Chapter 15: A Shadow Yet to Come

“Alright everyone, final preparations are underway. First act in 15 minutes!” Tenderheart shouted backstage as everyone ran around, checking costumes, makeup, sets and special effects. Love Heart already had the Illusion out going through the forms it would have to take throughout the production and finally satisfied as Tenderheart made his way to the sound booth where Harmony would be controlling the music, “Everything ready, Harmony?”

Harmony checked the script she had in front of her and the CDs with the music for the play one last time, “Good to go, Tenderheart, give my best to Brave Heart.”

Brave Heart hurried over to Love Heart in his full costume, Cheer Bear had painted lines on his fur to make him look wrinkled and dyed his mane grey; he was wearing his old nightgown, extended by Confidence Heart, and had pulled a long coat that looked somewhat like a business suit over top of it that he had just finished doing up. “Last minute effects check?” he asked Love Heart.

“Right,” Love Heart nodded toward The Illusion, “Illusion, Young Scrooge please.” The Illusion wrapped itself around Brave Heart and the wrinkles disappeared, his mane changed back to tawny and was drawn back in a ponytail and his clothing changed into a school uniform. “Adult Scrooge please,” the clothing changed to a business suit and Brave Heart’s appearance changed to look more like his natural self with his standard mane style. They had gone through these costumes in reality and had The Illusion memorise them as it was easier than trying to just create complex costumes completely out of imagination, “Looks good, thank you Illusion.” The Illusion pulled back to float by Love Heart in a kaleidoscope pattern again.

“That’s good,” Brave Heart swiped his forehead and picked up the top hat from a nearby pile of boxes.

“Nervous?” Love Heart asked.

Brave Heart looked around then whispered in a confidential manner, “Yeah, don’t tell anyone but I have a little stage fright.”

“I get it,” Love Heart nodded, “We’re pretty nervous too.” Love Heart held his hand out for a fist bump, “Break a leg, Brave Heart.”

Brave Heart smiled and returned the fist bump, “Thanks, Love Heart.”

“First act in five minutes!” Tenderheart shouted as he moved to his spot to make sure everyone else was ready, getting thumbs up as everyone did last minute costume and set checks.

“We heard you,” Grumpy said as he stretched, getting ready for the fast set changes.

“I’m just nervous, but I think everything’s come together great,” Tenderheart smiled.

“Yeah, because we’ve all been doing double work,” Grumpy voice came from behind Tenderheart and he whirled around to see Grumpy pulling on a set rope, then looked back to where Grumpy had been a second ago. He shook his head and returned to his work.

“Alright everyone we’ve all worked hard to see this through so let’s go on and put on a great show,” He stumbled a bit over his awkward delivery but received encouraging applause from the cast and crew.

As show time was about to begin, Noble Heart and True Heart stepped out on stage to see that the auditorium was packed, mostly with students and parents but also with other people from Readington who wanted to see this version of the story be put on.

True Heart smiled and spoke up, “Quiet everyone please!” The crowd quieted down. “Thank you everyone, and thank you all for coming to Care-a-Lot Escalator’s all Care Bear production of A Christmas Carol.”

“Everyone has worked hard on this for the last two months,” Noble Heart continued, “and we all hope for an enchanting performance. Now let’s begin,” He and Tue Heart grabbed the center of the curtains and made a big show of pulling them back, when it was really Champ Bear pulling them back.

The set opened to a dark screen as ominous music played and Harmony Bear narrated through the loudspeakers.

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.”

As the narration continued, Funshine raised the lights on to a set of Scrooge’s office and Brave Heart stepped through the door from stage left and marched to his desk. Bright Heart, as Jacob Marley, sat at a smaller desk further down, wearing a patchy coat and scratching away at a paper with a quill while doing his best to shiver convincingly.

Swift Heart, as Fred Scrooge, bounded next to Love Heart at side stage as the scene played out, “So far so good?”

“Yep,” Love Heart couldn’t help but feel nervous as he glanced sideways at The Illusion as Swift Heart readied himself and waited for his cue.

Swift Heart wore a stylish winter jacket as he burst through the prop door, rattling the set somewhat, “A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!" Swift Heart did a flourish as he practically skipped across the set.

“Bah!” Brave Heart waved his hand with his own quill in it towards Swift Heart, “Humbug!”

“Christmas a humbug, uncle!” Swift Heart gave a short laugh, “You surely don’t mean that!”

“I do,” Brave Heart put the quill down and \*humphed\* “Merry Christmas! What right have you to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You’re poor enough.”

Swift Heart leaned on the desk with a goofy grin on his face, “Come, then, what right have you to be dismal? What reason have you to be morose? You’re rich enough.”

“Bah!” Brave Heart acted his best to ignore Swift Heart and suppressed a smile as he went back to scratching with the quill, “Humbug!”

