up his time as he waited.

Scott repeated this ritual and was looking at his watch, about to decide to leave, when a hiss caught his attention.

He looked around. It wasn't until the second loudly breathed "Scott!" that he saw the hisser. Several yards away, Craig was crouching well away from the moonlight, on the other side of the dome-like jungle gym that so many wars for "King of the Mountain" had been fought.

Scott watched Craig motion for him to approach. Scott sighed, dropped his cigarette and crushed it to death under his foot, then walked over.

"Good Christ, am I glad to see you!" Craig breathed, standing and embracing his friend before Scott could even react.

When they disengaged, Scott was startled to take in the full vision that was his old friend. Craig's hair was rumpled and his face sported several days' worth of stubble. He was wearing a battered blue windbreaker over some kind of faded button shirt, which was untucked over his equally road-weary blue jeans. True to form, his tennis shoes looked about five minutes away from needing some serious reconstructive surgery involving duct tape before they simply abandoned his feet for the next world.

"Jesus," Scott said finally, "are you--?" but Craig shushed him, motioning with his hands to keep his voice down. Scott nodded and pitched his voice below a stage whisper, "Are you okay? You look like shit, man."

Craig nodded, eyes wide. "I feel like it, too. It's been a long time, Scott. Long damn time."

"Where the hell have you been?" Scott breathed, "You've been missing for, what, two years now?"

Craig nodded again, even more enthusiastically. "Two years, three months, twelve days. I had to disappear, Scott. I had to. They knew I was onto them."

Scott blinked. Something about this entire routine was already making his body cry out for more nicotine. "What in hell are you talking about? Who knew you were onto them?" A thought slid home. "This isn't more of that alien bullshit, is it? You haven't...gone and done something stupid...with the government, have you?"

Craig had been a reporter for *The Universal Tribune*, the tabloid that made even the stuff the *Weekly World News* printed look sane by comparison. For writing some stories about lights in the sky over Detroit, Craig had gotten canned three years ago. This never made any sense to Scott, seeing as how it was the most tame thing in that particular issue, what with the stories on plant-animal hybrid experimentation going on under Ottawa and the existence of a shadow-version of the city of London.

Craig was now shaking his head with just as much enthusiasm, grinning despite himself. The smile was something less than a comfort. "No, buddy. This is big. Bigger than that. Forget that alien stuff, that's nothing."

Under other circumstances, Scott would have been glad to hear this from his friend. But the conversation seemed like it was just going to get stranger. "Okay, what then?"

"He's real. I've seen him. Well, not him. Not directly. But I've seen his operations. And I'm telling you: he's real."

Scott felt his patience wearing quite thin. "Craig. Amigo. Who is real? Who the hell are you talking about? You ask me out to the elementary school like it's some matter of national emergency and I'm freezing my ass off and all you can--"

"Kringle, Scott. Santa Claus. The jolly old guy," Craig rattled off. "Him. That's the one that's real."

Scott paused for a moment in mid-shake of his cigarette pack, looking up at Craig's face. "You're serious?"

Craig did not move.

"You're serious." Scott cleared his throat. "Listen, I'm glad you're back, but you have got to lay off the sauce, Craig, you--"

"I'm not drunk!" Craig almost shouted, then became startled and even more paranoid than before as his voice rebounded off the houses back at him.

Scott was momentarily uncertain how to proceed, then tried a different tact. "Listen, Craig--this is a lot to take in. And you've come up with some zingers before. And now you're telling me Santa is real. I mean--look at it from my point of view for a second."

"No," Craig said, and fumbled in his pocket, "look at it from my point of view." He fished out a crumpled stack of what looked to be shots from a Polaroid instamatic. He flipped through them and showed the first to Scott. "Look at that."

Scott peered down at the photo. He saw what appeared to be a few buildings and a dome in an ice field. "What am I looking at?" he asked finally.

"That's the Amundsen-Scott Station. It's located right at the South Pole. It's supposed to be for research, but of course, that's all bullshit."

"Wait. Craig, the South Pole? Santa is supposed to be at the North Pole."

Craig looked at Scott with pity in his eyes. "Next you're going to tell me all the alien shit the government has really is kept at Area 51. Everyone knows that whole place is a red herring, just like the whole North Pole nonsense." He pointed back at the photo. "No, Kringle's at the South Pole. And the station is a front for the operations he has below the planet's surface."

Scott shook his head. "What are we doing down there, if not research?"

Craig pointed at the photo. "You remember that whole business with Admiral Byrd? Operation Highjump?" When Scott continued to look blank, Craig continued, "We went down there to finish off the Nazis. Big cover-up."

Scott shrugged and tried to look informed.

"Anyway, who do you think tipped off the Allies that the Nazis had moved and set up shop down there?" Craig grinned. "We've been in bed with Kringle ever since. I guess we should be pleased that he and Hitler could never reach an agreement."

