



The
Nutcracker
& the Mouse

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Clara's slipper came down on the Mouse King's head, and it was all over.

Elly gaped from her little cubby in the wall, the narrow one where the edges of the molding had been pried up and chewed back. She brought her front feet up and wiped them over her eyes, as though clearing her vision would reveal the battle had been all a dream. But it wasn't. The Mouse King fell, carted away by terrified but still-loyal subjects, and just like that, Elly and her family were free.

A portal more brilliant than the candles on the Christmas tree sprouted from the tree's lowest branches, shimmery and blue. Taking Clara's hand, the Nutcracker whispered something and pulled her into the realm beyond.

Cautious, and perhaps a little too daring for a mouse, Elly slipped from the nook and approached the tree. It seemed to be growing, but perhaps that was the effect of the portal. Or her still-racing heart.

But what had drawn her attention first was not the portal of the Nutcracker's magic, but the little sliver of him that he left behind, when the Mouse King's sword had landed true. Slender as a toothpick and not quite as long, Elly's fur stood on end as she touched the wood with her nose. The Nutcracker's magic. She turned toward the portal. The Christmas tree wasn't growing; the portal was shrinking.

She'd never been to the other realm, though she imagined it to be marvelous. This was her chance, one she'd never dreamed would be within her grasp. She debated for the few seconds she could spare before biting down on the sliver of wood—perhaps the only thing keeping the

portal open—and made a wish. A daring wish. A shock went down her spine, but Elly dashed forward, the portal just large enough to fit the body of an eager mouse.

Sparks filled the periphery of her vision and bells rang in her ears, but they quickly faded, replaced with moonlight and distant string music. Elly blinked, her vision sharpening. A forest padded with ice surrounded her. Excitement flooded her as soft snow fell, like a comforting blanket over the trees and ground. Laughter echoed through the trees, and bobbing lights glimmered on the path ahead as the last of the Nutcracker’s soldiers disappeared beyond the boughs.

Or so Elly thought.

“Who are you?” a female voice sounded from behind Elly. A distinctly non-mouse voice. Elly spun and, shocked to realize her own four short legs were now two long ones, promptly fell into the snow. She blinked, separated from the spectacle of the wood enough to feel the changed shape of her eyes, her nose—and her fur was gone! Mouth dry but tight with a grin, she held up two *human* palms and studied them.

“Answer me.” The soldier’s sharp tone broke through Elly’s reverie. Her gloved hand tightened on her hilt. “Who are you?”

The soldier was a woman in a red and white soldier’s uniform, double brass buttons lined down the front of her jacket. Elly shrank against the ground, fingers sliding into cold mud, the remnant of wood still clenched between her teeth.

A whisper in the back of her mind, as quiet as a breeze passing through the snow-laden branches, spoke to her. *You'll have your wish to be here and human ... until the last star of Christmas morning disappears from the sky.*

The soldier's woolen cap covered the tops of the soldier's ears, so Elly couldn't be sure if they were pointed. No wings, though. Probably a human . . . *Just like I am.* Elly had only heard bedtime stories about magical creatures, the Nutcracker included, but she *did* have more than enough experience with humans. They usually screamed and tried to smash her . . . or ran away. She preferred it when they ran. Though when the human was clumsy with fright, it was rather a fun game to dodge the broom, shoe, or antique figurine.

The soldier's shoulders relaxed just a bit. "You shouldn't be here." She sighed. "This portal is closed now. Come with me."

Elly gave a quick nod, but she could not stay long with the soldier. If the soldier discovered what Elly really was, she'd be killed on the spot. Elly shivered thinking about the ferocious battle she'd witnessed from the molding between her own species and this soldier's comrades. But for now, the soldier could give Elly much-needed information that would save her precious time.

Elly pushed herself to her feet, but nearly fell trying to take a step. The soldier grabbed Elly's arm, steadying her.

"Portals can be dizzying," the soldier said as she helped Elly get her bearing.

Elly pressed her lips together, unsure if human speech came with her human body. She focused on balancing.

“You’re up early, even for Christmas morning. It’s still the wee hours.” The soldier tilted her head. “And you look rather feral with that stick between your teeth, yet you’re wearing a fine party dress. Who are you?” She muttered the last part under her breath.