Swift Heart had fumbled his lines a few times in rehearsal but now he was performing them perfectly.

At side stage, Lotsa Heart walked up next to Love Heart wearing a white ghostly night gown with white cream on his face and carrying chains with lock boxes. They had at first wanted to use some fake plastic chains leftover from Halloween decorations but Lotsa has insisted that as Jacob Marley he should use real metal chains to show off real weight and convincing metal chain sounds, as he was strong enough to carry them effortlessly.

“Ready?” Love Heart asked.

“I sure am, and that’s the truth.” Lotsa carefully set the chain ends down to avoid disrupting the scene on stage as Swift Heart exited and Treat Heart Pig and Cozy Heart Penguin as the charity workers entered to ask for Scrooge’s charity, only to be dismissed by Brave Heart and sending chills up everyone’s spine with the line:

“Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?” after which Brave Heart dismissed Bright Heart as Cratchit before leaving himself.

Champ and Grumpy hurried to set up the next set as Funshine drew the light to the side of the stage so no one would see them setting up the bedroom scene.

“Here goes,” Love Heart clutched his staff a bit too tightly as Brave Heart reached for the front door set and the large TV screen at the top of the stage began to show from the camera hidden up Brave Heart’s sleeve.

“Illusion, morph the door handle into Lotsa’s face and mimic his movements,” Love Heart whispered.

They held their breath as the screen showed the door handle morph before their eyes, and on stage, the grip part turning into the pink elephant’s trunk. There was an audible gasp from the audience as Brave Heart recoiled and Lotsa gave a moan and the animated door handle did the same. And just like that the effect was over and the scene continued.

Love Heart swiped his forehead, “Thought we’d screw up for a second there,” he whispered.

“You’re both doing great, and that’s the truth.” Lotsa clapped him on the back which almost sent Love Heart to the ground. “Time for my scene,” Lotsa took a deep breath as Love-a-Lot, playing Scrooge’s laundry lady Ms. Dilber, was dismissed from the set and the bedroom set was set up.

Brave Heart removed his coat which revealed the night gown he wore underneath and sat down in a rocking chair on the set. Lotsa Heart let out a frightful moan and clanked his chains, the genuine sound making the audience jump as he entered the set from the window side, dragging the clanking chains with the lock boxes attached that looked realistically heavy as a small fog machine misted across the bottom of the set.

Brave Heart jumped from his seat as Lotsa appeared, “I know him! Marley’s Ghost!” he fell to the ground then carefully picked himself up. “How now! What do you want with me?”

“Much!” Lotsa pulled the chains forwards so they were surrounding his feet instead of just trailing behind him.

“Who are you?” Brave Heart sat in the chair again.

“As me who I was,” Lotsa spread his arms.

“Who were you then?” Brave Heart forced his voice to raise, “You’re particular—for a shade.”

“In life I was your partner, Jacob Marley,” Lotsa had to almost bite his tongue to avoid adding ‘and that’s the truth’ on reflex.

Everyone backstage breathed a sigh of relief as Lotsa has made that mistake in almost all of his rehearsal performances, including the dress rehearsal last week. All at once most of their worries were suppressed as the scene went on.

Brave Heart trembled as he delivered the next lines, “You are fettered, tell me why?”

Lotsa lifted up the chains, making them clank metallically, “I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on and of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?”

Brave Heart wasn’t even faking his trembling now, Lotsa’s performance had him completely convinced.

“Or would you know,” Lotsa as Marley continued, “the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was as full and heavy and long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!”

Confidence crept up next to Love Heart as the scene continued, “Everything alright?” she whispered.

“Just nervous, worried something’s going to happen,” Love Heart whispered back.

“A Clow Card?” Confidence was scanning the stage just in case she saw something.

Love Heart nodded, “Yeah, and I know it’s going to be here, I’m just worried when and how.” He looked up to the rafters over the audience where Keroberos had perched to both watch the play without scaring anyone and for any trouble and then to where he saw Syaoran and Ms. Mackenzie in the audience, the former looking serious and the latter with the same serene smile she always wore, but both telling him something was going to happen tonight.

He shook himself out of his contemplation as Lotsa’s scene drew to a close.

“You will be haunted by three spirits,” Lotsa proclaimed as he pointed at Brave Heart.

“Is that the chance and hope you mentioned, Jacob?” Brave Heart made his voice falter as he spoke the lines.

“It is,” Lotsa nodded

“I—I think I’d rather not,” Brave Heart shook his head.

Lotsa closed his eyes and shook his head, “Without their visits you cannot hope to shun the path I tread. Expect the first tomorrow, when the bell tolls one.”

“Couldn’t I take ‘em all at once, and have it over, Jacob?” Brave Heart seemed to be begging.

