

# MIRIM'S FIRST CHRISTMAS

THE SELENITE FIRST FAMILY  
CELEBRATES A GALVESTON GILDED AGE  
CHRISTMAS WITH VICTORIAN ENGLISH  
AND SERBIAN ORTHODOX FLOURISHES

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**GRESHAM CASTLE**

Mirim walked down the crushed seashell surface of Broadway on her beloved husband Elisha's arm. The local calendar said it was December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1891, and for most of the last three months the lunar revolution had kept them apart from each other. That struggle still was not over, but after the bloody horror of the Endymion Cluster campaign, they were both taking a couple of days' break before the summit meeting at Endymion Aerie. Since Elisha was leading the war as general, it was likely he would be the first president of the Selenite Republic. Assuming they won, and assuming there were people to make up a Selenite Republic after they won.

They were walking slowly on their path from the Embassy of the Selenite Republic to Gresham Castle. It would not do for their son, Nasir, to hurry ahead of them to see Beulah Gresham and for his parents to arrive moments later. After Nasir and Beulah's trip to Mars, it appeared all that remained for the two of them was planning the wedding.

Mirim did wonder whether there would be both a lunar ceremony and an earth ceremony, or only one or the other. As well as she got along with Beulah's mother, Josephine, Mirim was not willing to forgo the

lunar ceremony, and was not opposed to having a wedding on both worlds. After all, Beulah's older brother Walter and his wife Eleanor had weddings on both worlds.

"We're a long way from being co-managers of the village at Tunnel 16 Entrance, aren't we, my soul?" Elisha asked quietly.

"We are indeed, my soul." Mirim said, "I'm hoping you can wrap up the war in time for me to consult Caroline Harrison about how to be a proper First Lady without seeming presumptuous."

"I will see what I can do," Elisha promised. "But we just can't afford campaigns like Endymion for the rest of the clusters."

"Too bad there aren't really winged lions like Oscar and Zeke on Earth." Mirim remarked, as they approached Gresham Castle. Winged lion statues were a favorite Victorian decoration. Among others, the Greshams had two guarding the gateway at the foot of the stairs to the castle.

Elisha chuckled. "If they were the size I've been told real lions are, they might be more fearsome than Major Regdar and his Troll troopers. Maybe Walter and Eleanor could have brought some back from their recent trip to Africa."

"I know, my soul," Mirim said, resting her head on her husband's shoulder. Then she straightened up. "Have you heard? Doctor Thadda says Caroline is going to make a complete recovery from her tuberculosis."

"That is wonderful news." Elisha agreed, "I wonder if that would count as one of these 'Christmas presents' we've been hearing about."

“I don’t know,” Mirim mused as they climbed the steps to the main entrance to Gresham Castle. “Ima’s husband, Ekkabert, has been studying this Bible of theirs, and he couldn’t really tell me much of anything. Apparently Christmas presents are a tradition that has grown up around celebrating the birth of their Jesus Christ. In fact, the celebration of Christmas itself seems to be extra-biblical. I suppose we are just going to have to ask the natives about the traditions of Christmas. After all, how complicated could they be...”

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### THE KISSING BOUGH

Walter Gresham Jr. slid open the door when Elisha and Mirim arrived at Gresham Castle. Technically, this was a breach of protocol since it was the home of Walter *Senior* and Walter Jr. and his wife Eleanor were only visiting. But the Greshams had all but adopted Elisha and Mirim since the two had first arrived with the delegation of lunar envoys back in April. Since this was mostly a family get-together much of the stringent Victorian protocol was even more relaxed today than it normally was in Galveston, Texas, United States – an indication of how unimpressed the family was with what someone in Britain – even one of the most influential British monarchs of all time – thought was proper.

“Y’all come on in,” Walter Jr. said, beaming. His English wife, Eleanor, was just coming into the hall from the Gold Room as Elisha and Mirim divested themselves of coats.

“This is quite the change from when I left in September.” Elisha remarked, “In the lunar underground, we never need clothing as warm as that coat. I hear it is even colder where your President lives?”

“Yep,” Walter replied. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve had snow in Washington D.C. by now. May even have some on the ground as we speak.”

“Snow?” Mirim asked. “What is snow?”

“It’s kind of like frozen rain, except it freezes so far up in the air that it just floats down as tiny little ice crystals. January three years ago, in 1888, it snowed on Frank’s birthday. Mama made snow cream for his birthday present, but that’s the only time I can remember there being snow here.” Walter explained.

Elisha shook his head in wonder. “The weather on your planet is a continual surprise. I’m glad we don’t have to worry about snow, or thunderstorms, or fog, or unscheduled rain, or any of a dozen other things you have to worry about here on Earth. I can’t imagine how much more complicated weather would make General Miles campaigns compared to mine.”

“Of course General Miles didn’t have to deal with a mind-controlling tyrant wielding dark magic,” Walter countered.

“True, true. I don’t know which I’d rather deal with,” Elisha said.

“I don’t suppose you get much of a choice,” Walter pointed out. “I guess you play the hand you’re dealt and it’s a waste of time wishing it was someone else’s hand.”

While the two men went into the library to continue their talk, Mirim and Eleanor embraced. Mirim looked around at the entry hall and grand staircase in wonder. Ever since their first dinner at Gresham Castle, Mirim had been in awe of the mansion. Most people were impressed with the enormous Victorian mansion. If you counted the

basement that was actually at ground level, it was more than four stories tall with more than 20,000 square feet of interior space and dozens of rooms. It was made of red granite blocks, concrete, and steel with decorative iron work and walls two feet thick. Nicolas Clayton, the architect, touted it in his advertising as one of the pre-eminent residential designs in Galveston. Since only Newport, Rhode Island had a reputation for being a richer city than Galveston that was saying something.

That made it impressive to most visitors, but to Mirim and other visitors from the Moon the most impressive thing was the lavish use of wood. The whole house was filled with a vast array of wooden paneling, accents, and furniture. Burlled walnut, oak, multiple types of mahogany, cherry, all the way down to long leaf pine could be found in the house. Since wood for building anything was almost non-existent on the Moon, the wooden extravagance was always impressive.

Today, that beauty was highlighted by gorgeous decorations. Opposite the foot of the grand staircase rising fifteen feet into the air, almost to the railing of the second story balcony was a conical tree unlike anything Mirim had ever seen. It was covered by dark green leaves that were almost like thousands of tiny twigs or fat needles. It had an almost furry appearance. The tree was decorated by a vast assortment of colorful ribbons, fanciful paper ornaments, fruits, and tiny leukos lights in a variety of colors.

There were four columns in the entry hall made of a beautiful polished stone called Siena Marble. Mirim knew that was somewhere over the eastern ocean and was very prestigious, but had never explored it in more detail. They were beautiful and as strange as the wooden floors made from the three different colors of wood. Today, however, the

marble was almost obscured by coiling decorations made of green plants, colorful ribbons, and golden grasses. There were also odd little brown oblongs in the decorations. Similar garlands were hung throughout all the areas of the house that Mirim could see.

