



NAUGHTY OR NICE

EMMA JAYE

Naughty or Nice

Festive Djinn #3

Emma Jaye

Purindoors Publications

Copyright © 2022 by Emma Jaye

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

[Naughty or Nice](#)

[Prologue](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Emma](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

Naughty or Nice

Krampus is closing in on his old rival, but the Supernatural Council requires witnesses for a successful trial, and they are vanishing quicker than snowballs in summer.

One tentative agreement that Santa has gone too far, and the ever-obedient Winter finds himself freezing his baubles off in a snowglobe prison with only Jingle for company. He wants to hate Jingle, to blame him for disrupting his perfect life, for being the fairy everyone wishes he would be. But the exiled fairy doesn't know what he is, let alone why he's being punished.

How can a compliant narcissist bring Santa down, when he can't escape or convince his fellow inmate of their identity, let alone resist his own face and Jingle's mouth-watering dominance?

Naughty or Nice is the final story in the angst and laugh-filled quirky Festive Djinn trilogy, part of the MM paranormal DeMMonica World. If you love wish fulfillment, a delicious naughty-list baddie, a Christmas-sized serving of heat, and a meddling sarcastic revenge demon, you'll love Emma Jaye's

festive MM treat. Each book in the Festive Djinn series contains a HEA.

NOTE: This is an extended, rewritten version of Jingle Balls, Naughty or Nice? #3. Grab Naughty or Nice to unwrap your angsty MM Christmas fantasy today!

Prologue



“Little demon, little demon, let me come in,” Arioch murmured as he padded down the warm, curving stone passage. He’d worn plastic-soled Converse on purpose; the echoes from harder shoes, particularly high heels, were a bitch here. Sometimes he wanted everyone who heard him approaching to quake. He had quaking in mind today, but not from fear.

He’d been here thousands of times, and the former dragon’s lair beneath the Himalayas felt like home. As one of the few delegates to the Supernatural Council who could transport themselves in or out, he’d arrived as early as the portal magic permitted. For three days a month, after the new moon, the maze of echoing, curving tunnels allowed visitors.

Most delegates relied on air elementals to convey them, but feet, paws, hooves, wings, or whatever else delegates possessed, were the only way to get around once here. Probably to even the playing field between those delegates who could employ magic and those who could not. Shifters,

demons, both true and born, humans with magic, elementals, and many other beings represented their kind on the council.

Without specific permission from the council leader, the air elementals only transported a maximum of two individuals, the delegate and an assistant. Arioch never brought anyone. He didn't need to give his subordinates ideas about the perks of moving up the ladder. Most delegates, particularly the shifters and born demons like the vampires, always brought a hulking, growly guard. Whether they were worried about being attacked, wanted to intimidate other representatives into voting with them, or were simply showing off, Arioch didn't know. But the posturing always amused.

He also got a kick out of watching the delegates pretending that the eerie, almost organic, curved tunnels and unexpectedly huge cavernous rooms didn't bother them. Most scuttled, or strutted, between the transport chamber where the air elementals dropped them off, their offices, and the council chamber. Looming out of the shadows of unlit side tunnels and making those who considered themselves the pinnacle of their species jump was juvenile but endlessly entertaining. Few, if any, dared to call him on his behavior. *Damn boring.*

No one wanted to offend the revenge demon delegate, just in case their name ever appeared on his list, but they didn't want to be friendly either. Friends shared things, such as what frightened them most. Everyone with half a brain knew Arioch would use their insecurities against them if they ever became the subject of a call for justifiable revenge.

By choice, Arioch's office was one of the furthest from the transport chamber because he enjoyed eavesdropping as he passed the other offices. The tangle of tunnels beyond the occupied areas stretched into the gloom, most sloping downward toward oblivion in an endless maze. Somewhere down there lay the supernatural prison, his personal, little part of heaven.

Today he'd arrived as soon as the sun rose after the new moon last night. It was an easily recognizable, regular, worldwide event. But he wasn't heading to his office. He had a far more interesting, and hopefully productive, destination in mind.

Unlike ordinary delegates, as the leader of the supernatural council, Avery got a priority service from the air elementals and usually arrived at the crack of dawn. Arioch wanted to get to the council leader before the suave blond incubus became embroiled in any petty problems.

Arioch's issue wasn't a minor territorial dispute like the ones the shifters always obsessed over; this had been brewing for more than five hundred years. Humans had a saying, *revenge is a dish best served cold*, but this wasn't chilly, it was glacial, and with every day that passed, it was getting colder and more annoying. He should have dealt with this centuries ago, but now his opponent had grown so damn strong that he needed to employ legal measures. Hence his need to schmooze the leader of the Supernatural Council.

At least it wasn't that damn vampire, Fabian, anymore. Trading his blood for favors from the arrogant fucker had

gotten old damn fast, but the revenge he'd inflicted on the vampire had been so satisfying, definitely up there in Ariocho's top ten. If this plan panned out, it could reach his top spot, because this revenge was personal. That was the bite, the tingle, that made his jaded heart sing.

Dealing with Avery was not only far more pleasant, it was addictive. As far as Ariocho knew, he had far more meetings with Avery than any other delegate. He'd established a habit of giving the incubus an energy top-up before or after the often long council sessions. That they had regular sex didn't mean he had more influence over the incubus than anyone else who fed the sex demon.

Their verbal sparring, before and after sex, was an entirely different matter. Teasing and banter made the world spin, but appearing interested in subjects that didn't have his own magnificence as the central theme had been a horrible trial. Hopefully, all that effort was about to pay off. After years of maneuvering, the time had come to exact a little justified revenge on his old nemesis if the council leader agreed.

And there was the issue. If Avery agreed. Thanks to his growing army of slave djinn, Dear old Nick now wielded an insane amount of power. Far more than the djinn council could deal with, more than even Ariocho could combat alone, and that annoyed the hell out of him. Nicky boy thought he was above the rules of fair play, and it was time his reign ended before the fucker got delusions of Godhood.

Avery's office lay next to the cavernous council meeting room with the hideously uncomfortable non-padded chairs. The council leader's door stood open, advertising that Avery was there and happy to be disturbed. Bigger than the other offices, it still boasted the same oddly organic rounded shape. He bet that if a 3D map existed, the various rooms would look like a collection of bubbles connected by thread-like corridors.

A magical fire burning in the recessed fireplace provided much of the light along with several gold oil lamps. Unlike the other offices, the council leader's boasted a window high up on the wall. The light coming through the crystal-covered opening was diffused by a layer of thick snow that clung to the mountainside. The contrast between the inhospitable outside environment and this almost cozy interior couldn't have been starker.

Silent in his Converse shoes and human-sized, slim, red-skinned male form, Arioch leaned his shoulder against the doorjamb and checked out the leader of the Supernatural Council. The blond incubus sat on his dark green leather chaise, one long perfect leg draped over the other, reading through one of the hideously long files provided by the nauseating, blue-haired, ancient fae delegate.

So damn annoying, so fuckable.

Avery looked absolutely edible in his dark green designer business suit, and Arioch itched to muss him up, especially as the incubus hadn't bothered to glance up and take in his magnificence. It shouldn't bother him, but however much he

tried, with different looks and genders, Ariocho couldn't compete with the sex demon on attractiveness, but his mouth and wit? Hell yeah, Ariocho could compete with them.

Knowing Avery always went for designer suits in council meetings, Ariocho had chosen distressed black jeans and a faded 'The Real Thing' Coke logo shirt. One sophisticated, blond, law-abiding and a born demon; one down and dirty, red-skinned, true demon. Ariocho loved the contrast, loved the games they played, didn't trust Avery as far as he could throw him.

Without looking up, the incubus said, "Is there something I can help you with, Council Member Ariocho?"

Being a regular fuck-buddy of the leader of the Supernatural Council wasn't a unique position, but he hoped he brought a little more to their meetings than simply feeding the incubus. And today, he needed to see exactly how far their relationship extended.

When Ariocho remained quiet, which almost *fucking killed him*, Avery looked up.

The heat of Avery's long slow perusal had blood swelling Ariocho's cock. The incubus would sense his desire, but neither of them wanted to show their hand this early in the latest round of their ongoing game. Avery probably considered it foreplay, and if Ariocho was honest, so did he.

"I really do have things to do, but if you wish to stand there and stare, can you at least come in and shut the door? There's a terrible draft."

Game on.

“Didn’t your mother warn you about offering help to strangers?”

Avery’s perfect bow lips quirked in amusement, then his tongue swiped across his upper lip, reminding Ariocho exactly what that very talented tongue could do. “I’d hardly call us strangers.”

“Friends usually know each other’s original names.”

Avery’s arm swept out in an invitation to enter. Ariocho strolled in, shut the door, and chose to sit in Avery’s chair behind the desk.