Elly stood straighter and pulled away from the soldier’s grip. *It is a fine dress, isn’t it?* It was the same color as the fur of her stomach, a white hue just a pinch creamier than the snow. She stretched her fingers, took the wood from between her teeth, and clutched it in her fist. The sliver had grown with Elly and was now almost as long as her forearm, with a few specks of red paint on one side.

Had it hurt the Nutcracker, when this piece chipped away? Did he even notice it was gone?

“Careful with that thing.” The soldier tugged on the edge of her jacket, smoothing it out. “You’ll poke someone’s eye out.”

Pulling back from the soldier, Elly took in the forest. It was nothing like the endless city of Leipzig. Of course, as a mouse, Elly’s limbs could only carry her so far; she’d never even traveled away from the grounds of the Stahlbaum estate. It had been quite a risk for her to bolt through the portal using the Nutcracker’s magic. Foolhardy, to be honest.

But her wish had come true, if only for a short time. And Elly was determined to make the most of it before turning back into a mouse.

With some practice, Elly was soon striding next to the soldier, trees flying past. Her new vantage point and the length of each stride filled Elly with wonder. The lights grew brighter and the music louder, thrilling Elly to her toes.

“The Christmas Eve celebration is the largest in this valley,” the soldier explained. “Well, technically it’s Christmas Day, now. The revelries won’t end until tomorrow, so stay close to my side. There’s someone there I need to talk to. He’ll know how to get you home.”

Elly slowed at the edge of the tree line surrounding the festivities. Bright bubble-lights in every color bobbed up and down over a massive pavilion. Bonfires dotted the edges, and delicious smells of sweets and mulled wine wafted in the air. Musicians fiddled with their instruments, preparing for the next song.

“Come. I assure you it’s quite safe.” The soldier prompted Elly to follow her. “The food was prepared by elven brownies and is quite harmless. Our patron put a spell over the woodland to banish all foul magic until sunrise, so no fae tricks will be played on us tonight. The only ones here are the musicians. We’ll avoid them easily enough.”

Elly was as nervous about the human soldier next to her as she was about the fae, not to mention the strangeness of the daunting celebration. But Elly threw her shoulders back as she’d seen the lady of the house do on numerous occasions and trod behind the soldier to the outskirts of the crowd, finally stopping next to a man with pointed ears and soft wrinkles around his eyes.

“Franziska, who is this you’ve found?” He spoke to the soldier, but he looked at Elly with a twinkle in his eye. For a moment, Elly wondered if this was Saint Nicholas himself.

“I confess I do not know who she is, Alwin, beyond the fact that she stumbled through the portal. She acts fae-touched.”

Not Saint Nicholas, then, but that had been a lot to hope for.

Alwin's gaze fell to the wood in Elly's fist. "Ah, your companion has some of the Nutcracker's magic."

"I'm Elly," she blurted with a dry voice, then shuddered with relief that she could speak human at all. She attempted a curtsy, but was sure she looked like a clumsy frog. Alwin suppressed a grin. Franziska frowned. If Elly were alone with the elf, she might have trusted sharing the truth of what had happened. But the Mouse King was the now-dead enemy of the Nutcracker, and the battle was too fresh for her to dare reveal her identity.

"Nice to meet you Elly," Alwin said. "I do know of a portal not far from here that will open at dawn. I can take you there, and make sure you arrive safely home."

"That is very kind." Elly warmed. This human adventure was turning out more splendidly than she could've hoped. "In the meantime, am I free to explore? I plan to try everything exquisite, lovely, and memorable."

With the Mouse King dead, returning home wouldn't be so terrible. Elly had gladly avoided the Mouse King and his gang of thugs, preferring to spend her time listening in on the children's school lessons. She was no soldier, and she certainly wasn't a crook. And yet she never felt like she fit in with the other mice either, and had longed for a chance to do *more*. When she'd seen the bit of the Nutcracker that had split off, she knew it was her chance . . . even if it was fleeting.

"Then Franziska best get to work, helping you have the most magical night." The elf looked at the soldier expectantly.