“This is lovely!” she exclaimed to Eleanor.

“Isn’t it?” Eleanor replied. “I’d forgotten how much I miss Christmas. Since my mother’s husband went back to England, it has been only me at Christmas. Last year, I was included in some of the events as Walter’s fiancée, but this year, I’ve been able to actually help Josephine, Beulah and the staff with the decorating. Especially with Tom and Frank back from university, it has been the best Christmas season I’ve had since the Christmases Mother and I spent at Knebworth House while the Graves expedition was on Mars when I was five and six.”

“Come and join us in the Gold Room,” Eleanor said, trying to lead her friend into the sitting room with the gold damask cloth on the walls the Greshams called the Gold Room.

“Certainly, in a moment. First, I’d like you to explain this,” Mirim said, gesturing toward the conical tree in the area of the Grand Stair.

“Be careful, Mirim,” Eleanor said playfully. “You don’t want to walk under the kissing bough without Elisha.”

Mirim stopped and looked around, mystified. “Kissing bough? What is a kissing bough?”

Eleanor pointed to the chandelier part way down the entry hall. Normally this was an elegant and practical three-branched chandelier. This afternoon the three branches were virtually obscured by an intricate arrangement of plants and fruit. There were more colored

ribbons, vines and more of the furry looking branches woven together into a festive sheath. There were even half a dozen bright red fruits Mirim didn't recognize spaced around the bottom of the chandelier.

Pride of place, however, seemed to be reserved for an abundant bouquet of a plant that occurred only in this one arrangement among the many. The narrow oval leaves were thick and waxy, a deep winter green that caught the lamplight and reflected it softly, as though the plant itself were aware of its ceremonial role. Pearly white berries clustered at the nodes, translucent and faintly luminous, each one fragile-looking yet resolute, like a promise that had survived the cold.

A ribbon of dark red silk bound the bouquet in place, its knot neat and functional, holding the arrangement with understated authority. Beneath the arrangement, space seemed to gather meaning, as though the air itself understood that it was a place set aside, where tradition invited courage and affection was given formal permission to act. "What is that?" Mirim asked, her voice hushed by the importance her social sixth sense recognized, but her mind did not understand.

"That," Eleanor said quietly, her voice full of emotion, "was my special contribution. As the most recently married member of the family, it was my task and privilege to arrange the kissing bough. It is a very old Christmas tradition to hang mistletoe, the plant there in the middle, from a place of prominence. During the festivities, any couple passing under the kissing bough is supposed to share a kiss. Last year it was both embarrassing and exciting to manufacture excuses for Walter and I to pass under the kissing bough Josey made. The way things are looking, this may be my only year to make a kissing bough. Thomas and Rey are planning to marry in the fall next year, and from what

Tia Dolores said and... some other things, it looks like your Nasir and Beulah may be married before next Christmas as well.”

Mirim wondered what other things she was talking about but decided to allow Eleanor her secrets. After all, that might not be her secret to share. She did share a smile with the younger woman, a smile with more than a hint of mischief in it. “I think we should refrain from explaining the tradition of the Kissing Bough to either my son or husband. It will be... entertaining to see how Nasir and Elisha react when Beulah and I demonstrate it for the first time.”

The gay laughter from the two as they continued toward the rotunda where the grand stair was located was heard in the library, but neither Elisha nor Nasir thought anything of it. Unfortunately, or fortunately, none of the other men thought to explain the tradition of the Kissing Bough to either of their guests, focusing instead on trivial matters like the way the war with the Manufactory was going or how production of the Gaisarix armored personnel carriers was coming along.



Mirim couldn't help but smile at how her young friend, Eleanor, the pragmatic engineer, superstitiously walked around the “influence” of the kissing bough. But quickly her attention was refocused as Eleanor began explaining the decorations. “In England, where I'm from, and even in New York and New Jersey where I spent most of my life before coming here, we decorate for Christmas much the same. We use ribbons and boughs from pine and fir trees like these.”

“These branches come from a tree that is actually called ‘fur’?” Mirim asked, surprised.

Eleanor looked a little confused. “Yes, they’re called fir trees. Why is that surprising?”

“Well, I thought they looked furry, kind of like a cat’s tail when the cat is startled. I didn’t expect them to actually be called fur trees.”

Eleanor giggled, something she tried to avoid but which happened when she was startled and amused. “I’m sorry, not f-u-r, but f-i-r fir trees. I don’t know why they have that name, but I doubt it has anything to do with animal fur.”

Mirim smiled her dazzling smile. “Your languages continually amaze me, especially English. It seems to have so many words that mean almost the same thing, and then has other words that sound the same and mean completely different things. It is almost as if someone back in history tried to invent or borrow as many words as they could.”

“That isn’t far from correct,” Eleanor agreed. “England had so many different people conquer and rule it, each with their own language to add to the collection. And then there are people like William Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll inventing words all the time. Even mother’s patron, Lord Lytton, invented often quoted phrases. He actually coined the phrase ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’ for one of his plays.”

“Amazing,” Mirim said. “But you were telling me about the plants in the decorations.”

“Of course,” Eleanor continued. “So most of these are pine branches that came with the trees that Mr. William McDonald sent from Paris.

That is the Paris in East Texas, not the one in France. East Texas has whole forests of pine trees. I'm not sure where the fir branches came from, but there weren't very many of them, so they were used strategically. The kissing bough uses more than any of the other decorations."

"I'm guessing this enormous tree is a pine tree, not a fir tree?" Mirim asked.

"I believe you're right," Eleanor said. "I suppose George Carver could have told us, but he is still on Aetherwood Island studying the plants there. This is a Christmas tree. I think the Germans first decorated pine trees for Christmas, and that may be where the United States got the tradition, but once Queen Victoria and Prince Albert started having elaborate Christmas trees, they caught on all over the English speaking world. Of course Queen Victoria's family, especially on her mother's side, were German nobles, and Prince Albert was the son of a Saxon Duke. That is a German duchy in the area of Germany that the Anglo-Saxons came from. The Angles are the people we get the word 'English' from. I heard that when Benjamin and Caroline celebrated their first Christmas in the White House, they were the first presidential couple to have an 'old-fashioned Christmas tree'."

"The cut paper and ribbons are beautiful," Mirim said admiringly. "And these are Earth apples, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are," Eleanor answered. "And these are oranges from Stringfellow Orchards. I don't know anyone else growing oranges in Texas. These decorations are slices of orange hanging from clumps of cinnamon sticks. And these are pine cones, although I don't know if they are from this type of pine tree."

“They are remarkable, and such a variety of delicious smells,” Mirim remarked. “But I know for a fact that leukos crystal lights are not traditional since we brought them with us in April.”