Carefully, Avery put the papers on the dark wooden coffee table and stood up, not bothering to hide the bulge in his suit pants. Like all sex demons, his body reacted to anyone aroused in his vicinity, just like a dog salivating when food was produced.

Ariocho rocked back in his host’s chair, hooked a leg over the arm as if this was his office.

Strolling over, Avery perched his tight ass on the edge of the desk. He rested one hand on the wood behind him while the other traced up the cloth covering his muscular thigh. The move drew Ariocho’s gaze to the bulge in the sex demon’s pants exactly as Avery intended. They’d both played their initial, predictable cards, now the game really began.

It only took a few seconds of mutual eyefucking for Avery to make his next move. “So, what is your birth name?”

Arioch held the incubus's gaze, refusing to give in to the throbbing desire that Avery would see as a glow around him. "Did I mention anything about being born?"

Satisfaction bloomed as Avery's jaw dropped a little then snapped shut.

"You weren't born?"

Lounging back in the chair of the most important supernatural on the planet, Arioch reveled in Avery's rapt interest.

"Aw, are you sad that there wasn't a cute little version of me irritating the fuck out of Momma and Pappa dotting vengeance demons?"

Avery's scowl of frustration was perfect. "I know vengeance demons are recruited from other species."

Making a show of it, Arioch put his feet up on the desk, causing the incubus's frown to deepen and his own amusement and lust to soar. Avery would pound him so damn hard for this.

The incubus was one of the very few beings on the planet not afraid of him. Arioch's ability to shift form, to become a twelve-foot tall, horned, tailed, and cloven-hoofed demon who could crack skulls between his fingers made most people wary.

"You never wondered what I started out as?"

Avery paused and ran his gaze down Arioch's shirt, lingered on the front of his jeans that outlined his hard cock. "I have, but I didn't think it polite to ask. Not an incubus by any chance?"

Arioch snorted. “Don’t try to charm it out of me.” He knew he’d fallen into a trap as Avery’s lips quirked in a smile.

“You think I’m charming?”

Arioch leaned forward. “You’re the most charming thing on the planet, which is why you’re usually the one sitting in this chair.” This close, he could smell the incubus’s spicy aroma that Arioch had to admit he was more than a little addicted to.

“So, not a sex demon,” Avery mused, gaze running over Arioch as if his current appearance would provide a clue.

“Have you given up on the name thing?”

As if he didn’t realize he was doing it, Avery reached out, began playing with Arioch’s tight curls. His hair wasn’t currently long enough for Avery to grip. He was just about to change form when the incubus leaned in and his breath caressed his ear.

“Give me your horns.”

And just like that, the tables were turned. Arioch shuddered as his black, ridged horns appeared. Having his horns touched, rubbed, had to be the second-best thing about being a revenge demon. The first was the high of delivering justified revenge. The thought reminded him of his mission.

“I’ll give you everything you want, if you allow me to bring a trial before the council when I have it ready.”

Avery sat back, the mood broken. “You think you can manipulate me with sex?”

“No, I think I can manipulate you with some information about me that only a handful of beings know, and most of them are involved in this trial.”

The sharp interest in Avery’s gaze meant Ariocho had hit the jackpot, but the thousand-year-old incubus wasn’t the council leader because he fucked better than anything else on the planet.

“And if I don’t agree?”

Ariocho shrugged, while checking out his black nails. “You could have a species civil war on your hands.”

“And the species is what you were before becoming a revenge demon,” Avery confirmed.

A smile twitched Ariocho’s lips. “I can neither confirm nor deny.”

“Sounds like I’ll find out soon enough whether you tell me or not.”

Ariocho gave him a grin. “Yes, but would it be this much fun?”

Those perfect pink bow lips pursed. “There’s far more to this than you’re telling me. Whatever you were before, you’re a vengeance demon now, and conflict provides most of your energy. I have to wonder why you’re not sitting on the sidelines encouraging the parties as much as possible.”

“I do have morals.”

Avery’s eyebrows rose. “Your morals only include the revenge you inflict being justified.” Ariocho must have given something

away, and Avery closed the distance between them again. “That’s it, isn’t it? You committed revenge you didn’t feel was justified.” As Ariocho was about to refute the totally true accusation, Avery reached up and gripped his left horn.

The incubus’s ability to exude lubricant from any part of his body meant his fingers glided over the ridges. Ariocho shivered, closed his eyes, tried to marshal his thoughts.

“Since I’m the leader of the council, I get to make the rules.” Avery leaned in, ran his tongue over the tip of Ariocho’s right horn. Ariocho knew the man who looked like an angel but fucked like the devil himself was a demon, but today, he seemed intent on proving it.

“And my new rule is that I don’t suck-off anyone whose name I don’t know.” Another lick while Avery worked both horns. He dropped one hand, palmed Ariocho’s hard cock.

“Ah, fuck, damn you, incubus.”

Ariocho hadn’t even realized Avery had untucked his t-shirt until talented fingers dragged up his chest, then tweaked his hard nipple. His jeans felt looser too. Ariocho might arguably be the best torturer on the planet, but right now, Avery had him beat.

“Tell me your name and what you were, and I’ll show you how... accommodating I can be.”

Ariocho had experienced exactly how accommodating Avery could be, and he wanted it again. He might have started this game, but Avery had flipped it as easily as a coin.

With an easy, practiced movement, Avery slid to his knees and had Ariocho's dark cock in his hand before the vengeance demon knew what the incubus was doing.

The sex demon didn't hesitate, he nuzzled at the base of Ariocho's straining cock as it throbbed against his cheek.

"I do love a demon, so much spicier than humans, less musky than shifters." Avery seemed to be talking to his cock, maybe his balls, but Ariocho didn't care as the incubus upped his cruel teasing with a flick of his tongue and a too-brief swipe over the head.

Ariocho's hand found the back of Avery's immaculate blond hair, and his hips twitched up, but Avery deftly avoided the thrust.

"Ah ah, remember the rules. Tell me the name you were given when you first opened your eyes."

Ariocho couldn't take his gaze off the sight of the most influential supernatural on the planet, in his dark green designer pants and cream dress shirt, about to swallow his cock.

The entire supernatural council were assembling for today's meeting outside, and nothing would happen until—

Another hot, wet lick, then Avery drew back a fraction. "You'll always be Ariocho to me, but tell me that first name." The incubus's breath on his spit-slick cock made him shiver with cold, and he wanted nothing more than having that heat

around him. Besides, it wasn't as if he hadn't intended to tell Avery his name.

“Stand up, foot on the chair. I want your balls.”

Arioch stood and vanished his clothes with a thought.

Avery's breath tempted, warmed, but his lips stayed a fraction of an inch away from Arioch's lurching cock.

“Tell me now, or I go back to my paperwork.”

“Krampus, my name was Krampus.”

A finger pushed between his cheeks and he widened his stance. It stroked over his hole, slick and wet, then dragged down his taint.

Arioch's hand tightened on Avery's hair. “Inside. I need it inside.”

As if he wasn't turned on enough, Avery dressed for an important council meeting and still willing to get on his knees for him punched every button Arioch possessed.

The finger returned to his hole, as Avery gave Arioch's balls a lick. “And the trial is for...”

“Ah, fuck, Avery, just push it in; I—”

“Their name, Krampus, or this stops right now.”

“Nick, Santa, Grandfather Frost, Pappa No—” He broke off, groaning as Avery pushed his finger inside and homed in on his prostate.

“Horn, give me your—”

Arioch bent his head at the hoarse demand, as Avery's other hand reached up. Yes, he had to shrink in height a little, but the combination of the spark from his prostate being pegged, the suction around his cock, and the rapid movement on his horn was too much.

“Fuck, fuck, that's perf—” The orgasm hit him like a fucking tsunami.

While he was still wondering which way was up, a shove on his chest had him sitting back in Avery's chair, looking blurrily up at the man who now stood above him, smoothing down his blond hair.

A sly smile curved those impossibly fuckable lips.

“So, Krampus and Santa? I thought you were human myths like gods.”

Being naked when Avery was perfectly put together felt damn uncomfortable. With a thought, Arioch transformed into his business attire, black skin, black suit, red tie.

As if they'd choreographed the moves, Arioch moved to the chair in front and Avery reclaimed his position behind the imposing wooden desk.

Arioch produced two cups of coffee, knowing Avery would have to call someone to fetch drinks. The incubus might be powerful because of his position, but on a species power scale, sex demons were one of the lowest. Maybe that was why Avery was such a successful council leader; he didn't intimidate anyone.

Avery leaned forward and picked up a steaming mug as if he drank magically produced beverages all the time.