Lotsa continued as though he had not heard Brave Heart, “Expect the second on the next night at the same hour. The third upon the next night when the last stroke of twelve has ceased. Look to see me no more; and look that, for your own sake, you remember what has passed between us!” Funshine dimmed the lights as Lotsa walked backwards, the chains clanking as he stepped through the window prop as Brave Heart moved to follow, though the set was being carefully pushed back to give more room for Love Heart’s next trick with the Illusion card. Brave Heart as Scrooge stepped to the window and looked outside as Love Heart had The Illusion create several flying ghosts with chains all around and everyone gasped, Brave Heart included as he had to clasp his hand over his mouth to stop from shouting before he ran to the bed prop and practically flung himself under the covers. Then all at once the scene was over and the stage became dark.

Lotsa hurried off stage, discarding his costume but without time to clean his face, “I was scared I’d mess up again, and that’s the truth.”

“You were perfect,” Tenderheart patted him on the shoulder, “Hurry help Champ with the next sets!” He pointed to where Champ was working, as the strongest there Lotsa would be needed to make the now rapid scene transitions as smooth as possible.

Sweet Heart walked over to side stage as the next scene was beginning. Unable to replicate the amorphous appearance of the book’s version of the Ghost of Christmas Past without overtaxing The Illusion, Confidence had instead designed a costume for her of flowing white veils that left her wings and head exposed.

“Ready?” Love Heart crouched down next to his sister.

“Almost,” Sweet Heart took a deep breath as the star on her forehead lit up and a flame-like effect overtook her hair. “I’ve been practicing some simple magic tricks,” she smiled then picked up an oversized bullhorn painted brass colored as the next scene begin.

“Break a leg,” Love Heart whispered as Sweet Heart flapped her wings to enter the scene as the clock bell sounds rang out over the stage and Harmony set up an eerie ambience to accompany Sweet Heart’s entrance.

Sweet Heart practically drifted onto the stage, her winged flight making her costume flow as though it were not affected by gravity.

Brave Heart was still in the bed as he quavered in fake fear at her entrance. “Are you the Spirit whose coming was foretold to me?”

“I am,” Sweet Heart kept her expression neutral and spoke in a softer tone that she usually used.

“Who and what are you?”

Sweet Heart flapped and landed gently so her hooves wouldn’t make noise on the stage, her arms wide, “I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.”

“Long past?” Brave Heart slowly got out of bed and approached Sweet Heart, who still flapped her wings softly to keep the costume from settling around her.

“No. Your past.”

Love Heart smiled at Sweet Heart’s performance, no trace of the stage fright she had exhibited during the rehearsals not even exhaustion at having to fly so slowly for her scenes. She’d come so far along since she confessed the truth about her involvement with the Clow Cards that Love Heart had to rub his eyes to stop from tearing up. He heard clattering back stage as Lotsa and Champ hurried to put the next set in place as Sweet Heart offered her hand to Brave Heart and flew through the window, with Brave Heart taking short jumps to look like they were flying without forcing Sweet Heart to actually carry him.

Another use of the screen was that they had recorded some scenes for Sweet Heart and Brave Heart observing past scenes where Brave Heart would have to play younger versions of Scrooge while his older self watched and as they hurried to show the screen of Scrooge at school, Brave Heart had to run around behind the set as Love Heart cast the illusion of his younger self costume so he could sit at the school desk still shrouded in darkness, panting a bit as Funshine refocused the spotlight on him so they could see him at school.

Sweet Heart performed her lines from off stage, synching up with the image of her and Brave Heart on the screen, “The school is not quite deserted. A solitary child, neglected by his friends is left there still.” She couldn’t resist pointing out to the scene even though she couldn’t be seen by the audience.

“I wish,” Brave Heart spoke into a small microphone from behind the book he held on stage so it sounded like it was the screen speaking as the image dried its eyes.

“What is the matter?” Sweet Heart asked.

“Nothing,” Brave Heart had to work hard to keep the audience from seeing him speaking on stage, “Nothing. There was a girl singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given her something, that’s all.”

Sweet Heart smiled alongside her image on the screen, “Let us see another Christmas!”

The lights flashed across the stage to indicate the passing of time though the scene didn’t change save that Brave Heart exchanged the copy of Robinson Caruso for paper and a quill. Dressed in old fashioned lady’s clothes, Friend Bear, an orange girl Care Bear with two smiling yellow flowers for her tummy, entered from the opposite side of the stage and darted over to Brave Heart.

“Dear, dear brother!” She shouted a bit too loudly than the part called for as she hugged Brave Heart in his seat. “I have come to bring you home, dear brother!” She let go and clapped her hands, “To bring you home, home, home!”