“You’re right, of course.” Eleanor agreed. “All the time growing up, and last year here at Christmas, instead of lights there were tiny candles in the branches. Of course, we couldn’t leave them burning all the time. Especially later in the season, when the tree is more dried out, leaving candles burning unattended is just asking to have a fire. Since the leukos lights don’t produce heat, they can be placed without worry.”

“But aren’t leukos crystals the same as your precious gems?” Mirim asked.

“True,” Eleanor said. “Chemically, they are rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. The fact that they are the same thing as Martian power crystals puts them beyond price. But since Argos can manufacture them from lunar dust and Šarac can charge them from the fusion power plant at Nikola’s Tower, we can use as many as we want. Besides, there still isn’t much of a market for them. If someone were to steal them, it would do them as little good as stealing the crown jewels of some European country. They could never sell them to anyone.”

The rest of the ladies joined Eleanor and Mirim in the Grand Stair, and the mistress of the house, Josephine Gresham, took everyone up the stairs to admire the decorations on that floor before returning to the decorations in the Gold and Silver Rooms, named for the gold and silver cloth wall coverings in the formal sitting room and music room.



After the ladies had looked at and admired the decorations in all the rooms on the main floor and the second floor of the house, and the men had done their best to both solve the world's problems and finish smoking their cigars, it was time for Christmas dinner.

Mirim got Elisha to come out of the library just before Josephine announced dinner. Since Nasir stayed behind talking to Walter Sr. about something, that allowed Mirim to catch Elisha under the kissing bough, pull his head down, and kiss him soundly. Elisha had learned enough about Earth customs to be shocked and surprised by this public display of affection, even if it was his wife. He recovered quickly, however, and wrapped his arms around his beloved. The leukos gems in their wedding rings shone like stars on their fingers as the spectators applauded.

Walter Sr. and Nasir missed the show, and Nasir looked mystified when he exited the library. Mystification transformed to shocked incredulity as Beulah pulled his face down for a kiss on the lips in front of the whole assembly. His wide-eyed expression turned to embarrassed self-consciousness as Beulah looked up at him mischievously and said, "Nasir, that is a kissing bough. It is Christmas tradition that if a man passes beneath the kissing bough, his lady is owed a kiss. I was only collecting my due."

Dawning comprehension wiped the embarrassment from the young man's face, replaced briefly by a calculating look. He then glanced at Walter Sr., who suddenly grinned and nodded. Nasir then grinned and dropped to one knee, holding Beulah's hands in his. "Beulah, my soul, you are the most amazing woman I have ever had the privilege of knowing. Your generosity is unbounded. Your love of God is unquestionable. Your beauty is beyond compare. Over the last several

months, and especially during our journey to Mars and back, it has become clear to me that you can be my complementary support and I can be yours. I have asked for and received permission from your father to ask for the most precious gem in his treasury, the hand of his youngest daughter in marriage. Please agree to join your life to mine, that we may be a family together for as long as we both shall live.”

It was Beulah’s turn to stare in open-mouthed shock, a sentiment shared by several of the ladies. It wasn’t that anyone doubted that the proposal was coming, but no one had expected it to happen today, under the kissing bough. In the silence, Mirim’s quiet question carried clearly. “Will I be calling you daughter, my dear?”

Beulah’s mouth clogged shut, radiant happiness suffusing her face as she began to nod with ecstatic vigor. “Yes, yes, yes, my soul! I would be overjoyed to marry you! I can’t imagine anything better than to be your wife. Yes, yes, yes, please, yes!” she exclaimed excitedly as she threw herself into her fiancée’s arms for an even more thorough and two-sided kiss.

When the applause of the assembled family seeped into the awareness of the newly engaged couple, they broke their kiss a little self-consciously, and Nasir reached into his pocket and withdrew a ring. It was gold with a large sapphire that matched her eyes and a scattering of palest blue sapphires around it. Beulah covered her mouth with one hand in amazement as Nasir slipped the ring on the ring finger of her left hand.

“When Walter and Eleanor came to us on the Moon, Eleanor already had her engagement ring on her left hand,” Nasir explained. “Since our custom is to place the linked leukos wedding rings on the right

hand, it seemed to me that giving you a traditional Earth engagement ring was only proper.”

“It’s beautiful,” Beulah breathed, looking at the ring in wonder, before throwing her arms around him again.

As the assembled family members applauded once more, Mirim overheard Walter Jr. remark to Eleanor, “You don’t seem to be as surprised as the rest of us.”

“I didn’t know the exact timing,” Eleanor replied, “but Argos designed and made the engagement ring. He felt he had to ask me before starting it, although I promised Nasir to keep it a secret. Nasir ordered the ring only a couple of weeks ago, right after they got back from Mars.”

## DINNER WITH THE CLAN

Mirim was surprised and honored when Walter Sr. and Josephine sat down beside each other at one end of the table. Josephine loved to entertain almost as much as she loved to travel. At her dinner parties and dances, she mostly followed standard protocol. Mirim had heard that Walter Sr. and Josephine habitually sat beside one another at regular meals, even when eating at the grand table in the dining room. Their seven living children and two who had died in infancy demonstrated how close the two were. Despite that, one of the rules Mirim had never seen her break at any event Mirim had attended at Gresham Castle was that the mistress of the house sat at the head of the table and the master of the house sat at the foot. To be present when Walter Sr. and Josephine were seated next to each other was an intimacy that belied the numbers in the house and the formality of the dress. It showed just how much Elisha's family had been accepted into the Gresham clan.

And clan was the proper way to describe it.

In addition to Walter Sr. and Josephine, Walter Jr. and his wife, Eleanor, were there. Walter and Eleanor had been aboard the experimental aethership *Artemis* when it had lightly crashed into the exterior bulkhead door at Tunnel 16 Entrance on the Moon. Elisha and Mirim

were the co-managers of the village there, and the four had become fast friends as *Artemis* was repaired, Walter and Eleanor married, and all had flown to Galveston to escape the clutches of the lunar tyrant Zafir.

Also at the table were Edward and Vicky Gresham and their three children. Edward was the chief managing officer of Gresham Aerospace, the company that was taking the lead in arming the Defender Marines who were fighting against the tyrant in the lunar revolution. William and Essie Lockhart and their son also attended, since William's family in Chappell Hill was too far to travel for just Christmas Day.

Bill and Josey Armstrong attended, since Bill's family was three states away. Bill still worked for Col. Moody at the Galveston Cotton Exchange and Board of Trade, but had become the go-to expert for the Selenites in selling gemstones and leukos crystals to fund their revolution.

Thomas Gresham was home from Wake Forest University and attending with his fiancée, Rey Hutchings. He only had a single semester to go before graduation and already had arranged a clerkship with US Justice John Harlan of the American Commonwealth Arbitration Council while he read for his law exam. Texas had just passed a new law standardizing the process, but it wasn't substantially different from what Judge Stewart practiced in the 10<sup>th</sup> District.

Frank was home from his first semester at Columbia University. He was studying hard, looking to graduate the engineering program early so he could come back and study the advanced engineering of the Crystal Keep when they started teaching in Galveston, as well as

learning aetheric engineering from Nikola Tesla. His fiancée, Margaret Sealy, accompanied him.