Both took a sip then Avery checked his watch. Yes, the council session was due to start soon, and Ariocho needed to get on with this. It still wasn't easy to admit something he'd kept to himself since leaving his previous life behind. It hurt even more to admit that he'd made a mistake.

"Nick is quite real, and rather than a myth, he's a djinn, as I was. We were created as opposites, an experiment. He was drawn to creating positive emotions via his magic, and I—" he shrugged. "Things haven't changed that much for me."

"But they have for him?"

Avery had always been sharp, and his insightful comment proved it again.

"He's expanded his operation exponentially, and it's distorting global wish magic. To maintain the balance, the other djinn, both free and bound, are being forced to create negative emotions almost exclusively."

"Bound djinn?"

"Those who either by accident or choice have bound themselves to another soul. You do know the three wish legend?"

"Arabian Nights, right?"

"Yep," Ariocho popped the *p* "rubbing the magic vessel and all." He glared at Avery. "And don't ask me to repeat the words that bind a djinn, because I won't."

“But you’re not a djinn anymore, right? It can’t do anything to you.”

Arioch raised an eyebrow. “Never going to take the chance. A bound djinn is a slave for eternity until their master releases them, but at least most bound djinn are free to express themselves.”

“Unlike?” Avery prompted.

“Unlike the several hundred slave djinn my brother has created. All but a handful are kept as easily manipulated permanent children, and he steals ninety percent of the energy they produce.”

Just as Arioch hoped, Avery frowned at the term *slave*. One of the reasons the council had been set up in the first place was to protect vulnerable beings, particularly humans, from stronger species.

“So what do you want to do?”

“I want to put him on trial for slavery and uncalled-for cruelty against slaves who don’t toe his very narrow line. They don’t even know what they are. He tells them they are fairies.”

Arioch couldn’t stop his lips twisting in disgust as he said fairies. Humans applied the derogatory term to several supernatural species, but none used the term to self-identify.

“You have witnesses willing and able to testify? They can’t be currently under his influence, or their testimony will be suspect.”

Arioch's lips tilted up. "I've been working on that. I have two bound djinn, former minions of his, who are willing to testify and one—" Arioch paused as his automatic thought about Jingle didn't produce an image in his mind.

"Anything wrong?" Avery asked, tone mild.

Arioch's jaw clenched. "Yes, it damn well is. My primary witness is missing."

Avery sat forward. "Dead?"

Letting out a snort, Arioch shook his head. "I very much doubt it. Djinn are almost indestructible. No, someone is hiding him from me."

"Santa?" Avery asked, then frowned. "And that sounds so damn wrong. It's like saying aliens exist."

"Probably, but I might have a way to find out what he's up to. If you don't hear from me by the next meeting, consider making a Christmas Wish."

Leaving Avery in his wake, Arioch left the office, but seeing a bunch of delegates milling about, he expanded into his demonic form, horns, tail, and cloven hooves.

"Move," he rumbled, voice like rocks grinding together. The delegates scattered, and Arioch headed for the transport chamber.

Yes, Avery would be pissed that he didn't hang around for the council meeting, but some things were more important.

Besides, angry and/or apology sex were Arioch's favorite.

CHAPTER 1



TWO WEEKS EARLIER

Winter's day started pretty much like any other in the Adult Department. As always, as soon as he woke, he stroked the pair of Christmas bells tattooed on the inside of his bicep. Despite looking like Jingle, he would never fail, never betray their creator as Jingle and Coal had done.

Dressing in the green tunic and red jeans he preferred, rather than the other uniform option of a red tunic with the black jeans, he stepped out of his small room. The other red doors in the corridor of the male fairy dorm remained closed. 'Normal' fairies had green doors. Coal's door had simply vanished, along with everything inside, when he'd chosen to bind himself to a human.

He didn't mind about Coal; the wet-behind-the-ears youngster's attitude had been a trial for them all. Cedar and Garland, the two other adult male fairies, must already be hard at work. His lips quirked in a smile, hoping that 'hard' work would also be on his agenda today. As the youngest Adult

Department fairy—now that Coal had left them—Winter got assigned the least complex wishes, usually simple sexual ones. He bet he'd done as many damsel-in-distress wishes as there were baubles on the central Christmas tree. Bad boy, billionaire savior, a literal knight in shining armor, or space pirate, he'd been them all.

Before he could begin work, he had to run the gauntlet of the ordinary fairies. Plastering an inane smile on his face, he headed down to the dining room. He and his twenty or so male fairy colleagues were outnumbered five to one by the girls. Out of the male fairies, only he, Garland, and Cedar were men, not permanently pre-teen youngsters or crusty ancients. Although Cedar could pass for an older teen if he tried. Winter looked a little older, perhaps mid-twenties for a human, and he stood at least a foot taller than the tallest ordinary fairy.

He groaned as the cheerful refrain, *We Wish You A Merry Christmas*, drifted up through the polished wooden floorboards. The height difference wasn't the only reason he avoided his diminutive fellow supernaturals. Being honest, their chatter and juvenile lavatorial humor got on his nerves. Sure, 'bum, willie, boobies, and fart' were funny said in the right context, but not twenty-four hours a day.

Never having been a child, he didn't understand the permanently ten-year-old fairies, and they certainly didn't understand him. The giggling and pointing at his adult-sized cock and balls in the communal showers got old real fast.

To avoid further comments about the amount of food he ate, with his belly still growling, he left the table after a single serving of Eggs Benedict. He managed to get away with only replying, 'Thanks, you have a good day too' a dozen times. The enthusiastic greetings and fond farewells every time someone entered or left a room made the dorm a place where he slept and ate, rather than spent any downtime.

Still, the fairy dorm was preferable to going anywhere near the acid-tongued human Santa had installed in the administrative cabin. Rich Fiddler, or 'Dick Fiddler' as July Spicer called him as a teenager, shrieked for Cedar and Tinsel at all hours.

Winter sometimes wished he wasn't the permanent junior in the department, but right now, not being assigned complex wishes didn't bother him much at all. As the senior male fairy, Garland had to deal with the Rich problem. Given a choice, Winter would have happily taken on the task of putting a smile on July's face, but that hadn't been what their Creator wanted. Making the cheeky, cheerful, and gorgeous former professional diver miserable was Garland's assignment. The whole 'revenge wish' thing had been a bit of a head-scratcher to be honest, but if that's what Santa wanted, who was Winter to argue?

He trudged to work through swirling snowflakes. Various buildings were scattered around the main square of the magical North Pole village, each with a view of the central giant Christmas tree. The whole scene looked like every human's perfect Christmas fantasy. The tiny Adult Department gingerbread cabin lay between the admin building and the

sorting office to the right of the dorm. The other two sides of the square housed the creation and packing buildings where the majority of the fairies worked.

As Winter walked into the Adult Department building and hung up his scarlet coat, Cedar turned from writing the day's assignments on the large blackboard on the wall.

"You ok?" Cedar asked, dark eyes intent.

Winter frowned. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Just asking. A lot of people have got their baubles in a knot over this human at the North Pole thing. There were mutterings over breakfast," Cedar replied and carried on with his task. "Garland's already sorted out the assignments; I'm just writing them up because 'he who must be obeyed' called, or rather shrieked. You've got a fun role-play today; wisher's name is Annabelle Frazier. You can start whenever you like."

"Fair enough," Winter replied, already homing in on the wisher and her desires. He didn't want to get mixed up in idle chatter. It wasn't as if they could do anything to change Santa's mind, even if he did talk to any of them.

The relentless pace of Christmas never stopped. Despite the Adult Department being somewhat isolated from date sensitivity—all their wishes were cold cases—the tension still mounted as Santa had to stretch time more and more each year to make all the deliveries.

Winter wondered what would happen when 'Christmas Eve' lasted longer than a year. Currently, the deliveries took seven

months, which Santa compressed down to a single human night. Still, logistics and the business of Christmas weren't his responsibility. He was an Adult Department fairy—he made the wishes of grown-ups who had missed out on a childhood wish come true. Smiling, he zapped himself to his wisher's location.

Winter spent the next few hours with a Human Resources Manager who yearned to be a princess in a tower and be rescued by a far lustier version of Prince Charming than Disney portrayed. The wish magic meant he saw her as incredibly sexy, although in reality she might look more like Princess Fiona from Shrek than Rapunzel or Cinderella. A sharp pain in his chest as he picked her up to carry her to bed after defeating the dragon, nearly caused him to stumble.

“Oh my Prince, are you injured?”

He gave her a gallant smile as the pain dissipated. “Only overawed by your beauty my love.”

He left her wearing an exhausted smile and with the glow in his chest from a job well done.

An hour after returning home, Winter looked at the resolute faces of his friends and colleagues, the only family he'd ever known. His heart ached at images he'd seen, the pain, physical and mental, that had been inflicted in the name of Christmas.