Franziska blinked with surprise, but straightened. “You’re probably right. It’ll be good for me to keep an eye on her so she doesn’t get lost.” Then, under her breath, “The last thing we need is another stray.”

“Relax and have some fun yourself, Franziska.” Alwin smiled.

Franziska moved through the crowd, but before Elly could follow, Alwin grabbed at the wood remnant in her hand, stopping her. “Best to tuck that securely away.”

Elly paused. The elf hurriedly added, “Don’t want to hurt anyone today, now do you?”

She slid the wood under her belt, and the pointed end poked her side. Ahead, Franziska waited. When Elly turned back to wave good-bye to the elf, he was already gone. Elly wove through the crowd to the soldier, and as soon as Elly reached her, Franziska pulled her to a long table filled with food.

Elly’s mouth watered, especially knowing brownies prepared the feast. Franziska handed her a plate and helped Elly fill it with biscuits and cranberry conserve, fruit-filled cookies, almond bread, and peppernuts.

“I’ve never eaten this much in my life!” Elly shoved fresh apple slices and cheese into what crevices of space still remained on the platter.

“Eat yourself sick. I won’t stop you.” Franziska shrugged.

Elly stuffed herself until her dress seams stretched and threatened to pop. They stood near a bonfire long enough for even Franziska to warm up. The soldier chatted with others around the fire, even laughing at a joke. Beyond the food, the evening was a feast for the senses. The scents

of cinnamon and sugar spun candy, vibrant market stalls with foreign wares, and dancers wearing costumes from lands near and far gave spectacular performances. When the music in the pavilion started up again, a human boy wearing trousers and a velvet jacket asked her to dance, Elly nearly said “no.” She couldn’t dance.

Then again, she couldn’t walk on two feet a few hours ago. Glancing up at the moon, Elly noted it still had a distance before it would drop over the trees.

“I don’t know how to dance,” Elly confessed. “But if you’ll teach me, I’ll give it a try.”

“Don’t know how to dance?” The boy exclaimed in mock horror. “It’d be a crime against the Nutcracker not to remedy this atrocity.”

Elly grinned and held out her hand, exactly like she’d seen the children of the Stahlbaum household do. Soon she was dancing and laughing as the boy swept her across the pavilion to the songs played by the fae musicians. Elly could have sworn she felt the magic down to the core of her bones, lighting her on fire.

“Are you sure you’ve never danced before?” the human boy asked after he’d guided her through several jovial songs.

Elly’s heart was soaring too high to reply. Instead she threw her head back and let out a laugh. This was truly the most glorious place. Perhaps she could stay here, even as a mouse. This realm was far better than she’d ever dreamed.

The song ended, and Elly tried to catch her breath. Her face was flush, and her feet were sore. All she needed was a quick break, and then she wanted to dance again. She looked for

Franziska, who had moved away from the bonfire and was in a deep conversation with another soldier. Elly tensed, seeing Franziska fold her arms and frown.

“Thank you for the dancing,” Elly said. “It made for the most amazing night of my life. My sisters would have loved to have been here.” As she said the words, a small pit formed in Elly’s stomach.

When her family heard about the battle, they might assume she was swept up in the fight. If she did stay . . . it didn’t feel right to leave them without saying good-bye.

“You’re a natural.” The boy gave her a small bow. “Find me if you wish to dance again.”

Elly made her way to the drinks. Out from under the pavilion, Elly realized the edges of the sky were already lightening. Gulping down a glass of wine, she frantically searched the crowd for the elf. The stars were starting to fade, and she didn’t want to miss the portal home.

A hand fell on her shoulder. Elly jumped, spilling the dregs of the wine on her dress.

“There you are,” Franziska said. “Something’s happened, and I need to leave. I wanted to wish you farewell.”

“Wait.” Elly shook her head. “You’re leaving?”

“There’s something I must attend to. But Alwin, the elf you met earlier, will find you and take you to the portal.” Franziska turned to go, but paused. “I know you have your secrets. And I’ll let you keep them. I just hope you found what you were looking for. Safe travels home, child.”