Finally, there was the recently engaged couple, Nasir and Beulah.

In parallel to the Christmas dinner celebration on the main floor, the Gresham staff, small as it was, held a similar celebration on the lower floor. Part of this was to give them more space than they would have had in any of their houses. Part of it was to make it easier for the Greshams to subsidize the food and cooking of that feast. And part of it was to allow Rosa to take care of the main floor feast in the way she felt was proper. Rosa may have been a small, plump woman, prone to laughter and gentle words, but she ruled her kitchen with a firm, tactical mind any general officer would be proud of.

Now, she marshaled her forces: her two daughters, Isabella and Catalina, Mrs. Thompson, the housekeeper, Ingrid Rüdiger, the coachman's wife, and Miss Ida Rudolph, the live-in maid. Under Rosa's direction, the other five women placed cups of oyster soup before every diner using the china set with the bluebonnets that Josephine had painted.

"This brings back memories," Eleanor remarked.

"Did you usually have oyster soup for Christmas?" Mirim asked.

"We had oyster soup a lot growing up," Eleanor said. "Since oysters are so much cheaper than other types of meat, oyster soup or oysters in other meat dishes to stretch out the beef or mutton was something mother did often. I still miss her. No matter how hard she worked on her design work for Edison Aetherics, she always took time to make dinner and keep the house."

"I wonder what Rebecca Hayes would say about that," Mirim mused.

"Who?" Eleanor asked.

"Mrs. Rebecca Hayes is an advocate for what she calls 'women's rights' and 'temperance'," Mirim explained. "I really don't understand either of them, but the women's rights she seems to champion sound mostly like she wants women to act like men and be 'freed' from 'having to' act like women."

Eleanor nodded her head. "I've met some women like her. Mother did as well. A few of them called themselves feminists, but they sound like Mrs. Hayes. They really liked it that mother was working as an engineer for Edison Aetherics, but they tended to lose interest when she told them the only reason she went into engineering instead of being just a wife and mother was that she was the only one able to carry on her father's legacy. Honestly, that is the reason I opened my engineering practice in Perth-Amboy; to carry on mother's legacy. Hopefully, one day Walter and I will have at least one son to carry on the engineering legacy, and all our daughters can be like you and Josephine."

"So what was Christmas like with your family?" Mirim asked, changing the subject.

"Well, we would always eat a special Christmas frumenty for breakfast," Eleanor said, gazing into her past with a fond look. "It is a porridge made from whole wheat berries. We ate it fairly often because it is hearty and inexpensive. On Christmas, however, she would add spices like nutmeg and cinnamon if she had them, along with dried currants and apples, sometimes dried cranberries or pitted raisins. She always

tried to make it a special dish despite it being just a little something to tide us over until Christmas dinner.

“Since it was only the three of us, we didn’t tend to have a whole turkey like Josephine will serve later. Sometimes it would just be a duck or maybe two, but usually mother would find a goose for us. At least when we were in America, which is most of the Christmases I remember, mother made cornbread stuffing. Since corn is something the Indians taught to us Europeans when we first got here, basing the turkey or goose stuffing on cornbread seems very American to me and a way to honor that friendship.

“We’d have roasted potatoes and mashed turnips and maybe some peas or beans of some type, and then mother’s boiled pudding for dessert. She always called it Spotted Dick for the spots of fruit in the pudding, but it is essentially the same as plum pudding. Since she usually didn’t have the spices to make the dough as dark as Rosa does, the spots of the dried fruit were more noticeable. She also didn’t use a mold for the pudding. She just used a linen cloth and boiled it for hours. The smell as it cooked filled the house and is another of my favorite memories. We usually had it with rum butter and didn’t flambé it. After all, rum has always been something ‘the colonies’ were known for.”

“You said most of the Christmases you remember were in America,” Mirim noted. “What other Christmases do you remember?”

“So mother’s husband, Lt. Vansittart, was on the Graves Expedition to Mars from March 1870 to August 1872. I turned five just before they left, so I don’t know when mother and I went to England, but at Christmas I remember we were at Knebworth House with mother’s patron, Lord Lytton. We didn’t return to America until after the

expedition returned, so we spent two Christmases there. I didn't think much of it at the time, but mother was almost treated like the lady of the manor during that time.

"I'm fairly certain I have memories of the two Christmases mixed up, but I'm pretty sure both years we had a big beef roast with bones in it. There was also roasted venison at least once. The dressing was completely different. It was made with chestnuts and veal and was called a 'forcemeat' dressing. I'm not sure of much more than that, but it sounded so strange and tasted so good I remembered that much. I don't remember a lot about the side dishes except that Christmas dinner when I was seven had a lot fewer. I do remember there was asparagus and stewed tomatoes, because it was winter and I was surprised that we were eating things that grew in the summer. The asparagus and tomatoes came from Lord Lytton's greenhouse, of course, and were served for the same reason Walter Sr. and Josephine have separate bedrooms in the house here. It was a demonstration of wealth."

"It sounds like you enjoyed yourself." Mirim ventured.

"Oh, I did." Eleanor agreed. "Sometimes growing up, I wondered why father made us come back to America instead of joining us in England when he got back from Mars. I also wondered, especially when I got older, why mother and I had been treated like family instead of guests. When Lord Lytton died and left me my enormous inheritance, many things became clear. Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if mother had stayed with Lord Lytton and become Lady Lytton. More recently, I'm very grateful she didn't. If she had, I would have ended up just another English noblewoman. Because she came back to her marriage, I learned engineering, had the chance to design *Nike*, *Artemis*, and *Endeavor*, and met and married Walter. Oh, and I got to

meet and make friends with an amazing Selenite woman who is likely to be the first First Lady of the Moon.”

Mirim joined her friend in laughter at that.

## CHRISTMAS IN VERACRUZ

Since this was Christmas dinner, even if it was a less formal family occasion, the meal was planned to take multiple hours and have plenty of time for conversation. Accordingly, Josephine and Rosa had planned to have a fish course. The fish course was falling out of favor among many in Galveston society, but Rosa had made a halibut with egg sauce.

The two planners had toyed with the idea of making a *huachinango a la Veracruzana*, a much more colorful dish, both for the eyes and the palate. Eventually, they decided against it. First, huachinango a la Veracruzana was at the edge of Rosa's culinary reach. Second, it was one of Dolores' favorites, and neither woman wanted to serve something that she would be disappointed in. Finally, Dolores' cook was a recognized master of the dish among the chefs of the dish's native city. With a bar that high, and with a judge that discerning, they opted for the safer American dish instead.



As they enjoyed their fish, Mirim asked Dolores, “Is this like the Christmas dinner you have in Mexico?”

“Well,” Dolores temporized, “it is like the Christmas dinner at Gresham Hacienda. But that is because I was married to an American barbarian who was only fit to ask for my hand in marriage because he had grown obscenely wealthy running the blockade during the Euro-American War.”