He wanted things to stay the same, was content with his life, but the other adult fairies weren't happy. And as much as he wished it wasn't true, the things he'd just been shown dented his previously rock-solid faith in his maker.

Red-haired Candy took her finger off the globe and glanced around. Winter couldn't help smiling either. The happiness of the reunion between Garland and Coal couldn't be denied. This was what being a Christmas fairy was about, not what Garland had been forced to do to Spice as Rich.

"Now Jingle," Tinsel said firmly.

"That's against the rules," Winter said as Tinsel radiated determination.

"You know what, Winter? I know it's not your fault, but sometimes I wish you were more like the fairy you're based on," Tinsel said.

Indignation flaring, Winter stood up from where he'd been perching on the arm of one of the worn, comfy red sofas in the Adult Department.

"What do you mean? Jingle is a complete self-absorbed fuck up. I'm not—"

Cedar's hand came to rest on his shoulder. "I think she means that Jingle was prepared, then and now, to risk everything for what he wanted. The Boss made sure he took that from you when he made you," Cedar said gently.

"So you think I'm a total yes man? Not true." He shrugged off Cedar's hand and stabbed a finger in Tinsel's direction. "I'm not stupid you know. Something went on between Mistletoe and Jingle didn't it? Did he hurt her? Was that what got him punished?"

Tinsel's lips pressed together. As the only one of the original four fairies here, she knew secrets about the early days the rest of them didn't.

"I knew him back then, and he wouldn't have done that. I don't know what happened that day," Tinsel said. "All I know is that back before this place existed, Santa disappeared. Days stretched into weeks and we were all getting weaker and more worried. Jingle and Mistletoe went for a walk. Mistletoe came back an hour later with Santa.

"He transported us here, and told us he and Mistletoe were married and to forget that 'fucker'." She sighed, looking down at her hands. "I regret not pressing him at the time, but things were so busy here and Garland said he was sure Jingle was on some special mission. And now Garland is gone too, although we know he's ok. I want to know what Santa did to Jingle." She looked between them. "He's as much my brother as any of you, and I hope you'd look for answers if I vanish one day. It's not right how he treats us."

"Hell yeah, I'd look for you," Candy exclaimed.

"Always, Sweets," Cedar added.

Even Snowflake, the ditziest one of them, gave a determined nod. They all turned to Winter, expectant.

His whole body prickled with anxiety. Publicly state he'd defy Santa? He wanted to, he really—

Tinsel gave him a gentle, sad smile. "It's all right. We can't change how we were—"

“I’d look for you,” Winter swallowed. The admission was surprisingly liberating.

The warm smile she gave him was better than the glow of a fulfilled wish. “Ok. Let’s get on with this before he suspects anything. Santa sent Jingle somewhere at the hospital, and I want to know what the Boss did to him this time for being nothing but what he made him.”

Candy, ever impulsive, reached out to the basketball-sized admin snowglobe on the desk. “Show me Spencer Ward.”

Yelping in pain, she snatched her hand back from a now completely black sphere. She carried on shaking as she glared at the globe.

“You, ok?” Snowflake asked.

“Yeah, stings a bit, more of a surprise than anything.”

“Anyone else feel like a mushroom?” Cedar asked, his voice dripping sarcasm.

“Mushroom?” Snowflake asked, bewildered.

“Fed on shit and kept in the dark,” the others said together. Snowflake had been created as the archetypal blonde bimbo, just as Candy was the ‘sassy redhead’.

“There’s always room for more in the reindeer sheds, folks,” Tinsel prompted, but those brown eyes were focused on him.

“Just because I’m more cautious than Jingle, it doesn’t mean I’m a coward,” Winter ground out. He walked straight over to the snowglobe. “Show me Spencer Ward,” he announced

loudly as he put his hand on the magical device. It sparked, and he snatched his hand back.

A smattering of applause had his heart soaring. “Go Winter,” Cedar exclaimed and patted his shoulder.

“Fuck, you were right; that stings like a bitch. I bet we couldn’t keep Coal away from it.” Winter grinned as he shook away the pain as Candy had done. For perhaps the first time, he felt like a group member rather than an add-on of an echo they’d rather have.

Winter raised his eyebrows at Snowflake.

“Really? Can’t I just say, ‘I agree’ or something?”

“Wimp,” Winter stated. The punch on his arm from Cedar had his lips curling up in a grin.

“We need to sort this out, and if that means we have to fight the natures we were given, we need to do that.” Tinsel looked around the festive group. “Any of us could be Jingle, Garland, or Coal next week.

“But I’m so worried about Jingle and the humans he comes into contact with. He’s traveling down a very dark road and will likely cause both himself and a lot more mortals a great deal of pain if he continues.” Her jaw clenched. “I watched a possible future when Spice ended up with Jingle.” She looked at the other fairies with a haunted expression.

“Spice drank himself into oblivion when Jingle left him, and he’s not mentally unstable. If something like that, or worse,

actually happens, I don't think Jingle could live with it. He's still a fairy at heart."

"But Jingle's still immortal, right?" Snowflake's voice wavered.

Tinsel pressed her lips together. "He doesn't age or suffer from diseases, but I don't think that means he can't die. It's possible he could kill himself. It would be the first-ever fairy death, and I don't have a clue what it would do to the rest of us."

This had gotten way too serious. They were Christmas fairies, for fuck's sake. Comfort and joy, not pain and grief and death. His gaze snapped to the heavy wooden door. Outside, the business of the North Pole still went on. Making people happy. He'd never regretted not being one of the oblivious child-like fairies before.

"Why would it do anything, apart from making us sad?" Snowflake asked.

Tinsel answered. "I've had longer to think about this than the rest of you, and thanks to being with Rich and his scientific mind for the last few days. I think we're all connected. We all felt that something was off about Coal as soon as we met him. Plus, I don't know about the rest of you, but I knew the moment both Coal and Garland became tied to their humans."

"That wasn't indigestion?" Snowflake asked.

"All of us, at the same time? I was in the dorm when Garland got bound," Cedar piped up. "Everyone rubbed their chest at the same time."

“I didn’t feel a thing when Coal got bound,” Winter said, “But I did think I’d pulled a muscle in my chest during my last wish.”

The glances from the others proved it hadn’t been a muscle.

Tinsel looked around the group. “Coal was only a few months old. Garland is one of the original four, like me, like Jingle. How do you think it would feel if a fairy that’s been alive for a thousand years died? It could explain why the boss exiled him rather than making him mortal. His death could take more than a few of us with him.”

Candy and Snowflake shuddered, but all Winter could do was stare at Tinsel.

“Death?” He blurted. “Humans die. Shifters die. We’re fairies, not—”

“We’re djinn, Winter,” Tinsel said. “We always have been. We’re specialists, but we’re still djinn.”

“And Djinn can die?” Snowflake’s voice trembled.

Tinsel walked over and wrapped her arms around the curvy girl. “I don’t know. That’s information he’s kept from even the original four. But you needed to know, in case he wipes my memories too.”

She released Snowflake. “Right now, I think we have to concentrate on what we do know while we find out more. These are the facts. Coal and Garland are both safe for now, but Jingle isn’t,” Tinsel said.

“But what should we do if we find him?” Snowflake persisted.

“We can tell him the truth about what he is,” Tinsel said. “I thought banishment for Jingle was harsh at the time, but I was young and arguing never crossed my mind. Even without counting what he did to Jingle, what happened to Spice, on Santa’s instructions, isn’t right. I think the boss is losing it, and we need to do something before his action, or inaction, causes more than an almost fatal beating for someone we should be making happy.”

From the expressions on the faces of his fellow fairies, they were all considering her words carefully, just as he was.

“Besides, do you really think it’s fair that he keeps all the other fairies in a not quite child, not quite adult state, and controls every aspect of our lives?” She looked at the other fairies, all of whom, apart from himself, she’d known for several hundred years.

“Just because Santa made us, does it mean he has the right to control not only our actions but our thoughts and bodies too?” Tinsel asked, pressing home her point.

The room was silent apart from the crackling of the magical fire in the hearth on the other side of the room. It was highly likely that most of them hadn’t thought about their situation in quite this way before; he certainly hadn’t. Now that he thought about it, most fairies never left the North Pole and its blanket of magical joy, and those that did went through life cheerfully making one mortal after another ecstatic. However, from the uncharacteristic subdued expressions around him, it seemed that her words rang a bell with all of them.