“Home, little Fan?” Brave Heart set the quill down and turned to face Friend ear with a look of surprise on his face.

“Yes!” She took Brave Heart’s hand, “Home, for good and all. Home, for ever and ever. Father is so much kinder than he used to be, that home’s like Heaven! He spoke so gently to me one dear night when I was going to bed, that I was not afraid to ask him once more if you might come home; and he said Yes, you should; and sent me in a coach to bring you. And you're to be a man! And are never to come back here; but first, we're to be together all the Christmas long, and have the merriest time in all the world."

There was some applause from the audience as the scene continued and a larger number of Care Bears and cousin extras gathered back stage. The next scene was one of the hardest for them to do smoothly as they needed some extras from the stage crew as Sweet Heart appeared once again with Brave Heart in his old man makeup to wander the background of the city until she led him to the next set.

Love Heart only caught one line from Brave Heart as he and The Illusion made Brave Heart look like a young man (That is like he wasn’t wearing makeup at all).

“Why, it’s old Fezziwig! Bless his heart; it’s Fezziwig alive again!”

Playful Heart Monkey was playing Fezziwig. The orange monkey boy with a heart and party favors for a tummy symbol had dressed in elaborate clothes and with a powdered wig that he’d argued with Confidence about a lot during the rehearsals.

“I still think it looks ridiculous, even for this,” Confidence commented as she walked up beside Love Heart.

“Well that’s Playful for you,” Love Heart had to suppress a laugh as the party at Fezziwig’s warehouse began and Playful couldn’t resist hanging from his tail from the set, thankfully solidly constructed enough that he wouldn’t risk damaging it, even playing a fiddle for real on stage. Even Harmony had had to admit the monkey knew how to play and it didn’t even disrupt the party music she was playing.

“So when this is over, want to come to my house?” Love Heart turned to look at Confidence Heart.

Confidence smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek, “I’d love to.”

“Flirt later, Confidence, you’re needed for a costume change,” Tenderheart whispered harshly. Confidence rolled her eyes but returned to her duty as the scene changed while Sweet Heart and Brave Heart discussed Fezziwig’s business practices on screen and Love Heart had to shift Brave Heart’s appearance back to his currently real ‘old man’ appearance then back to his young adult Scrooge as he was on stage with Proud Heart Cat, who was playing Belle and wore a simple mourning dress and coat and a sorrowful expression as she conversed with Brave Heart.

“It matter little,” Proud Heart spoke softly, “To you, very little. Another idol has displaced me; and if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come, as I would have tried to do, I have no just cause to grieve.”

“What Idol has displaced you?” Brave Heart had to make his voice sound like it caught in his throat.

“A golden one,” Proud Heart turned away from Brave Heart trying to look like she was crying.

“This is the even-handed dealing of the world!” Brave Heart’s sudden sharp tone caught Proud Heart by surprise, “There is nothing on which it is so hard as poverty; and there is nothing it professes to condemn with such severity as the pursuit of wealth!”

As the scene wore on and Proud Heart as Belle left Brave Heart as Scrooge alone on the stage Love Heart gradually had The Illusion lift itself from Brave Heart so that he appeared to age into his appearance over the course of a minute and his clothes were replaced by the nightgown he wore as Sweet Heart floated back on stage.

“Spirit!” Brave Heart begged to Sweet Heart, “show me no more! Conduct me home Why do you delight to torture me?”

“One shadow more!” Sweet Heart swept her hand across the stage as the last set of the act was lit up.

“No more!” Brave Heart almost shouted, “No more. I don’t wish to see it. Show me no more!”

The scene didn’t have Scrooge in it and they watched as Proud Heart still as Belle and Swift Heart with a costume change and a hat that hid his ears to play Belle’s Husband entered the scene.

As the scene finally ended, Brave Heart practically cried out as he grabbed for the bullhorn Sweet Heart was still carrying.

“Leave me! Take me back. Haunt me no longer!” He pulled the bullhorn from her and covered Sweet Heart’s head with it as she let the flame effect dissipate and the lights shut off, cutting the scene to black.

Life Heart and Sage Heart met their daughter as she dashed backstage, pulling the bullhorn off her head. “How was I?” she asked her parents.

“You were brilliant!” Life Heart hugged her daughter, “great job.”

“Fantastic,” Sage Heart hugged her too.

Love Heart smiled at his family as Gentle Heart Lamb walked up next to him. She had been chosen to play the Ghost of Christmas Present and was on small stilts and wearing a long green robe with an empty rust colored scabbard at her side and carrying a flashlight torch that would flicker like fire when turned on; the wool on her head had been dyed grey like Brave Heart’s. She had been willing to leave the top of her robe open for authenticity but they had ultimately decided she should keep it drawn up around her chest.