Dolores’ sally elicited a round of laughter from everyone present. Dolores continued, “In Mexico, we tend to celebrate Christmas in very different fashion. Instead of a single big celebration on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, we start celebrating more than a week before. In Mexico, Yucatan, and most of Central America, there is a tradition called *Las Posadas*.”

“The Inns?” Mirim asked, confused.

“That is the literal translation,” Dolores agreed, “but it is a *novenario*, a religious activity repeated for nine consecutive days, symbolizing the nine months Maria was pregnant with our Lord, Jesus Christ. Since Veracruz is a fairly large city, each district will organize their own Las Posadas celebration. They choose two people, one to play the part of Maria and one to play the part of José.”

“Maria and José? Is that Spanish for Mary and Joseph?” Mirim questioned.

“Sí, sí, Mary and Joseph,” Dolores acknowledged. “Each night from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 24<sup>th</sup>, Maria and José lead a procession to a prearranged house or sometimes church, and they sing or chant verses back and forth between José asking for shelter for *Maria Regina Caeli* and

the inn keeper saying there is no room. Eventually, the procession is welcomed inside, and a fiesta, a celebration, is held.”

“*Maria Regina Caeli*, Mary Queen of what?” Mirim asked.

“Mary Queen of Heaven in Latin, the root of Spanish.” Nikola supplied. “My father explained that if Jesus Christ is King of Israel and the Universe, then Mary is the Queen Mother.”

“*Sí, sí*, learned sir.” Dolores said, touching his arm. “In the coastal regions of Mexico and Yucatan from Veracruz to Belize, we have an additional tradition called *La Rama* for the branches that are carried by many of the children. Children will go out and get a tree branch and decorate it, kind of like a small Christmas tree, although painting the branch makes it a little different. They will travel from house to house singing a song about how a gentleman lives in the house and gives them permission to ask for coins or candies. The coins are sometimes used to help defray the costs of the *Posada* fiesta, although when the fiesta was held in our house, any coins collected went into the *piñata* instead.”

“What is a *piñata*?” Mirim asked.

“It is a clay container that can be many different shapes, with colored paper decorations.” Dolores explained. “During the *Las Posadas* fiesta, a *piñata* shaped like a seven-pointed star to symbolize the seven deadly sins is shattered, and the children scramble to collect the candies, dried fruits, and coins that spill out. It is really quite endearing.”

“I remember *piñatas* at some of the celebrations we had at your house in Veracruz.” Walter Jr. put in. “I always enjoyed them, although I don’t remember one shaped like a star.”

“At least at Hacienda Gresham the seven pointed star piñata is only for Christmas.” Dolores said. “I think we usually had a donkey piñata when you and your siblings were there. And even you were endearing when you were scrambling for the piñata’s spilled contents.”

General laughter, led by Walter Jr., met Dolores’ sally since it was well known that Walter Jr. and Tia Dolores had an ongoing good-natured teasing relationship. “After the piñata we have food and *Ponche Navideño*, Christmas Punch, which I believe Josephine will be serving later?”

“Yes,” the mistress of the house answered. “It will be one of the drinks available when we adjourn to the Silver Room to sing Christmas songs.”

“I suspected it would be part of the festivities when Rosa asked for the recipe and for the fruits to be flown up from Veracruz by *Artemis*. The fact that we can just send for something from Veracruz in the morning and it is in Galveston by afternoon is still amazing.”

## NIKOLA'S CHRISTMAS

The next course was purposefully designed to be eaten over a long period of time and was more of a set of snacks than a proper dinner course. This also gave the children a chance to play for a while in the upstairs sitting room to burn off some energy. The food consisted of olives, celery, carrots sliced into long pieces – almost julienned – spinach custard squares and small, round deviled spaghetti servings baked in small ramekin dishes with Rosa's special spices.

This was also a chance to have a drink other than wine with their meal. Despite the relatively cold weather outside, they had a chilled sweet tea. In deference to their guests from the Moon, instead of black tea from Asia, they had Mirim's favorite nakur tea. It had a taste similar to mint tea, but lighter, with a slightly sweet, grassy note. The plants themselves had square stems and leaves that looked very much like mint. If the nakur plant of the Moon existed on Earth the same way coffee plants did, the Earth equivalent had yet to be identified.



“It seems that celebrating Christmas in Mexico is quite different from in Galveston. What about where you are from, Nikola?” Mirim asked. “The Austrian Empire, if I remember right.”

“Well, good lady,” Nikola said, donning his professor/showman persona like a comfortable robe. “Technically, I was born and raised under the sovereignty of the Austrian Emperor and King of Hungary. Practically, however, I was born and raised a Serb. It has been so long since Serbia was its own nation that the boundaries are quite blurred, and there were a lot of Croatians in Smiljan, the town I was raised in, as well as Serbs.

“I’m not familiar with either Austrian or Hungarian Christmas traditions. Since we were Serbian and father was the local Serbian Orthodox priest, we followed those traditions for Christmas. One big difference is that in Smiljan, and in the entire Orthodox world, today is not Christmas Day. Christmas Day won’t be for almost two more weeks, on January sixth. This is because we still use the calendar instituted by Julius Caesar instead of the one instituted by the Catholic Pope in 1582. Eventually, the Orthodox world will need to do what the Protestant countries have done over the last three centuries and adopt the new calendar, but whether they change what day Christmas is on is anybody’s guess.

“Three Sundays before Christmas was *Detinjci*, Children’s Day. After Mass, Mother and Father would tie our arm or leg to a table with a soft scarf, and we would have to give them a present to gain our freedom. Since we were supposed to save up our own money to buy the gift, or the materials to make the gift, it encouraged us to be frugal. Something I forgot during my third year at the Polytechnic, when I fell into gambling, to my shame and annoyance.

“Two Sundays before Christmas was *Materice*, Mother’s Day. Again after Mass, Mother would be tied to a chair with a scarf, and she would give each of the children a gift in ransom. This was always something edible, candy, nuts, fruit, or something similar. When we were given the gift, we would... I suppose the best way to say it is we would congratulate Mother for being a good mother. It loses something in the translation, but it is congratulations with a healthy dose of thanks and gratitude.

“The Sunday before Christmas was *Oci*, Father’s Day. Once more, after Mass, Father would allow us to capture him and tie him to a chair with his belt. A playful negotiation would then take place until the gifts were agreed upon, and Father would tell us where to find them. Usually it was something of practical value that would help us with our studies or tasks in the year to come. Father often gave me books on church history or theology until I went to the Polytechnic and he gave up trying to convince me to follow him into the priesthood.

“I just recently sent Mother a leukos lamp for the kitchen and Father a book of Selenite lore Ima’s husband, Ekkabert, helped me prepare. I’m sure Mother will find the lamp useful, and if the lore book isn’t a religious text per se, I suspect he will at least find it interesting.