Elly was surprised by how alone she felt as the soldier disappeared into the crowd. Strangely, she wished she had a sibling or a cousin with her. They would have laughed about their aching feet, and pretending to be human, and listening to fae play instruments. The whole situation was surreal, but no one here would quite understand it.

Perhaps it wouldn't be worth the loneliness, to stay, either as human or mouse. She craved the adventure of the Nutcracker's realm, but . . . the sacrifice was proving to be too high.

A group of people lowered their voices near the bonfire. Elly wouldn't have noticed except the words "Mouse King" caught her attention.

"The Nutcracker must be wounded," a man with a bushy beard said. "I'd bet my new tankard of beer at home on it."

"No one will take that bet," a woman with messy curls joked. "You always add far too much barley."

"I'm serious," the bearded man said. "The Nutcracker took that young human girl back to her realm already. And he didn't return to the festivities. I tell you, he's injured."

Another man spoke up, his words slurred. "Magic created him. Magic will heal him."

The bearded man shook his head, but before he could argue, the woman with messy curls pulled him toward the pavilion.

Elly tapped her chin. She hadn't considered that the Nutcracker would be able to return to the same household before the dawn. But, of course he must've known a way to return Clara. Alwin could have insisted Elly go with the Nutcracker and return home in the same portal as the

young mistress. Why hadn't he? Elly rapped her fingers against her goblet. Clearly, he'd figured out when her spell would break. But why was he so kind in allowing her the fullest time in his realm? And why hadn't he revealed that Elly was a mouse?

Part of her was grateful and wanted to thank him. But another part of her was suspicious. Magical creatures were not known for being kind by default.

Elly pushed herself to her throbbing feet. She was exhausted and ready to go home. She needed Alwin. But she wouldn't walk blindly into a trap, either.

As the sky grew lighter, Elly wrapped cakes in a napkin and tied it to her belt. They would likely shrink with her, unfortunately, but her siblings would still get a taste of her escapade. While she waited for Alwin, Elly took one last walk through the crowds, soaking in every detail. Soon enough, Elly spotted the elf watching her from the edge of the crowd. He gave her a soft smile.

When she was at his side, she noticed a streak of sweat near his temple. She adjusted the wooden remnant at her hip.

"The portal should be open shortly." Alwin guided her deeper into the forest. "I hope you had a lovely evening."

"It was very memorable." Her past study of humans had proved helpful. But if she was honest, she'd overindulged in learning their ways. She could've spent more time playing games with the other mice. She would remedy that when she returned home. She patted the cakes at her side.

Elly fell in step with the elf, who had shortened his stride so she could keep up.

“Why are you helping me?” Elly asked.

“Why do you ask?” Alwin replied.

“You don’t even know who I am,” Elly murmured.

“I know *what* you are,” the elf spoke with a kind tone. “But the Nutcracker’s enemies are not necessarily my enemies.”

Elly slowed. “But you’re friends with Franziska. And you didn’t tell her I’m a ...”

“Mouse?” He gave her a half-grin. “You are an adventurous creature not here to harm anyone. A creature who found a bit of the Nutcracker’s magic and dared follow him. How can I not reward a creature who amuses me?”

Elly let out a sigh of relief. Perhaps her parents wouldn’t have noticed she was missing yet, and she could skip the scolding-of-a-lifetime.

Not likely. Still, the adventure was worth it.

“We’re at the portal.” Alwin pointed as a shimmering circle spiraled in the snow a few steps away, identical to the one Elly had taken by the Christmas tree.

Elly counted a mere three fading stars still in the sky.

“You should go while your disguise is still intact,” Alwin warned.

Giving a firm nod, Elly gripped the wood at her hip and stepped forward.

A chill breeze swept through the wood, causing Alwin to frown. That same soft whisper that had warned her the magic wouldn't last, was now warning . . . what? Not to leave? She closed her eyes, trying to understand its message.

“Hurry—the portal will close any moment.” Alwin clutched his hands together. “I’m directing the portal to your home, but I can’t manage it for long.”

Yet hurried footsteps in the snow made her pause.

“Wait!” Franziska’s voice cried in the distance. Elly whirled around, searching the trees, spying a flash of red coming toward them.

“Go on,” Alwin urged. “I’ll help her. Your magic is waning, besides; she’ll see what you are if you don’t hurry.”