“Alright, I’m ready. Love Heart?” She turned to Love Heart and was forced to look down at him.

“Right.” Love Heart pulled The Illusion back to wrap around her, hiding the aging makeup on her. “Break a leg, Gentle Heart.” He let her stride on the darkened stage.

Brave Heart was walking back onto the darkened set as Gentle Heart spoke, louder than she ever would in public.

“Come in!” She lit up the torch and raised it as the stage lit up revealing that it had been decorated in Christmas themes and there was a scattering of fake food all over. “Come in! And know me better, man!” Gentle Heart herself provoked a gasp from the crowd as she appeared more than four times her normal height, even sitting atop the small throne of food and her head appeared to nearly reach the ceiling as she laughed heartily as Harmony started playing the melody of Deck The Halls.

“I am the Ghost of Christmas Present,” She smiled down at Brave Heart, “Look upon me! You have never seen the like of me before!”

“Never,” Brave Heart felt his neck strain as he looked up at what he knew was an illusion but still jarring to see Gentle Heart tower over him.

"Have never walked forth with the younger members of my family; meaning (for I am very young) my elder brothers and sisters born in these later years?" Gentle Heart swept her torch around.

“I don’t think I have,” Brave Heart shook his head, “I am afraid I have not. Have you had many brothers, Spirit?”

“More than eighteen hundred.”

“A tremendous family to provide for,” Brave Heart watched as Gentle Heart stood up and Love Heart withdrew most of The Illusion which made Gentle Heart shrink in size until she was her natural size, plus the stilts hidden under her costume.

Love Heart swiped his forehead. Even during dress rehearsal by this point he had been getting tired from maintaining the special effects, but seeing the audience’s reaction was worth it for being able to do things that were normally impossible in a stage play, especially a public school play.

The scene followed as Gentle Heart led Brave Heart around a set with a few extras, using her torch to flavor the food of Treat Heart Pig and Cozy Heart Penguin as they conversed on the street. Finally they came to the Cratchit house set where Bright Heart and Share Bear playing Cratchit’s wife were setting out a small table of prop food with six of Teacher Bear’s cubs in ragged costume clothes were all making great exclamations about enjoying Christmas.

Then Grateful Heart Hedgehog entered the scene playing Tiny Tim. As they had decided he wasn’t using a crutch but didn’t hide that he was missing the front half of his right arm as he was helped to sit at the table by Bright Heart and they set in to enjoy the fake meal.

Bright Heart raised an old cup as he proclaimed, “A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!” As the others repeated.

“God bless us every one!” Grateful Heart held up his own in his left hand.

Brave Heart couldn’t help but feel his heart melt as he spoke the next lines to Gentle Heart as they peered in from the small window wall. “Spirit, tell me if Tiny Tim will live.”

Gentle Heart’s face turned morose as she recited one of the few lines they had changed from the original text, “The sickness already forced them to take his arm lest it claim his life early. T’was the best they could afford. And now I see a vacant seat in the poor chimney corner, without an owner and always set aside for him. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die.”

“No, no,” Brave Heart felt himself choke up involuntarily, “Oh no kind Spirit! Say he will be spared.”

Gentle Heart only glared down at Brave Heart as Scrooge, “If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, none other of my race will find him here. What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.” The repeat of Scrooge’s line from earlier in the play made those backstage jump and even Bright Heart had to suppress the urge to turn to the scene with his girlfriend at the side of the stage, as she had delivered the line with a harshness they didn’t think possible even while acting, even more forcefully than during rehearsal.

As the scenes moved on Love Heart began peeling back the illusion that cloaked Gentle Heart making her wooly hair start to grey around the edges and spread inwards. Eventually they moved on to the party being put on by Scrooge’s nephew Fred, still being played by Swift Heart with a few Care Bear extras to play the party guests. Brave Heart couldn’t resist laughing as he mingled technically unseen among their party games.

As the scene moved to a darkened set and Gentle heart moved to a carefully hidden hole at the back of the set, Hugs and Tugs darted to the hole from behind and snuck under Gentle Heart’s robes right as Love Heart removed the last of The Illusion’s magic and let Gentle Heart’s makeup be fully revealed so she looked as old as Brave Heart did.

Brave Heart looked down at where Hugs and Tugs made Gentle Heart’s costume robes ripple. “Forgive me if I am not justified in what I ask, but I see something strange, and not belonging to yourself, protruding from your skirts. Is it a foot or a claw!”

“It might be a claw, for the flesh there is upon it,” Gentle spoke with sorrow as she pulled the bottom of the robes aside, “Look here.”

Cheer had outdone herself on the twins’ makeup, making them look absolutely desiccated as they trembled and clung to Gentle Heart’s legs clad in nearly threadbare rags, which also hid the stilts that Gentle Heart still stood on.