“On Christmas Eve, our celebration started fairly early. Father and one of the young men who helped him at the church would go into the forest and cut down the *badnjak*, a large oak log, longer than I am tall. They would lean it against the house for most of the day. Why we cut it in the morning but didn’t do anything with it until evening was something Father couldn’t explain except for, ‘it’s tradition’.

“In the evening, Father would cut the badnjak into three logs. Father would bring in the largest of the three logs himself, although when I was strong enough, I got to help him with the other two. When he brought the first log in, he would be careful to cross the threshold right foot first and greet us all by saying, ‘Good evening and happy Christmas Eve to you.’ Mother would throw grain at him and say, ‘God give you well-being, and may you have good luck.’”

“Actually, now that I think of it, I think Father would throw grain at the tree the badnjak was cut from and recite some sort of blessing or prayer. I never paid a lot of attention to that part and left for school in Karlovac when I was fourteen.

“It was our tradition to lay the three logs with the larger two at the bottom and the other on top as a symbol of the Holy Trinity. Lighting the badnjak symbolized the fire the shepherds kindled at the mouth of the stable cave Christ was born in to warm him and his mother, Mary, throughout the winter night. Since the house was supposed to be Christ’s stable nursery Mother would scatter straw on the floor. I used to dislike that part, as all the children were supposed to act like baby chickens.”

“Maybe we should revive that tradition,” Dolores put in with a smirk, “It is good for you to have your stuffiness unstuffed now and then.”

Nikola blushed and harrumphed before continuing. “It is a solid log to symbolize Christ’s cross, and the warmth it sheds symbolizes the salvation his crucifixion made possible. Father would then pour a little wine on the badnjak and offer a prayer. ‘Grant to us, O God, health and joy in this home. Grant us abundant harvests. Grant us healthy lives. Grant us increase in our flocks and herds. Grant us, O God,

the Peace and Goodwill your angels promised to the shepherds on the night Christ was born.’ He would take a sip and pass the jug to Mother. She would sip and, as necessary, help the children take a sip as well.

“Among the Serbs of Smiljan, the head of the household was supposed to bless the whole house with the Sign of the Cross and using a lit candle as a censer. Since Father was the local priest, he used a real censer with frankincense instead of the candle. After that, we would eat a special Christmas Eve meal.

“Since Christmas Eve was a fast day, there was always *badnjački kolač*, a type of round, unleavened bread that each of us had to eat a bite of with salt on it. There wasn’t supposed to be any meat with it, but fish was acceptable. We would have roast fish, beans, sauerkraut, noodles with ground walnuts, honey, baklava, and wine.

“Everyone would stay awake then until the badnjak was burned through. Supposedly, if you fell asleep beforehand, you would be at risk of dying suddenly in your sleep in the coming year. What helped me stay awake, at least until I’d been to Joanneum Polytechnic was the promise that whoever noticed the badnjak burn through first would be blessed with extra luck that year. After the burn through, the children would go to bed, and Father and Mother would keep watch until the fire was out.

“The next morning all of us who weren’t required to watch the cooking went to church for Morning Mass. After Mass, the badnjak was rekindled, and the same young man who helped father cut it was our first visitor on Christmas Day. The first visitor was our *polaznik* and had a very special significance.

“He would enter, right foot first, and greet us by saying ‘Christ is born,’ to which we would reply, ‘Truly He is born.’ He would then strike the burning badnjak several times, causing sparks to fly. Each time, he would wish us different types of happiness and prosperity as abundant as the sparks that flew. He would then throw a coin into the fire, and we’d give him a round loaf of bread and some small present.

“One of my sisters was always sent to the well to get the strong water. Supposedly, the first water gathered on Christmas morning has special properties, and there was a whole ritual to getting it. Again not something I paid particular attention to.

“Our Christmas feast would always start with a bite of the *prosphora*, some of the bread brought back from the Christmas Morning Mass. I think it was a way for the people who couldn’t go to Mass to connect with the celebration of the Mass.

“Christmas dinner was the most festive meal of the year for us. A Pečenica, a whole roast pig is the centerpiece, and one of the reasons not everyone could attend Morning Mass. Ours was always a small pig instead of roasting a normal sized pig. After all, we were a relatively small family, just my Father and Mother being the adults in the household. We never would have been able to eat a normal sized roast pig.

“There were always several *česnica* loaves baked. One special one and several more just to eat. At the start of the meal, Father and the polaznik would hold the special *česnica* and rotate it three times counterclockwise. They would then carefully break it into as many pieces as we had diners, and everyone would eat it first. There was a coin baked into the special loaf. Whoever got the coin was supposed to have extra special good luck that year.

“In addition to the pečénica we would have *sarma*, of course. That was cabbage leaves stuffed with ground meat and rice. It was something we ate fairly often. We’d also have either a baked ham or sausages, another reason to have a smaller than typical. There was a hearty *olivier* salad, and Mother would also make *ajvar*, a roasted red pepper and eggplant relish for the meats. For dessert, there was more česnica, without the coin, baklava, *orahnjača*, a nut roll, apple strudel, and fresh and dried fruits.”

“Well, Nikola,” Josephine said, “you’ll be pleased to know that Rosa made an Oliver salad with ham chunks for you. In fact, I believe it will be part of our main course here in a few minutes.”

## MIRIM HAS QUESTIONS

After the children had been corralled and reseated at the table, the main course arrived. A large turkey, roasted a golden brown with rich chestnut stuffing, took center stage. Around it, cranberry jelly, sweet potato croquettes, mashed potatoes, giblet gravy, peas in turnip cups, and hot buttered yeast rolls were arrayed. In deference to Nikola's Christmas memories, there was olivier salad. This was a hearty salad with diced boiled potatoes, carrots, eggs, pickles, peas, and ham chunks bound with mayonnaise. With this, a sparkling cider, watered a little for the adults and more so for the children, was provided.



“So what do you think of your first Christmas, Mirim?” Eleanor asked.

“It is wonderful,” Mirim replied. “The variety of foods, so many of them new. The decorations are beautiful. The kissing bough, especially since my son used it so strategically to propose to Beulah. And the different traditions you and Dolores and Nikola have told us about. But it all leaves me even more confused about your Earth religions.”

“Why is that, good lady?” Nikola asked.

“When we first came here,” Mirim said with some exasperation, “I thought that every time there was a major political split, a new sect of Christianity would appear. Orthodox and Catholic, with the split of that empire. Anglican and Episcopalian with the founding of the United States. Then the Reverend for the Baptist Church explained that their split from the Catholics didn’t have anything to do with political questions. Then I discovered that all of you Christians split off from the Jewish tradition after the time of Jesus Christ. It seems every time I learn a little more, it gets more confusing.”

“Has she heard about the Mohammedans, or Indian pagans, or even the Mayans or Aztecs?” Walter Jr. asked his wife.

“Hush,” Eleanor whispered, “it’s confusing enough for Mirim without adding all of those into the mix.”