Elly’s stomach looped. The magic of the gateway fell over her like summer sun. She gripped the wood splinter at her side until it bit into her palm. Her toes grazed the portal. Now was the time to go.

But why did it feel so *wrong*?

“Go!” Alwin’s voice took on a hard edge.

Elly reached into the portal—

“*Stop!*” Franziska barreled toward them. Alwin stepped forward as though to block her path, but Franziska fainted to the left and swung around him on the right.

Elly wrenched her hand back. “What’s going on?” The edges of the portal faltered, like they were growing tired.

“That wood. It’s part of the Nutcracker, isn’t it?” Franziska faced Alwin. “And you *knew*. How could you?”

Alwin shook his head. “The Nutcracker holds all power over this realm. He’s not even an elf. He’s a puppet!”

“Traitor,” Franziska growled. “The Nutcracker protects us. Protects *humans*.” She pointed at Elly.

Elly shrunk inside, the lie painting her with something oily and bitter.

Alwin’s nostrils flared, but he spoke calmly to Elly. “This is not your concern. Go before the portal closes. I swear you will be safely returned to your family.”

Elly longed to jump, to believe him, but that winter wind rose gooseflesh on her human skin.

“The remnant of wood.” Franziska held out both her hands for Elly to stop. “The Nutcracker needs it to survive.”

“W-what?” Elly could barely eke out the word.

“The Nutcracker *will* survive,” Alwin corrected. “He’ll return to his true form.”

“And your family of elves will take over this region,” Franziska spat. “It all makes sense. How long have you waited for an opportunity to take down the Nutcracker?”

“The portal is closing!” Alwin warned. “Leave the wood and jump!”

Elly glanced back at the portal to see the edges were rippling back to solid snow. She tore the wood from her belt.

Franziska took a tentative step toward Elly, her face twisted in fear, raising a whistle to her mouth. “No, please. You have to give him the wood yourself. You’re the owner of the remnant. You must willingly return it to him, or its magic will be lost.”

“The last stars are disappearing,” Desperation and anger laced Arwin’s voice. “Leave the wood here and leave while you can!”

“Come with me, Elly.” Franziska held out her hand. “Alwin cannot take what is yours unless you give him permission. It’s the law of this realm.”

Alwin growled, his face turning red.

Elly bit her lip and glanced back at the shrinking portal. Who was telling her the truth? If Alwin spoke truth, then she should leave now and reunite with her family. But if Franziska was right, then without the remnant, the Nutcracker and his realm would fall. Yet if the soldier found out Elly was a mouse, would she help Elly get home?

She looked to the tree branches beyond them, waiting for the voice on the winter wind to guide her. But it didn’t come. She had to make this choice herself.

The Nutcracker had defeated the Mouse King. Liberated them. Brought her here, in a way.

Darting from the portal, Elly rushed to Franziska’s side. Franziska pulled Elly behind her, blew her whistle, and raised her sword to Alwin, challenging him, but the elf backed away, hands

raised, grimacing. He looked ready to fight, but whatever dampener affected the fae's tricks apparently had taken a toll on him as well.

They backed away, Franziska shielding her, until they crossed a line of trees. Then they turned together and ran deeper into the snowy wood. The first rays of dawn glinted off hanging icicles.

Sparks blinked at the edges of Elly's vision.

Fear tore up her torso and prickled her arms. "Franziska, I have to tell you—"

The change happened all at once, the ground rushing up to meet Elly as she tumbled into the snow, her smooth human skin mottled with fur, her long limbs shortened, her whiskers sprouting from the sides of her nose.

From far overhead, Franziska gasped. The wood from the Nutcracker had fallen nearby, maintaining its enlarged state. Elly tried to explain, to defend herself, but her voice was a mouse-squeak.

The snow under the remnant came alive, scooping up the wood and throwing it into Alwin's waiting hand.

"I'm sorry, Franziska. I truly am. But we've waited too long for this opportunity."

"The Nutcracker was specifically chosen as the steward of the realm. There's a reason St. Nicholas did not select you." Franziska lunged for the remnant, but the elf was quick on his feet and slipped out of her grasp. "And you do not have license to take Elly's possessions."