“Oh, Man!” Gentle Heart’s all but moaned sorrowfully, “Look here. Look, look, down here!”

Brave Heart couldn’t help but tremble at the performance from the twins, “Spirit! Are they yours?”

“They are Man’s!” Gentle Heart’s sudden shout made Brave Heart, Hugs and Tugs jump slightly, “And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers.” She pointed to Tugs, “This boy is Ignorance.” She pointed to Hugs with the hand that held the torch, “This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased. Deny it!” She spread her arms wide which even made the audience jump. “Slander those who tell it ye! Admit for your factious purposes, and make it worse! And bide the end!”

Brave Heart couldn’t help but recoil from her performance as a clock bell started chiming, “Have they no refuge or resource?” He had to force himself to shout so the audience could hear him.

“Are there no prisons?” Gentle Heart looked down at Brave Heart with scorn, “Are there no workhouses?”

As the twelfth bell stuck the stage went dark, save for one light focused on Brave Heart which let Gentle Heart and the twins shuffle off stage. Gentle Heart was panting and shaking as she stepped off the little stilts and met Take Care Bear backstage.

“How was I?” Gentle Heart gave a soft smile.

“Very good,” Take Care hugged her, “I was shaking when you spoke Scrooge’s lines back to him.”

“Thank you, big sis,” Gentle Heart finished taking off her costume, “I need to sit down.” She was still trembling from having delivered such an uncharacteristic performance.

On stage the lights rose on a misty set as Loyal Heart entered, his costume completely obscuring his body and a mesh mask that hid his face but still let him see. The billowing robes dragged along the stage so it looked as though he was gliding on stage.

Brave Heart visibly shivered, his still latent fear of the dark adding to his performance, as Loyal Heart approached. “I am in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?”

Loyal Heart lifted a hand as Love Heart covered his white gloved hand in another illusion that made it look like a skeletal thin hand and pointed down.

“You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us, is that so, Spirit?”

Loyal Heart just nodded.

Love Heart shivered but not from his friends’ performances, something was clawing at his mind as the darkness looked greater than it should have been. He was just thankful this illusion required little concentration.

“I need to speak to Love Heart now!” The voice made Love Heart turn around as Syaoran tried to force himself backstage but was held back by Noble Heart.

“Li?” Love Heart checked to make sure The Illusion was maintaining its illusion over Loyal Heart’s arm before going over too speak to him, motioning to Noble Heart to let the boy past. “Li what’s wrong?”

“Can’t you feel it?” Syaoran stepped backstage, his eyes narrowed in a glare, “There’s a Clow Card here.”

“Yeah,” Love Heart nodded, “I started feeling it in this scene but I can’t pin it down.”

“What are you going to do?” Syaoran already had his medallion in hand.

Love Heart gripped his staff in hand, “For now, nothing. I’m not going to ruin the play.” He looked back on stage as Loyal Heart was leading Brave Heart to show him Love-a-Lot and Good Luck Bear as Ms. Dilber and Old Joe talking about how they had looted belongings. “If I can lock it down then I’ll seal it, I’m just hoping it doesn’t attack in the middle of a scene.” He turned back to Syaoran, “Are you at least enjoying the play?”

“Yes,” Syaoran let a small smile creep on his face. Love Heart smiled back then returned to side stage as the scene had moved to Bob Cratchit’s house as Bright Heart mourned the death of Tiny Tim.

Bright Heart’s voice shook with feeling, “...I promised him that I would walk there on a Sunday. My little, little child! My little child!” Bright Heart broke down sobbing on stage

As the scenes moved on, backstage Teacher Bear was crying, genuinely crying as she hugged Grateful Heart from behind, as his character had died.

“Mom? What’s wrong?” Grateful looked up at Teacher Bear.

Bluebelle, Teacher Bear, Mulcahy wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry but... I just remembered when I first found you, Grateful Heart. You were just a normal hedgehog, your arm was crushed and the vet said you probably wouldn’t survive. I was so scared you wouldn’t make it through the night even as they... cut off your arm instead of putting you to sleep.”

Grateful touched his stump, he couldn’t remember that far back but Teacher Bear had told him about that, how she found him and all his adopted siblings at an animal shelter. He looked up at the woman who had raised him, and hugged her. “It’s alright mom, I’m here. I love you mom.”

“I love you too, son,” She kissed the top of Grateful Heart’s head and hugged him back.

On stage the scene had shifted to a graveyard and Loyal Heart pointed to the only gravestone that was a prop instead of part of the background.

Brave Heart was shaking, “Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point, answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they the shadows of the things that may be, only?”

Loyal Heart stood impassively and pointed at the gravestone, shuddering inside the costume. Was the darkness deeper than it had been during the dress rehearsal? He shook his head and saw that the spotlight had revealed the name “EBENEZER SCROOGE” on the gravestone and Brave Heart was now on his knees in front of Loyal Heart in the costume.