Scott rubbed at his forehead. This was not going well at all. "Santa's supposed to be a good guy. Why is this all so sinister?"

Craig pitched his voice even lower. "Because the bit in the song--the one about he sees you when you're sleeping, knows when you're awake...you remember that, right?"

Scott nodded.

"That's all true," Craig said grimly. "He sees everything. Naughty, nice, it doesn't matter. And anyone who tries to mess with him...well, let's say that some of the information he has gets out."

Scott said nothing.

Craig continued, "He's been making a power play. There's a reason why nobody thinks of that Christ guy, even though his name basically makes up the name of the holiday. It's all about Kringle now. Notice how Kringle's moved everything up so that right after Halloween--bang!" Craig snapped his fingers, which sounded amazingly loud in the quiet of the playground. "You're shopping for *his* holiday. You're seeing *his* decorations everywhere. And versions of himself everywhere. Vain bastard. Thanksgiving's almost an afterthought now. It's just a big dinner. Halloween's next and then on up the calendar. His power is growing unchecked. People have got to be warned."

Scott still said nothing.

"And I haven't even told you about what happens in his factories. The mines. The weapons. What he's doing to people--it defies description. Which is why I have the photos. I have all of this evidence," Craig said. "And I need help getting it to the right authorities. You're the only one I can trust with this. Will you help me?"

"Craig--" Scott began, but stopped as something small zipped through the air.

Instantly, Craig's hand went to his neck. His fingers fumbled around and extracted from his flesh a small metallic dart. He held it up and looked at it, then his eyes went back to Scott. His lips managed to move, but no sound came out.

"Craig, I'm sorry," Scott said weakly.

Craig tried to look around to where the shot must have come, but his neck did not want to cooperate. He was able to take a single, shuffling step and then the leg gave way and he toppled forward into the dust. The photos fluttered down like leaves all around him.

Scott took a step forward but a voice stopped him. "He's fine. Don't touch him. Please step away."

Two figures came out of the darkness. They were both dressed in black suits that were absolute but for their white shirts beneath their coats. At first, they looked like the "Men in Black" from that movie. On further inspection, though, Scott realized that the fabric was not black at all, but a deep, deep crimson. One carried a sniper's rifle. The other was speaking into his sleeve. "We have him. Three for pickup." As Scott looked, he realized that they looked just like men--large, burly men--but with pointed ears.

"You're...elves?" Scott asked, still in shock.

"Very astute, Mr. Griffin."

"Aren't you...supposed to be smaller?" Indeed, Scott was just under six feet and they appeared to both be at least a head taller than him.

"Genetic experimentation made me what I am today, Mr. Griffin," the elf said. "Run along home, now. Mr. Kringle appreciates your service today."

Scott bowed his head a bit and nodded. No matter where he looked, he could see his friend lying sprawled on the ground. Surprisingly, no blood left the puncture wound in Craig's neck. "What's going to happen to him?"

"Nothing you need concern yourself with," the sniper elf responded. "Mr. Kringle appreciates your discretion. And he promises to use his own in regards to...what was her name? Mindy?"

Scott winced.

The other elf spoke up, chuckling. "We saw the video as part of our briefing. We were all very impressed, Mr. Griffin."

The sniper elf held onto his rifle with one hand and picked up Craig by the waist of his pants with the other, as though Craig weighed nothing at all. Then the elf looked skyward. "Our ride's here."

The other elf looked down at Scott. "Have yourself a merry little Christmas, Mr. Griffin. That's not a request."

What appeared to be a brilliant red spotlight descended and bathed the elves and their captive, blinding Scott, who shielded his eyes with one hand. When Scott was able to look back, the light was gone and so were the elves. So was Craig.

Scott looked up and saw nothing but sky. He could very easily have just hallucinated the entire thing. Perhaps it would be best to think of it that way. Pretend they had never called him, never asked him to be prepared for Craig to return, never asked him to--no, that was wrong. As the elf had said, it wasn't a request.

Scott went to shake a cigarette from his pack and noticed something. It was one of Craig's photos, lying face down in the dirt. Scott placed the cigarette between his lips, lit it and stood over the photo, contemplating.

Finally, he picked it up and stuck it in his pocket without looking at what was on the other side of it.

As Scott walked back into town and towards his own neighborhood, he began to feel somewhat better. Even with the photo in his pocket, he could still somehow assure himself that nothing Craig had said mattered--or that it was the deluded ramblings of a madman. Or both. Or that Craig--he had never known a Craig at all. He--

As he rounded the corner of Main Street, he saw the front of the Sundry Sundries drugstore. Christmas wreaths already adorned the windows and awning. Blinking red and green lights encircled the front door.

Scott looked down at his watch. Yes, it was October 25<sup>th</sup>.

When he reached the garbage can at the next corner, he tore the photo in half and dropped the pieces in without looking at it.