“I’m not taking it.” Alwin lifted his chin. “I’m merely storing it for her until she returns to the human realm.”

Seemingly forgotten, Elly scurried up a tree for a better vantage point. The portal was gone. She’d failed to get home. Her family—

Franziska grunted as she tried to retrieve the remnant. A sickly purple light shot from Alwin’s hand and hit her in the stomach.

I haven’t failed yet.

Elly ran across the longest branch and leaped onto Alwin’s back. She dug in her claws, scurried up his cloak, and thrust her teeth deep into his exposed ear.

Alwin screamed and swatted at her. But Elly was ready. Leaping onto his hand, which was fisted around the wand-like remnant, she bit again. Alwin dropped the wood. Elly scrambled up his arm, dodging his next attack . . . but it never came.

Franziska had her sword at Alwin’s neck, and three more red-and-white clad soldiers were converging on him—soldiers called by Franziska’s earlier whistle. Alwin’s nostrils flared.

“You should have left when I told you to, mouse,” he said without looking back to where she hid in his hood. “The soldiers know what you are.”

The elf spun away from Franziska, sending Elly sailing into the snow, and ran deeper into the forest. A wall of ice shot up behind him, barring pursuit. While the soldiers tried to find a way around it, Franziska knelt next to Elly.

“So this is your secret?” She ran her thumb and finger across her eyelids and pinched her nose. “Saint Nicholas has a sense of irony, I’ll give him that much.”

For a few moments, the forest was silent. Though Elly had bested Alwin, she’d lost her portal home. Her stomach sank, thinking of how worried her family would be when they awoke Christmas morning to find Elly missing. But Elly wouldn’t give up on returning. She couldn’t.

However, there was something more important to do, first.

Hoping to assuage Franziska’s anger, she squeaked and pointed her nose at the dropped remnant. If the Nutcracker was hurt, they needed to get it back to him immediately.

Franziska nodded. “We’ll make better time if I carry you and the wood back to the Nutcracker. May I?” She extended a hand.

Elly offered an overly dramatic nod, hoping Franziska would understand her, and that her willingness to help would distract the human from what Elly really was. Timid, Elly climbed into Franziska’s hand, holding on tight as the soldier picked up the remnant. To her surprise, as they walked, Franziska gradually tucked Elly closer to her chest. The soldier even stowed away the remnant and put her other arm across Elly to protect her from the biting cold.

“Don’t you dare tell anyone I went soft on a mouse,” Franziska frowned, but there was an edge of humor to her voice, and Elly dared to hope.

The sun was fully risen by the time Franziska came to a copse of trees far from where the Christmas Eve festivities had taken place. Elly assumed the Nutcracker would be resting at a castle or some fine estate, not in a slapdash tent in the middle of the woods. Several soldiers

moved away, allowing Franziska to approach the Nutcracker, who was stiffly resting against a stump.

The Nutcracker looked much smaller and weaker than the last time she'd seen him. Wood grain was pronounced on his face, and his white hair was stiff like fur. He was turning from his human form back into a wooden toy.

“We have the missing remnant.” Franziska knelt next to Nutcracker. “You’ll never guess who brought it from the human realm.”

Franziska gently set Elly on the piece of wood. The Nutcracker let out a strange laugh, hollow and deep.

“Turn me on my side,” the Nutcracker instructed the nearest soldier.

Elly clasped the wood in her teeth and dug in her claws, holding it as best she could. With Franziska’s help, they guided it to the woody wound in the Nutcracker’s back.

The remnant began to glow as it morphed to fit the new size of the Nutcracker and his wound.

Elly scampered back. As the light grew, everyone pulled away, covering their eyes.

Blinking her vision clear, Elly looked up to see the full-grown Nutcracker kneeling in front of her.

Elly squeaked excitedly. *You’re healed!*

“Thanks to you.” The Nutcracker smiled at Elly.

Elly perked up. *You can understand me?*

“It is one of the gifts bestowed upon me as the steward of this realm, by St. Nicholas.”

She marveled at that. Considered the vibrant magic that had made the Nutcracker whole.

Then . . . can you return me home?