“...Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!” Brave Heart begged as Loyal Heart’s hand trembled.

Even as the darkness grew deeper Brave Heart started to cry, “I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!” he reached up and grabbed Loyal Heart’s hand.

An icy sense gripped Love Heart in his chest and he shouted, “Brave! Loyal! Look out!”

“Love Heart!” Keroberos shouted from the rafters which drew everyone’s attention for a moment before darkness erupted from the stage and swallowed everything except Love Heart and Syaoran.

“It’s here-” Syaoran tried to summon his sword before he too was swallowed, which left Love Heart alone in a sea of complete black.

Love Heart stood still, the whole auditorium silent. “Hello?” he called, “Hello! Anyone!” His voice echoed around the emptiness. He started to run towards where he knew the stage had been, “Confidence! Sweet Heart! Brave Heart! Loyal Heart! Mom! Dad...” Love Heart slowed down. “Where is everyone?”

Keroberos stood still, unable to see Love Heart but his face fixed in a serious glare. “Be strong, Love Heart. You need to conquer this card on your own. I know you can do it if only you’ll notice what’s going on before it’s too late.”

“OK OK... think...” Love Heart looked down as he felt something claw at his feet to see the darkness crawling up his feet. “Yow!” Love Heart jumped and the darkness receded a bit. “Ok... I should have hit a wall by now or felt something so this Clow Card can warp space and time... I have The Shadow Card already so this is... The Night Card? No...” Love Heart thought for a moment, “The Dark Card?” as he spoke the darkness surrounding him cracked and grew lighter for a moment. Love Heart’s face lit up, “That’s it right?!” he shouted hopefully.

Kero smiled as he saw the darkness break for a moment, “That’s part of it, but it won’t be enough this time. You need to notice something else, Love Heart.”

Love Heart saw the darkness settle down around him again, “OK so just getting your name isn’t enough. I’ll have to attack somehow.” Love Heart focused on his tummy symbol, “Care Bears Countdown! 4! 3! 2! 1! Care Bear Stare!” Love Heart fired off a beam from his tummy symbol, but it shot out less than half a meter before it was absorbed by the darkness too. “No...” Love Heart felt himself start to tear up, “OK calm down think, think, what can I do?” he stared at his hands and the staff still held in one.

Wait...

He \*saw\* his hands. They were as visible as if he were in the daylight despite being surrounded by darkness. “How can I see myself in the darkness like this?” He looked down at his body. Though his feet were partly consumed the rest of him was lit up. “I’m glowing?”

Suddenly his body burst with light, “What’s going on.”

“Well done, Love Heart Bear, you’re right.” The light bled off his body into a form in front of him.

“If this is The Dark Card then you have to be The Light Card!” Love Heart stared as the light beams formed into Light and elegantly and richly dressed woman with lengthy, curled, pale hair that wore a spiked crown with a stylish dress and a sun printed above her chest.

“Yes. I am The Light Card,” The spirit spoke in a high but steady voice, “I have been inside you since the seal on The Clow Book was broken.” She held her hands sideways, “And now it’s time for us to return.”

The darkness surrounding them began to coalesce into another form next to The Light, who reached their hands sideways to grasp a new pair of hands which swiftly formed into a regally dressed female figure with long, straight, black hair wearing a spiked crown and five gems spread across her neckline.

The new spirit spoke with a deeper, though still feminine voice, “Here I am, my true self: Light and Dark.”

“Now seal us together, Love Heart,” The Light said.

“Right,” Love Heart held up his staff then paused, “Wait, Dark can you do me a favor please?”

“Is it about the play?” The Dark asked, “I felt your sentiment towards it when you fired your energy into my being.”

Love Heart nodded, “Yes, if the audience is unaware of the passage of time can you please keep them safely under darkness for a minute so we can get the next scene set up?”

“Yes, I believe we can accommodate that,” The Light nodded and the darkness receded from the stage and backstage.

Everyone suddenly came back to awareness as Love Heart ran on stage. Brave Heart was breathing hard as Love Heart ran to his side and helped him up. “Brave Heart! Are you alright?”

“Just give me a minute, what happened?” Brave Heart turned to see the two spirits floating in the darkness over where the audience was.

“Clow Cards, I’ll explain later,” Love Heart turned to Loyal Heart, “Hurry, get the next scene set up.

“The Light and Dark Cards!” the voices came from Syaoran and Keroberos as the latter landed on the stage and the former ran on stage with his sword at the ready.

Love Heart held up a hand, “Don’t worry, it’s under control.” They heard voices from back stage as Loyal Heart managed to get everyone on task, “Hopefully the audience will just think it’s part of the show.”