Cedar put his arm around Tinsel. She leaned against him, grateful for his solid support. “I for one don’t want to see anyone else getting hurt because of us. It isn’t what we’re about. Humans have a word for how we’re treated, it’s slavery,” Cedar said firmly.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love being a Christmas fairy, and I don’t ever want to live as a mortal or be bound to one, but he treats us with about as much consideration as he does the reindeer. He gives us a pat on the head and feeds, clothes, and houses us, as long as we toe the line. He also ‘castrates’ most of us by not allowing us to develop adult desires and emotions.”

Tinsel gave Cedar a thankful look as he gave her a one-armed squeeze.

Snowflake looked worried, but after a moment her jaw tightened. “Fuck it. I want to make people happy, not miserable, and I certainly don’t want to be the cause of people getting the shit beaten out of them. I’m in.”

Winter rolled his eyes. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m in, but I hate to say this, we’re hardly equipped for a rebellion, are we? What’s your plan, Tinsel? Candy cane duels? Jousting with reindeer, crackers at dawn, or a last-fairy-standing snowball fight? We’re Christmas fairies—” he held up his hand to stop her butting in “—even if that is a type of djinn. We’re not insurgents. Besides, he can chuck us anywhere in the world and leave us there without our memories or magic.”

Tinsel looked around again. “I want to make it clear that I’m not talking physical action here, none of us are fighters, and I don’t see any need for it. I don’t think Father Christmas has gone bad, he’s just behind the times and overwhelmed with the rising mortal population. When he first started this, the world’s population was around four hundred million, now it’s eight billion and rising. How he’s coping at all, is well, magical, but there must be limits, even for him.

“Secondly, Winter’s right, violence isn’t our style, we’re not equipped mentally or physically for it, but we can’t ‘jolly’ him out of his present course of action either. A good belly laugh or a shot of joy heals a lot of things in the mortal world, but our normal methods won’t work here.”

“So, what are you suggesting?” Candy asked.

“We do a Gandhi, a peaceful protest. We talk to him and work to rule—doing the minimum necessary—and get as many of the other fairies to join us as possible. Hopefully, he’ll listen and understand that we need more personal freedom and that we can make his life easier by spreading the load. Most of the male fairies could stand in for him if needed, and in this day and age, even a bunch of ‘Mrs. Christmases’ would be accepted in most places.

“I also think one of our demands should be working to free Coal and Garland when their humans pass away if they don’t get freed, and let them talk to us. Plus, Jingle gets reinstated immediately. He’s getting more extreme the longer he stays in the human realm. I’m really worried he’ll end up severely

hurting someone even if he doesn't intend to, like with July. And without Jingle's interference, do you really think Garland would have done what he did? He should still be with us." Her eyes welled up. "And I miss him so much."

Winter couldn't help it. Distress, anyone's distress, but particularly that of someone he considered his big sister, hurt. The urge to hold her, to somehow reduce her pain, overwhelmed him.

He stepped forward, needing to hold her. Tinsel reached past him, ignoring his gesture. The rejection stung, but when he looked over his shoulder, Tinsel held Snowflake's wrist away from the snowglobe.

"We need someone to retain snowglobe privileges. But I suggest you work to rule. That means no fun wishes, just ones that would cause a lot of emotional pain if you don't fulfill them."

"What difference are we going to make, though?" Winter persisted. "In the scheme of things, the Adult Department has got about as much leverage as a single snowflake in the Sahara. Let's face it, most of us are here because we were crap at the real purpose of Christmas fairies. He could get rid of us as easily as he got rid of Jingle, and it wouldn't make any difference to his operation."

Tinsel smiled. "Those of us who still have globe privileges will work to rule, and we'll all try to recruit the other fairies to our cause until Santa sees sense." Her dark brown eyes focused on each of them in turn.

“I’ll start with the sorting office,” Cedar said.

“Leave the female dorm to us,” Candy nodded at Snowflake.

Although Winter’s stomach rolled with a deep sense of ‘wrong’ when it came to his turn, he still said, “I guess that leaves me with the male dorm.”

He reached for his coat, intending to talk to some of the least childish male fairies about the unsettling changes they’d all seen in their Creator and the way time continued to slip through their fingers. Another decade, maybe two, and Christmas might collapse under the weight of humanity.

CHAPTER 2



AS WINTER’S FINGERS CONTACTED the heavy red fabric of his coat, he found himself standing alone in a blizzard instead of inside the cozy Adult Department cabin. His balls shriveled. Father Christmas must have been listening in on their little rebel meeting. Agreeing to defiance had been wrong. He should have defended his creator, should have—

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it,” he shouted into the silent night. A gust of wind hard enough for him to stagger forward a pace to keep his balance gave him his answer. Santa was pissed, really pissed.

Winter threw his coat on, feeling like an utter shit. He wasn’t cold yet, but he soon would be if he wasn’t careful. He pulled up the collar of his thigh-length coat wondering which way to walk because standing still would turn him into Frosty the Snowman in an hour or so. A soft glow came through the falling snow ahead, hopefully indicating the magical village he called home. Tucking his hands under his armpits to retain heat, he set off. Putting them in his pockets would mean a face

full of snow if he tripped. Being wet as well as freezing, would not be fun, but at least he had his coat and boots.

This wasn't the first time Santa had transported a bolshie fairy outside the limits of the North Pole and left them to walk back. The cold and silence gave the miscreant plenty of time to contemplate and regret whatever they'd done to piss off their maker.

Winter regretted his actions already, but it seemed as if a long walk in the cold darkness was in the cards anyway. Other penalties included being assigned reindeer clean-up duty or losing snowglobe privileges, which was like taking all electronic devices from a human. Winter had never been sanctioned before, and he didn't like it. If Santa let him back, he'd be the best damn Christmas fairy the Adult Department had ever seen. He'd forget about being a djinn, about Coal, Garland, and that damn Jingle who had started all this.

"I really am sorry," he called out.

Not a gust of wind disturbed the falling snow this time. Santa wasn't watching. Unwanted. Discarded. Ignored. Forgotten. The last option caused a shiver to run up his spine, although the cold had yet to penetrate his clothes.

As he walked, black boots sinking into the six-inch-deep snow, and with windblown flakes forcing him to squint, he pondered how he'd managed to defy his Creator. It'd never crossed his mind before. Did he have more 'Jingle' in him than Santa intended, or was he reverting to type as he aged?

An equally unpalatable option was that the combined authority of the four older and more experienced Adult Department fairies had trumped his loyalty to Santa. That he would change his mind if the people around him possessed more dominant personalities left a sour taste in his mouth.

I'm not that weak-willed, am I?

The cold began to penetrate his boots, then his nose. He stopped to pull his shirt up over nose. Breathing warmed air helped for a while but his feet burned with the cold.

The glow wasn't getting any brighter, and he didn't seem to be gaining on it at all. The snow-filled sky meant he couldn't see the stars or moon to navigate by, not that he knew how to navigate by celestial bodies. As a fairy, he simply thought about a place or a person, and he was there.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. Only his boots in the snow broke the silence. If it hadn't been so cold, he would have sung to keep his spirits up, but wasting warm breath didn't seem like a great idea. *In The Bleak Mid-Winter* felt appropriate, so he sang it in his mind. One Christmas song followed another until he couldn't remember how many times he'd sung Twelve Days of Christmas through.

He stumbled, didn't fall, but it was a near thing. Dawn didn't seem anywhere near close, nor did the village, but that damn glow was still in front of him so he hadn't been going in circles. But what if he wasn't going in the right direction?

The fairies referred to their home as the North Pole, but he had no real idea where it was. It could be a hundred miles to the

next habitation. *Can I make that?*

He could no longer feel his hands and feet, and the glow on the horizon hadn't gotten any brighter. If Santa had left his immortality intact, when he succumbed to hypothermia, he'd lay out here, literally frozen in time, until someone found him. He might never be found.

I'd be dead. Winter stopped in his tracks, he hadn't noticed it'd stopped snowing until that moment. No wind, no sound at all, just an endless field of uncaring snow.

He'd never considered his own mortality. To his knowledge, no fairy had ever died. Tinsel, Garland, Mistletoe, and his double, were the first fairies Santa had created more than a thousand years ago. They'd all granted so many wishes, seen so much.

If he counted the actual days he'd lived rather than the festive seasons he'd seen, he was... perhaps twenty human years old? However long it had been, it didn't seem long enough.

Why didn't I just do what I always do and obey the rules? He knew exactly why. Tinsel had made him lose all sense when she'd said, "I know it's not your fault, but sometimes I wish you were a little more like the fairy you're based on."

Jingle. Everything came back to bloody Jingle, the fairy who was apparently a far more admirable being than him, even though he left the humans he enticed without a word. So, having people on their knees, destroying their ability to live without him, was a cause for admiration, a reason to change every damn thing to save the fucker? Imagining punching the

smug bastard who wore his face kept Winter going for another slow shuffling mile.