“Only elves know the secrets of the portal and can manipulate them,” the Nutcracker spoke with sympathy. “It was the power of St. Nicholas that allowed all the magic at the Stahlbaum estate last night.”

Elly’s insides turned to water. If the Nutcracker himself couldn’t control the portals and send her home, then could the Nutcracker convince another elf to help her?

“Not to worry.” The Nutcracker placed a hand over his heart. “St. Nicholas resides in the northern region of our realm. He will send you back. We merely need to travel to seek his aid.”

Elly forced a smile. She should be pleased, after all. She’d gotten the adventure she’d wanted, was able to save the Nutcracker, and she would be able to return home. Just not on Christmas day. She would miss celebrating with her family. Her eyes burned thinking of her parents, worried, searching the house. What a fool she’d been to dive into a portal without telling a soul.

Can we begin our journey? Elly asked the Nutcracker.

Before the Nutcracker could answer, he stiffened and narrowed his gaze, scanning the forest beyond. Franziska bent her knees as if she was on unstable ground.

“Can you feel it?” Franziska said. “Someone powerful is manipulating magic nearby.”

Magic pulsed through the air on a soft winter breeze, causing the branches to quiver. The same gentle wind that had guided Elly before. Her fur stood on end.

Next to the stump where the Nutcracker had been resting, the air began to shimmer. Elly's stomach shot into her throat. A portal!

"I've never seen a portal form in this part of the forest." Franziska approached the magic slowly.

The Nutcracker moved to the shimmering air and ran his fingers through it. A slow smile spread across his lips. "I know this magic."

Elly scampered closer. She felt a pull to the portal, and a whisper to her mind, in that same winter-wind voice, that it was time to come home.

"This will guide you home, little mouse," The Nutcracker said.

Relief washed over her. *Yes, it will.*

"Thank you for saving my life," The Nutcracker bowed. "I will forever be in your debt."

Franziska knelt next to Elly. "I wish you'd trusted me with your secrets sooner, Elly, but I understand why you didn't. If we meet again, let's meet as friends."

Agreed! Elly squeaked. With nothing more to say, Elly leapt into the portal—
—and skidded across the floor of the grand hall.

Morning light streamed through the windows, revealing the vestiges of wrapping paper, orange peels, and ribbons. All of them absolute treasures to a mouse. And without the Mouse King hoarding the best things for himself, this would be the best Christmas *ever*.

“Thank you for saving my Nutcracker,” a warm voice sounded from behind the Christmas tree. Elly immediately recognized it—the same voice that floated on the winter wind.

A large man with a jolly face, round belly, and a red robe stepped out from behind the tree.

Elly’s mouth fell open. “Saint Nicholas?”

He shrunk smaller and smaller and smaller, until he was Elly’s size.

“Who else could have granted your Christmas wish and opened you a portal home?” He strode to her side, lifting the edge of his hat to reveal a pointed ear. “Besides, I knew you would be just the creature to return the piece of the Nutcracker that he left behind. He’ll know better next time.”

Elly blinked. “You . . . knew?”

He nodded. “I wish I could have been more help, but, well, it’s Christmas!” He chuckled, then rubbed his beard. “I was a little preoccupied with the children around the world. But I had faith you would understand my message, in the end.”

Saint Nicholas dug inside his pocket and produced a bulky napkin. “A treat for your family. I can’t have you returning home empty-handed.”

Elly jumped and carefully took the package between her front paws. “Thank you!”

Cries from mouse siblings tore Elly's attention from the Patron of Christmas. Her sisters rushed over, practically knocking Elly over in their glee.

"What's this?" asked the youngest, sniffing at the package. "Where did you get fancy cakes?"

Elly laughed and pointed behind her . . . but there were only the flames in the hearth. She spun about, searching, but found no sign of a red-clad elf anywhere.

Still, Elly smiled as she turned back to her sisters. "Saints alive, do I have a story for you."

Approaching footsteps made them all freeze.

"Into the wall!" the youngest sister cried with delight, and together the mouse family darted across the hall to a gap in the molding. Just before Elly slipped through, she heard a voice soft as the winter wind drifting from the fireplace.

It seemed to be whispering, *Merry Christmas*.