“Don’t worry,” Mirim assured her friend, “I know there are many other religions other than the Christian ones. I’ve just been focused on them because they seem most compatible with our own beliefs. But all these traditions seem to have grown up around Christmas, and I don’t see how they connect with the actual events of Jesus Christ’s birth.”

“Actually, I think I can help with that one,” Nikola said. “As I mentioned, my father always wanted one of his sons to follow in his footsteps and become a priest. After my older brother died, he focused that desire on the sole remaining one, me. Despite not following in his footsteps and never going to seminary, I was exposed to a lot of church history and theology. I also had questions about how our Christmas traditions connected to the events of Christmas. Put simply, the con-

nection is sometimes convoluted and often postdates the tradition itself.”

“How can that be?” Mirim asked, puzzled.

“From the time of Constantine the Great in the fourth century, Christianity had been the official religion of the Roman Empire. Within the empire, it was fairly easy to get people to convert from the pagan religions that had fallen out of favor to Christianity that was in favor. Outside the empire, it was a different story. In the fifth century, Pope Gregory I encouraged missionaries to destroy the idols, but, if the temple was well built, to purify it and turn it into a church. He also encouraged them to celebrate pagan rituals and festivals if they could be adapted to have Christian meanings. I suspect most of the Serbian Christmas Eve and Christmas Day traditions relating to luck are adapted pagan festivals.”

“Not all of the Christmas traditions are adapted pagan rituals,” Dolores objected. “Virgen santa, I can’t imagine any Aztec ritual that could have any but a demonic interpretation, and the Maya weren’t that much better. Las Posada started as a pageant to teach the natives of New Spain about the nativity. If it has drifted a little, at its heart is still the teaching about the birth of our Lord.”

“Certainly that is the case, fine lady,” Nikola said. “I don’t mean to imply all Christmas traditions are originally pagan in origin. It is like when Boniface spread Christianity among the Germanic tribes in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. Certainly he chopped down an oak sacred to the pagan Germans and built a church from its lumber, but many churches were built in Germania with no ties to anything pagan.

“At the heart of all Christmas traditions is the story.

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 'Glory

to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, ‘Let us now go unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.’

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

There was a solemn silence for a moment when Nikola had finished before Walter Jr. asked, “Did you just recite that Bible passage from memory, Nikola?”

“It isn’t only science and engineering texts I can memorize after only a few readings,” Nikola said. “I’ve found it instructive when learning how to read a new language to read the Bible in the new language as well. Even when the language is out of date and lacks technical terms, like your English translation, it gives me an initial broad base of reading skill to add the technical terms later. One of the challenges I’ve faced learning to read the Goen most of the Crystal Keep archives are in is that our Selenite friends don’t have a translation of the Bible for me to start with.”

“Getting back to Nikola’s point, the important thing is to remember the story of Christ’s birth is the heart of Christmas,” Walter said, taking another helping of mashed potatoes. “We add various joyous celebrations of that story and maybe some of the details. Decorate with things that, at least now, have greater or lesser significance to the story. We celebrate with solemn church services and joyous carols. We feast and sing with family and friends, and all of that on top of the story, can just be gravy,” he finished, pouring a ladle of gravy atop his potatoes with a triumphant grin.



After the main course, a lighter course of lettuce salad and cheese balls was served to cleanse the palate and allow some time for the guests’ digestion to catch up. To aid the process, Rosa had secured a very special tea. Rosa was visiting with Marie, the cook for the French Consul in Galveston, when Marie mentioned receiving a very special Pu’er tea through French Indochina. Apparently, it was so prized by the Chinese Emperor, that it was called a ‘tribute tea’. It came compressed in discs with special paper wrappings and seals. After seeing how much the Pu’er tea cost, Rosa learned the complex, multi-step method of rinsing, reconstituting, and putting the tea through multiple, short steeping cycles to bring out the best flavor. The result was a dark tea with a full body and a mellow, earthy flavor with fruity notes and a slightly sweet aftertaste.

## SWEET ENDINGS AND FETCH QUESTS

After about half an hour, the centerpiece of the formal dessert course was brought out. In both the US and Britain, this was called a plum pudding, despite having no plums in it. It was also called a Christmas pudding, despite it being made throughout the winter months. Rosa used the same recipe Eleanor's mother, Henrietta Vansittart, had used, with the addition of a few more sweet spices. It mixed raisins, dried currants, chopped dried figs, chopped dried apples, and orange zest into a sweet batter that included a significant amount of beef suet. The batter was put into a pudding mold and boiled for several hours. Rosa had done this the previous week and merely put the pudding back into the boiling water again just prior to serving it to reheat it.

The resulting pudding, with a sprig of holly adorning its crown, looked very much like a dark cake with darker spots of dried fruits in it. Rosa brought it out on a raised platter and placed it on the table for all to see and admire. As she made a few additional preparations, her helpers closed the window blinds and turned off the electric lights. In the dim light of the leukos crystals from the tree in the grand staircase and a pedestal candle on the table, Rosa poured a rich rum into a large ladle and began to heat it over the candle flame. After heating it just

enough, Rosa tipped the ladle just enough for the rum to catch fire and proceeded to pour blue flames over the entire dessert, to the applause of all.

When the fire went out, the lights were restored, and the other desserts – mincemeat pie, pecan pie, and chocolate pie – were brought out and placed on the sideboard. As diners indicated their preference, the servers would provide them with a small slice of pie or, if they wanted pudding, Rosa would cut them a slice and place the rum butter sauce atop it. The party enjoyed their dessert with cups of rich coffee from the Blue Mountains in British Jamaica.



As they were enjoying their dessert, Dolores spoke up, “Rosa, don’t just serve the pudding. Since we are sharing Christmas traditions with Mirim, you need to tell her about making Christmas tamales.”

Rosa looked a little shocked to be called on to address the room. After all, even if she was the cook, she was a servant, not a member of the family. “Oh, *Doña*, I couldn’t,” she said.

Josephine, intrigued, spoke. “Don’t worry, Rosa, you and Juan are almost like family anyway. Besides, I’m curious as well. I didn’t know there was a difference in making Christmas tamales.”

Rosa still looked reluctant until cries from all sides made it obvious that the company were all interested in her story. Rosa was not the storyteller her husband was. Taking a deep breath however she steeled herself for the ordeal.

“I’ve had family in San Antonio since it was a Spanish outpost. I remember the Las Posadas parade along the river to the Cathedral prior to Christmas. In San Antonio, and even here in Galveston, the Tejanos eat a lot of tamales during the Christmas season. About two weeks before Christmas, the women in the family get together and try to make enough tamales ahead of time so we don’t fall behind during the season. This year, since Doña Dolores and Mistress Eleanor were back from their adventures and both had asked to learn how I made tamales, I invited them to join us.”