He stumbled, taking a face full of snow because he'd pulled his arms inside his coat. He took a breath, wondering how he'd ended up on his face. Staying down, just for a little while to catch his breath, take the weight off his aching legs was so damn tempting. But if he did that, out in the open, he wouldn't last long. He struggled to free his hands, then climbed back to his numb feet, uselessly brushing at the ice crystals on his already soaked, freezing clothes. Within a hundred yards, it began snowing again. A lazy, half-hearted, twirling, slow, mesmerizing fall.

The only hope he had to cling to was that although Santa had been furious with Jingle for doing whatever he did with Mistletoe, he hadn't removed his immortality when he'd banished him to the human realm. Jingle's crime of maybe seducing the future Mrs. Christmas had to be far worse than his slight defiance, right?

He needed to get back and make his case in person. He pictured himself on his knees, apologizing in Santa's ancient office, the place where he'd sprung into existence from Santa's imagination.

Something clicked. If Father Christmas had made him this way, why was he being punished for Santa's mistakes? It wasn't fair. He couldn't help the way he'd been made. It would be like kicking a dog for retrieving a ball. Not that he liked dogs. The damn things always barked at him.

Cats didn't like him either.

Reindeer did.

Winter smiled. He'd give his right nut to be in the warm, snug reindeer stable right now. He could almost feel the warmth of their furry bodies and hot breath around him.

Unlike the swirling snowflakes, Winter's thoughts and movements slowed until it took all his concentration to put one foot in front of the other.

Left. Right.

Left... Right.

Head down, but not bothering to hunch or put his hands under his armpits anymore, he carried on until he bumped into a tree. Staring at the trunk blankly, he wondered what idiot had put it there. Looking around, he blinked stupidly at a forest of widely spaced trees rather than the featureless landscape he'd been traversing. It felt like they'd sprung up between one footstep and the next, almost as if they wanted to protect him.

The trees were perfectly at home, serene and content as they gathered together in a cozy social group. Warm and sleepy, he decided to join them, just for a while. He half fell, half sat at the base of his new companion. He vaguely remembered the symptoms of hypothermia included disorientation and not feeling cold. There were no lights in the distance, no stars above. In the winter in the far north, it might only be light for an hour or so a day. It could be hours until dawn.

I'm not getting out of here. The thought swirled like a snowflake then settled, seamlessly sinking into his psyche.

As ends went, it seemed anticlimactic for a being whose life had been focused on bringing joy to others. Humans would remember the characters he'd played, not Winter himself. The other fairies would remember him, right? He'd been important as an individual, not just as another lesser version of Jingle? As much as he wanted to believe it, it wasn't true. They tried to be cheerful around him, but every now and again, he caught one of the older fairies wearing a wistful, sad expression when they gazed at him.

It all made perfect sense now.

He watched the uncaring snow swirling down outside the protection of his tree. He focused on one flake's progress to the ground, twisting and turning, full of energy and life until it settled and vanished among all the others as if it'd never been. He looked up, focused on the next beautiful, unique flake falling to its end. He watched another and another, sad that all the billions of flakes out there would never ever be seen or appreciated. Not that his life meant a great deal more. There might even be another version of him laughing and joking in the cozy adult cabin already. It wasn't right. He deserved more than this.

A tear formed and fell, just like a forgotten snowflake. He blinked again, once, twice, then kept his eyes closed. Just a few minutes rest, and he'd carry on. After all, he had a job to do. Somewhere, there must be a wish he should be fulfilling.

The adult wisher had probably already waited a long time for their wish to be fulfilled. Another few minutes wouldn't make a difference, and he was so very tired.



Seventy festive seasons earlier

Light stabbed at his eyes, and a loud knocking assaulted his ears while the scents of pine, orange, and cinnamon tickled his nose.

“It’s alright, take a few deep breaths; it’ll pass. I’ve got you,” a deep, slow male voice said. Tension drained from his body.

Blinking at the warm, orange light coming from a crackling fire in the hearth in front of him, he fought to concentrate on the kindly, plump old man sitting on the other end of the sofa. He was in an office, a large, comfortable, and tastefully decorated office. The deep greens and reds of the garlands and ribbons, together with the dark, aged wood of the desk, walls, and floor, comforted like a soft blanket. Without a doubt, this was the best place in the world.

“Better?” the man rumbled again.

“Yes, thanks. Where—”

“If you don’t interrupt, you’ll find out quicker.” The gentle admonishment crushed him, and he dropped his gaze in shame.

“Sorry,” he murmured.

“Not a problem, my boy, you’re only a few minutes old. But listening to people that know more than you is something you should always do, understand?”

“Yes, sir.” The words came immediately to his lips. His answer made the man’s whole face crinkle into a gentle smile. An immediate sense of achievement warmed him.

“I am Father Christmas, although I have many names, and I created you. Your name is Winter, and you are the solution to the problem of the ever-growing number of names in the Adult Unfulfilled Wish Book. Do you know what that is?”

Without knowing how, Winter knew exactly what his Creator meant, but only the obedient words, “Yes, sir,” fell from his lips.

Santa’s smile broadened. “Excellent. I have every confidence in you. May the spirit of Christmas live in your heart forever.”

Winter beamed under the praise. The faith his Creator placed in him made his ego, and his determination to live up to expectations, soar.

“Thank you. You too, sir.”

Still smiling, Santa nodded toward the door of his office. “Well, off you go; there’s no time like the present to start work. Your colleagues in the Adult Department will be very pleased to see you.”

Winter stepped out of the office in the large administrative cabin. The reception area held a plump older woman with

snowy white hair. She sat behind a desk that was far too big for her. She beamed at him.

“Welcome to the North Pole, young fairy.”

He smiled back. “Thank you. Hello to you too.” Remembering what Santa had said, he added, “May the Spirit of Christmas live in your heart forever.”

She smiled gently. “I’m Mrs. Christmas. And I think you’ll do fine; just be yourself. If you ever have a problem, you come to me, my dear. He can get a bit grumpy unless he’s cheating on his diet.” She winked.

Winter laughed because that was what she wanted. Pleasing her left a warm glow in his chest, just as it had with her husband.

After picking up the coat he instinctively knew was his from the hook by the main door, he made his way out into the crisp afternoon. He didn’t question how he’d known which of the thirty or so identical red coats he should use, nor how he knew which of the brightly lit, decorated gingerbread cabins around the square was his destination.

To say the mouths of the fairies gathered in the snug cabin he entered two minutes later were hanging open was an understatement. Santa had primed him to expect an enthusiastic greeting, not utter shock.

He glanced behind himself for the source of their surprise. Seeing no one but himself, he shut the door to stop the snow from getting in.

“Am I in the wrong place? I’m looking for the Adult Department.”

The deafening silence was only broken by the crackling fire in the hearth and a tinny rendition of ‘Proper Crimbo’ from the snowglobe in the hand of a red-haired girl fairy sitting on a sofa. Her name, Candy, popped into his head. The room was a smaller version of the reception area in the admin building, except for the five festively dressed people. Two men, three women.

Yellow-haired Garland recovered first. He strode across the room, and Winter found himself engulfed in a tight hug before he’d even had a chance to take off his coat.

“So good to see you; I never thought he’d let you come back.”

“Come back from where?” Winter asked as the man held him at arms-length, tears shining in his eyes.

Garland shook his head, stepped back. “It’s so damn wrong, but you’re back, and we can leave all that behind us now.”

The two girl fairies from the sofa, Candy and Snowflake, and the brown-haired, boyish-looking Cedar, took their turns hugging him.

“I can’t believe it. I never thought I’d actually meet you. They missed you so very much,” Cedar’s voice broke with emotion.

“We’re all so very sorry about your wife,” Snowflake choked out, blinking away tears.

Winter untangled himself from these weirdos. Father Christmas had told him the Adult Department fairies were

different, that they had mature human emotions and urges, but he hadn't mentioned they were a few baubles short in the brain department.

“Wife? I haven't got a wife; no fairy does. No fraternizing, remember?”

“Oh my, what has he done? Folks, this isn't—” Tinsel, a dark-haired fairy who had just entered the room, exclaimed, but she was interrupted by a blast of cold air from the corner.

Every fairy in the room turned to see Father Christmas in his young, handsome, dark-haired form, sitting on the sofa that Candy and Snowflake had vacated.

“Fairies, I'd like you to meet the newest member of your happy little band. I made Winter an hour ago to help Garland and Cedar. He was created with the adult upgrade, so he's ready to go. Make him feel welcome.

“And yes, he is similar in many ways to someone you might remember, but there are differences. He knows how to obey rules, don't you, Winter?”

“Yes, sir,” he'd replied without thinking, and his working life started.