“The Dark does rob people of their awareness of the passing of time,” Keroberos said, “and if it agreed to do this for you they are out of danger.”

Love Heart let out a sigh of relief, “Good.”

They managed to get the next scene set up with a much calmer Brave Heart in the bed on the set.

“Alright, Love Heart, everything’s ready,” Tenderheart waved from back stage, “Seal them.”

“Right,” Love Heart stood out of sight at side stage and faced the two spirits where they still stood. He raised the staff over his head and called, “Light and Dark Cards! I command you to return to your power confined! Light and Dark!” He swung the staff at the spirits as two cards formed in front of the staff.

As The Light and The Dark broke into strands of light and darkness to be sucked in they spoke to Love Heart.

“You have done very well, Love Heart Bear, the cards are almost all captured,” said The Light.

“But the final challenge will come from Yue,” said The Dark.

“What? Wait!” Love Heart’s call came too late as the cards finished forming and The Light Card and The Dark Card floated into his hand with the spirits on the front. “Who’s Yue?”

The audience let out a gasp as they were freed from The Dark’s spell, though mostly none the wiser, it seeming like the Care Bears had managed to transition the stage in an astoundingly short period of time.

On stage, Brave Heart shot up out of bed and went right back into character. "I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future! The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. Oh Jacob Marley! Heaven, and the Christmas Time be praised for this! I say it on my knees, old Jacob; on my knees!" his face was wet with real tears from the brief fear of The Dark Card.

Love Heart had signed his name to the two newly sealed Clow Cards and looked up in time to see Brave Heart throw open the window on the stage to see Get Well Bear walking past dressed in a winter coat.

“What’s today?” Brave Heart called over to Get Well.

“Eh?” Get Well put on an exaggerated inquisitive look.

“What’s today, my fine lass?” Brave Heart repeated.

“Today!” Get Well put on a big grin, “Why it’s Christmas Day!” She put on a very exaggerated English accent which made Take Care and Indy lightly groan backstage and got some laughs out of the audience and the rest of the crew.

With no more special effects needed, Love Heart retreated backstage and recalled The Illusion, “Thanks for all your help, Illusion.”

“Everything alright?” Confidence Heart joined him.

“Just a lot to think about and I do not want to think about them any more tonight,” Love Heart put the three cards inside The Clow Book.

“There is much to discuss,” Keroberos stood next to Syaoran nearby, who had put his sword away.

“I know, there’s only one Clow Card left but let’s not talk about this tonight.” Love Heart let out a long tired sighed, “I need to unwind and just let the play finish.”

The end was signaled as Harmony Bear put on the melody of Good King Wenceslas and started the ending narration.

“Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

“He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!”

The curtain fell and the audience applauded. Tenderheart ushered everyone on stage for a curtain call, cast and crew, in mostly full costume for a bow and ovation.

“So he did well tonight, didn’t he?” Ms. Mackenzie walked on stage to stand next to Keroberos.

Keroberos nodded, “Yes, but the real challenge will come and sooner than he thinks.”

Ms. Mackenzie regarded the green bear on the stage taking another bow. “Then let us hope he is ready.”

“I am confident that he is,” Keroberos looked up at her, then back to the stage.

A/N and now for the pleasure of the readers, the full cast and crew list for the Care Bears production of Christmas Carol.

Cast

Ebenezer Scrooge: Brave Heart Lion

Bob Cratchit: Bright Heart Raccoon

Tiny Tim: Grateful Heart Hedgehog

Jacob Marley: Lotsa Heart Elephant

Ghost of Christmas Past: Sweet Heart Pegasus

Ghost of Christmas Present: Gentle Heart Lamb

Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: Loyal Heart Dog

Ignorance and Want: Tugs and Hugs

Fred: Swift Heart Rabbit (male version)

Fezziwig: Playful Heart Monkey

Belle: Proud Heart Cat

Fan Scrooge: Friend Bear

Other Cratchit Children: Passive Heart Badger, Charity Heart Fox,

Hungry Heart Billygoat, Curious Heart Wolf, Thorough Heart Weasel,

Pretty Heart Skunk

Mrs. Cratchit: Share Bear

Charity Workers: Treat Heart Pig and Cozy Heart Penguin

Ms. Dilber (Scrooge's laundress): Love-a-Lot Bear

Old Joe: Good Luck Bear

"It's christmas day" kid: Get Well Bear

Crew

Costumes: Confidence Heart Fennec

Set Design: Grumpy Bear

Set Changers: Champ Bear and Lotsa Heart Elephant

Magic Special effects: Love Heart Bear

Director: Tenderheart Bear

Lights: Funshine Bear

Audio controls & Narrator: Harmony Bear

Makeup effects: Cheer Bear