“Rosa’s tamales kept us fed when we would forget meals while we were building *Artemis*.” Eleanor explained. “The few we took in jars were also hugely popular with the Selenites at Walter’s and my wedding feast. Since we were taking a break from flying all over creation chasing rumors and adventures, learning to cook a new dish sounded very relaxing.”

“So you thought it was going to be relaxing?” Dolores said mirthfully. “You don’t know Latin women very well, whether they are Tejano or Jarocho.”

“Touché,” Eleanor acknowledged cheerfully.

The banter from the two upper class ladies helped Rosa to relax, and she was far less tentative as she continued. “My friend Angelina joined us since all her family is in New Leon. All my female relatives are in San Antonio or Laredo, so it was just my daughters, Isabella and Catalina. Six ladies to make all the tamales we would need for Christmas would be difficult, especially since two were new to tamale making, but it was better than just the four of us last year. Besides, part of the tradition is for the men-folk to help us by getting ingredients as needed.”

"Is that what it was called," Nikola said. "I know I wondered throughout the day why I'd been invited. It seemed every time we went into the kitchen, you had another errand for us. It seemed you were trying to keep us out from underfoot more than actually needing our help."

"What gave that away?" Walter Jr. asked. "Was it having to go all the way to Stringfellow Orchards to get the special oranges, or having to talk only to Bill Heer at Boone & Johnson because he was the only one who knew the correct type of chili powder she wanted."

"It was talking to Mr. Heer." Nikola decided. "When he said we needn't have waited on him to finish his lunch and that any of the clerks knew what chili powder the Gresham's cook, Rosa, bought, that gave it away."

"Reckon it did at that," Walter agreed jovially.

"Both of you stop it." Dolores scolded good naturedly. "On tamale making day, Rosa was Doña of the Kitchen, and you menfolk were her cheerful knights errant. You go on your quests without complaint or second guessing and keep your *bribón* comments to yourself."

"Yes, Tia, of course, Tia, I will cheerfully fetch anything Doña Rosa requires, Tia," Walter said unctuously.

Dolores gave her nephew a very old fashioned look before turning to Rosa with an encouraging smile. "Please continue, Doña Rosa."

Rosa took a moment to get over her fluster before continuing almost apologetically. "Part of the tradition is to send the men folk on, um, quests, I suppose. The women think up errands that are very specific and time consuming, but possible. The men attempt to accomplish

the errands as quickly as possible while following the instructions scrupulously. It is kind of a good-natured game.”

“Of course this year I had two new sets of hands to teach how to make tamales.” Rosa noted. “Doña Dolores was slow to start, but got very good very quickly.”

“I had an advantage,” Dolores confided in the company. “I’ve always liked to watch our cooks make things, especially in the cooler months. When I was a girl, our hacienda was in the mountains, so I watched a lot more often. I remember helping with tamales a few times. I’m not sure if they even came out, but after the first dozen or two the technique came back to me. I will note, however, that all the corn husks I seemed to get were much closer to the right size, and I never had to piece two together to make the wrapping. Also, Rosa’s masa paste was perfect, and the husks were all soaked to just the right amount of flexibility.”

“You’ll also note the conspicuous absence of comments on my own poor efforts,” Eleanor noted wryly. “I don’t know if it is some missing Latin characteristic or too much time in the design studio instead of the kitchen, but I could not get the right amount of masa paste in an even enough coat without spending far more time than any of the other women.”

“Mrs. Eleanor,” Rosa protested, “you try too hard to be perfect. Do it fast and poorly a few dozen times, and you’ll find you are doing it fast and good enough. Do it fast and good enough as many times as Angelina and the girls, and you will be as fast as they are.”

“Perhaps you’re right, Rosa,” Eleanor replied with a rueful shake of her head. “By nature I prefer Eli’s advice. ‘Slow and deliberate, delib-

erate is fast, we don't have time to make mistakes.' At least we have the results of your efforts to enjoy. And we will want more tamales in jars to take with us to Egypt when we go."

"Yes, Mrs. Eleanor. I'll be sure to make them."



After enjoying the pies and pudding, Rosa and her helpers brought up plates of finger-food style desserts. Swiss Penny Cakes, small meringue cookies with a vanilla flavor. Lemon star cookies, an iced butter cookie with lemon flavor cut into star shapes. Gateaux de Milan, another type of butter cookie flavored with lemon and rum and using the egg yolks left over from making the meringue for the Swiss Penny Cakes. Sugar plums, powdered sugar covered balls of dried fruit and nuts. There were chocolate bon bons using chocolate from Veracruz and three different types of dessert tamales, two with dried fruit and jam fillings and one with a sweet cream and pecan filling.

With the desserts were laid out three different drinks. Mulled wine on an alcohol burner to keep it warm sat next to an array of small glass mugs. A punchbowl of eggnog sat next to its collection of punch cups. *Ponche Navideño*, Christmas Punch from Veracruz sat in a bowl on another alcohol burner with a number of clay cups called *jarritos* next to it. There were also a number of spoons available with the ponche so that people could eat the chunks of fruit as well as the punch. Since this was the drink available for the children, there were several decanters of spirits at the back of the jarrito array for adults that wanted a bit of a punch with their ponche.

The celebrants, whether from Galveston or the Moon, spent the rest of the afternoon singing Christmas Carols, drinking punches, and nibbling on dessert tamales, cookies, and sugar plums.



When Elisha and Mirim were walking back to the Selenite Embassy, both were in a happy and festive mood. “Well, my soul,” Elisha asked, “Do you still think the Christmas traditions can’t be that complicated?”

Mirim’s laugh was silvery sweet in the gathering darkness. “I should know better than tempt fate so, my soul.” She admitted. “Of course every time I begin to wonder how people can come up with so many different ways to do something, I remember that there are more people just in Texas than all the people on the Moon. This is such a huge world with millions and millions of people in a thousand different societies. No wonder something as special as Christmas will be celebrated in so many different ways.”

“I liked how Nikola’s people have the Children’s and Mother’s and Father’s days,” Elisha said. “It seems to be a good reminder of the ties of family.”

“Family,” Mirim mused. “And now our family is going to grow as Beulah joins it. And we are going to be joined by marriage, not just friendship, with this wonderful Gresham clan.”

“That is for sure, my soul.” Elisha agreed. “I’m glad to see it as well. I hope Nasir and Beulah are the first of many Moon-Earth families. I certainly can’t think of a clan I’d rather my son marry into.”

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## THE STORY CONTINUES...

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Book 3: Forging the Chain Breakers <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0FXTFL9K8>

Book 4: Selene Unchained <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0FXTJ933V>

Read about the further adventures of Walter and Eleanor in Antarctic Honeymoon, coming in 2026. <https://malcolmup-ton.com/books/antarctic-honeymoon/>

Secrets of Kilimanjaro, coming soon. <https://malcolmup-ton.com/books/secrets-of-kilimanjaro/>

Accompany Nasir and Beulah on their adventure on Mars in Martian Phoenix, coming in 2026. <https://malcolmup-ton.com/books/flight-of-the-phoenix/>