CHAPTER 3



CHAPTER 3

In the months before ending up in this hellish frozen prison, Spencer had been considering moving on to a new life. His human friend and Dom rival, Angus Fricker, had settled down with the feisty, masochistic Coal. The bolshie youngster had briefly interested him, but Coal was far too needy.

Spencer liked his subs a little calmer, a little saner. Coal would require almost 24/7 supervision to stop him from hurting himself, and his love ‘em and leave ‘em lifestyle might tip the mouthy kid over the edge. At some point, he would leave Coal, just like he walked away from everyone after a few years. He didn’t want to imagine how the self-harming masochist would cope with being abandoned. These days, he picked companions that he thought would be ok with short-term relationships. No one made it past his outer shell of emotions; if ever someone did, Spencer headed for the hills.

It hadn’t been like that at first, when he’d woken up in an alleyway in 1581, and been press-ganged into the English

army.

Being a Redcoat had given him a name, two meals a day, clothes that kept him warm, and boots without holes. As long as he had all his limbs and could walk ten miles without falling down, it didn't matter if he couldn't remember his name. The sergeant who signed him up took the family names of the two men in the line behind him and pronounced him to be Spencer Ward. It was as good a name as any, and he'd grown fond of it over time.

It had taken several battles, many wounds, and then watching his beloved wife, Mary, die from old age, childless, for him to realize that his lack of memory wasn't the only thing separating him from the people around him. He healed from the most heinous wounds, didn't age, and to his everlasting regret, he couldn't give the woman he'd loved a longed-for child.

Her barrenness had haunted Mary, turning the cheerful smile of her youth into an ongoing melancholy that lasted for the remaining years of her life. A time when he had aged himself with grey hair powders, actor's makeup, and changed the way he moved. He thought he'd concealed his lack of aging until she was on her deathbed.

He had been holding her chill hand against his face, frantically watching for her next breath, fearing each one would be her last when she'd opened her eyes.

"Be happy, my love; do not be lonely without me," she whispered through thin, bloodless lips.

Tears prickled his eyes. “Don’t worry, my love. I’ll join you soon.”

A sad smile appeared on her still beautiful, lined face. “Don’t lie to me now of all times. We both know you’re more than a man. You need to go on. All the time you remember me, a little piece of me will live. God chose not to bless us with children to carry on our legacy, but maybe he didn’t have to because you can do that yourself, can’t you?”

He nodded, tears streaming down his face, heart tearing that he couldn’t make her stay, couldn’t go with her. “I don’t know why. I don’t know how, but I—”

“Promise me, you’ll go on, that you’ll love, smile, laugh, and see things I can’t even dream of, please...” She grimaced in pain. He found himself frantically promising whatever she wanted to ease her mind.

Her last breath left her a few minutes later. He found himself sitting with the empty shell of the person he’d loved in the house they’d shared for forty years. The first Spencer Ward died three weeks after his wife. Several people saw him fall from the London bridge, but no body was ever found. Still, the Thames was tidal at that point, and the search had been called off after scouring the banks for a mile downriver.

His estate had been sold. According to his will, the funds were bequeathed to his wife’s nephew in America, George Cooper. George’s second cousin in Australia, Spencer Cooper, inherited from him twenty years later, and so it had gone on. Arrogance and projected confidence became the shield behind

which Spencer hid from the world, and the pain loving people caused.

Angus and Coal's blazing happiness only enforced his lonely existence, and he couldn't sit around and watch their Happy Ever After unfold. Even being in the same area, the possibility of bumping into them, felt like a raw wound poised to hemorrhage.

He had been wrapping up that life, and considering his next persona, when he met July Spicer. The ex-competitive high diver had been a breath of fresh air, a sexy, vibrant, and none-too-smart breath of fresh air. July needed him. That, together with the thrill of competing with a pig of a man for him, made Spencer hunger for the prize. He'd been determined to protect July from the uptight fucker using him as nothing but a celebrity sex toy. Setting July back on the path to greatness seemed like a pleasurable, productive way to spend a few years.

Everything had been going to plan, July responded to him on a personal level and was regaining his diving confidence. Then he'd found the vibrant man beaten half to death in the Olympic Park Aquatic Centre in London. His centuries of medical training diagnosed a life-threatening ruptured spleen. He'd seen hundreds, possibly thousands, of people die but losing such a beautiful young man who had such potential hurt in a way he hadn't experienced in decades.

His rival for July's affections, Rich Fiddler, had appeared, and between one breath and the next, they were in the foyer of one

of the few specialist hospitals in the region capable of saving July's career as well as his life.

As July was rushed into surgery, Rich drew him outside.

In the next breath, he stood a hundred yards from this cabin in the dark, snow swirling around him. No other buildings, vehicles, or roads were in sight, and no lights apart from a rosy glow coming from the cabin windows. The cold bit through his shorts and thin summer shirt. Bewildered, heart pounding as his mind screamed WTF, he jogged to the rustic cabin.

He knocked but didn't wait in the freezing conditions to open the door. Politeness risked frostbite.

Opening the door, he called, "Hello, anyone home?"

Only the crackling of the fire in the hearth and twinkling Christmas decorations greeted him. Considering the date, August 26th, it was yet another item that epically failed to make sense in the last hour. But at least it was warm.

After searching the place, he found no sign of occupants, including a total lack of clothing, personal items, or any means of communication. Giving a wordless apology to the cabin's owner, Spencer made himself a meal from the festive food in the fridge and settled down for the night.

He woke to complete silence. Had a noise woken him? Were the owners coming back? He listened harder. No sound. He scanned the Nordic-themed room. His clothes were missing from the other side of the bed. Someone had been creeping around him as he slept. Maybe a maid picking up laundry, but

he wished she'd woken him. Spencer appreciated his privacy, including in hotels. With his interest in the BDSM scene, a maid who entered without permission might get more of an eyeful than she intended.

He smiled at the memory from a few weeks ago of a shrieking maid and a very red-faced sub. A few large tips smoothed the hotel staff's ruffled feathers. He hadn't been as successful with his temporary sub. The guy had galloped past him while Spencer dished out the full effect of his charm—and wallet—on the manager. The entire incident had been a shame, for the sub anyway.

The shocked expressions of both maid and sub had been highly amusing, especially as the interruption occurred before Spencer undressed. The sub had responded well up to that point, but another subject was always around the corner. To be honest, subs lined up for him so willingly that he'd found July, who'd told him no, a fascinating challenge.

A challenge who might be dead. Spencer needed a phone.

A red toweling bathrobe with white trim hung on the back of the bedroom door.

Somebody's going all out with the Christmas theme.

Slipping it on, he made his way downstairs. Feeling a little like Goldilocks and not wanting to startle the possibly angry owners of his temporary refuge, he called out, 'hello' again.

No answer.

From the lack of personal effects, he presumed he'd stumbled upon a holiday home prepared for delayed Christmas-mad guests. It didn't solve the mystery of how he'd arrived here, how his clothes had vanished or who had set the now blazing fire he'd carefully banked last night. The view from every window showed an expanse of pristine snow with trees in the far distance. No other buildings, no vehicles, no tracks.

A creak upstairs made him change his mind about visiting the small bathroom off the kitchen. The wardrobe in the room he had slept in stood open. Rather than the empty space of last night, it now contained several pairs of black jeans, polo shirts in red and green, and black boots, all in his size. The previously empty chest of drawers contained socks and boxer shorts, all with festive comedic themes.

He blinked at the impossibility staring him in the face. The only explanation was that the guys who had beaten July had returned and done the same to him. Everything from that point onward had to be a hallucination, and he now lay sedated in a hospital.

How long would it take for the doctors to work out his injuries had healed and remove the sedation? Then would come the questions he'd avoided for centuries. At least he wouldn't have to face 'witch' accusations in a modern western country. Thankfully, whatever had been done to him wouldn't be permanent.

Even if July survived, he would lose his spleen and diving career. Spencer's jaw clenched so hard it ached. When he

woke in the real world, those bastards would pay.

In the meantime, he decided to explore this odd festive dream his subconscious had conjured. Why he'd imagined this, he didn't quite know. Christmas always made him feel both vaguely uncomfortable and nostalgic.

That first day, he explored the immediate vicinity of the cabin, looking for signs of life. The snow was pristine for the quarter-mile he'd walked in every direction. Beyond that, a coniferous forest surrounded the wide clearing.

He returned to the cabin and searched for the generator powering the lights. He found nothing. He also couldn't locate a hot water boiler, the source of the gas powering the range cooker, or a cesspit connected to the bathroom next to the kitchen. Logic, control, that was the only way to deal with life. Work the puzzle, and the answer will eventually reveal itself. The mantra had worked for centuries, except for the issue of why the hell he was the only immortal on the planet.

His discoveries confirmed the hallucination theory rather than some sort of weird kidnap scenario of someone wanting to get their hands on his centuries of accumulated wealth.

He'd worked out long ago that things that were cheap, or considered rubbish in the present, were often worth fortunes in the future. He owned dozens of small, inconspicuous warehouses worldwide, accumulating inexpensive mundane items. Luxury items were more likely to be retained, but cheap everyday clothes, furniture, posters, leaflets, food containers,

and utensils from several hundred years ago proved to be a goldmine.

With a practiced eye, he assessed the cabin as having a mix of items from fifty to a hundred and fifty years old, except for the ultra-modern refrigerator. He still couldn't work out why he'd imagined this range of fixtures and fittings. None of it would be worth anything for at least a dozen decades.

The second day, he walked the perimeter of the clearing without finding a sign of another person, a road/track, not even an animal or bird footprint or call. Apart from the sound of the treetops rustling in the breeze, he was completely and utterly alone.

When his food supplies diminished to critical levels after five days, he leaned back toward this being a real-world scenario rather than a hallucination. Starving would be very real. He'd lived through famines before, it wasn't pleasant, and he didn't know if even his constitution could go without food forever. Subsisting on pine needle soup didn't thrill him.

"There's only one thing to do, walk out of here," he stated to the world in general, just to hear a human voice for a change.

After spending the afternoon fashioning a rough sled from the empty chest of drawers in the second bedroom, he ate heartily and went to bed. As the sky began to lighten, he washed, ate a carb-rich breakfast, then piled his food reserves, clothing, blankets, firewood, a cooking pot, the ax, and other tools, on the sled and set off southward. The lack of a waterproof

tarpaulin to provide shelter was a worry, but the heavy blankets would have to suffice.

His breath steaming in the sub-zero, crisp, clear environment, proved he was alive and present in this solid world. It didn't feel like some drugged, ever-shifting dream state. He didn't look back at his temporary home.

The crunch of snow under his boots and the cold air in his lungs was real. Every step would take him nearer to finding out what had become of July and the men who hurt him.

Imagining the screams and begging of those men in his dungeon helped pass the time. Unlike the torture he usually inflicted in his playroom, this wouldn't be in the least erotic. He wouldn't console, wouldn't encourage, wouldn't help them to slip into subspace.

Terror and mortal fear, that's what they deserved. Jealousy flared, and he fanned the flames to keep his blood pumping. The ultimate fear of humanity, death, had been denied to him. Nothing this world produced could physically hurt him for long.

Pushing through pain and discomfort that would cause most people to stop or panic wasn't a problem because he knew he'd heal. He only had to guard against unconsciousness in this environment, although he wasn't sure that being frozen solid would kill him. He'd probably just thaw out come spring and wake up.

With his fitness level and mental advantages, he could maintain a pace of six miles an hour in clear conditions while

pulling the loaded sled. Despite the seasonal decorations that indicated December, the days seemed unusually long. He estimated he had around twelve hours of daylight to travel. Which, together with the tree species around him, pointed to him being in the far north, in early autumn, not Christmas. The days would soon shorten, and the temperature would drop further. The sooner he got out of here, the better.

Forty miles per day, maybe more, wasn't out of the question, and he had four days of frugal supplies. After that, his progress might decline. It would have to be enough. There had to be some signs of humanity, or animals to hunt, within two hundred miles.

Although he hadn't found any paths on his previous explorations, the trees surrounding the cabin's clearing were spaced widely enough to negotiate the woodland. The snow wasn't as deep under the dark green canopy, and the litter of pine needles was thick enough that he didn't have a problem pulling the sled. The temperature under the trees was at least a degree warmer, and the difference might be more at night.

I can do this. Hell, I have to; I don't have a choice.

As he walked, the silence forced his mind to wander back through the years, the people he'd helped, the ones he'd hurt, but most of all, he remembered Mary's last words, "*Promise me, you'll go on.*"

If he'd learned anything during his long life, it was that nothing stayed the same. He'd enjoyed his little holiday in the cabin, it had given him time to ponder his next move, but now

it was time to get back to living as his dear Mary would have wanted. Maybe Australia again. Somewhere warm and liberal anyway.

When the trees thinned after he'd walked for an estimated four hours, covering about eighteen miles, hope and trepidation bubbled. If the trees petered out entirely, he'd be exposed to the elements, but it could mean he was nearing habitation. People tended to denude the tree stocks around their settlements for building and firewood.

The drag in his tired legs vanished as he reached the tree line and saw the back of a single cabin in the distance. The sky had become overcast in the last few minutes, so this couldn't have come at a better moment. Stress drained out of him as he spied smoke curling from the chimney.

He sped up, but as he got nearer, something niggled. The distance from the trees to the cabin seemed almost identical to the cabin he'd left hours ago, and its dimensions were horribly familiar.

In urban areas, rows of similar houses were common because they'd been built by the same company. This far from civilization, people usually constructed their own homes. His heart sank. Unless the builder of both cabins had decided to make two identical homes, nearly twenty miles apart, he'd traveled in a circle. Automatically, he checked the sun's position in the rapidly clouding sky. To his amazement, it appeared to have moved while he'd been concentrating on the cabin.

When he rounded the porch, his heart dropped to his boots. His lonely sled tracks headed off in the exact opposite direction from where he'd arrived. Despite the wide-open space around him, he felt more trapped than the few times he'd been incarcerated. The increasingly thick snow meant he had no choice but to take shelter.

The oddness continued when he entered and found a fire he hadn't built burning in the hearth. He called out a greeting, although he didn't expect, or get, an answer.

The shelves heaved with food when he opened the fridge to put away the perishable supplies he'd taken with him. Heart beating faster, he checked the other storage areas in the kitchen; yep, vegetables, drinks, everything had been replenished. Every single item was traditional festive fare as it had been on his arrival.

How the hell had someone gotten here and replenished the supplies without leaving evidence in the pristine snow outside? If someone had dropped the supplies off, they must have gone to extreme lengths not to leave a single footprint. Besides, how did they know he'd left? Bizarre. Everything about this was weird. Why go to these lengths? Was someone trying to convince him he was going crazy?

A glance out the window showed the blizzard he'd witnessed yesterday commencing. He needed to hunt out the cameras that were clearly spying on him before trying to leave again. But the snow would have to stop first. How long did weather patterns last up here? He'd been here... he paused, trying to

work it out. Eventually, he pinned it down to four days, but it hadn't been easy, and it wouldn't get any easier. Taking a knife from the drawer, he marked four notches on the back of the front door.

As his jeans had gotten damp during his trek, he went upstairs to change, thinking that he should probably do some laundry although the cabin didn't have a washing machine. The chest of drawers he'd demolished to make the sled was back in the spare bedroom, as was the bedding. Plus, all his clothes had been cleaned, if they were the same ones. His bed had been perfectly made with fresh linen.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he almost ripped the front door off its hinges. He didn't know if he was happy or sad to find the sled, and the rest of its load, exactly where he'd left it minutes ago. He brought it in, just in case it decided to disappear too. He spent the evening removing the decorations to check for hidden cameras. He didn't find one. The next day dawned clear and bright, so with nothing else to do, he set off again, in the opposite direction to yesterday.

It took a month to resign himself to the truth. No matter what he changed in the cabin, it came back while he was out. But it took walking in a straight line until he returned to the cabin for it to 'reset'.

Even the damn decorations came back, although unlike everything else, they didn't come back exactly the same. The more often he removed them, the more garish the replacements became. Staying out all night or two nights in a

row didn't change anything except the decorations toned down in color and number. But they never disappeared. Still, a single green tree with white lights was a damn sight better than negotiating a neon, psychedelic, flashing forest to get to the kitchen.

The only things that didn't reset were the notches on the back of the front door that he added daily. They seemed to mock him as they stretched down to the floor. One month, two, six, a year went by with no change in the weather, the cabin, or anything else. The silence, the long dark evenings, were the worst, so he searched for things to fill his time that didn't involve brooding.

It took three years to fill the living area with whittled sculptures made from firewood or furniture that was always replaced. The sculptures remained during each reset, proof of the time he'd spent here. He talked and sang to himself and the people and animals he fashioned out of wood, anything to break the never-ending silence. The wooden recorder he'd made a year ago helped, but when he stopped playing, the silence became a living thing, lurking, taunting.

The Bible depicted Hell as fiery, full of noise and pain, but this, for him, was far worse. The silence, the lack of interaction with another living soul, ate at his mind. He was probably immortal, so this could last until every cabin surface was covered in notches. Then it would probably reset and start all over again.

Four years into his solitude, he finally contemplated ending his torment, which posed a significant problem. He'd heal from normal injuries, eventually. Back in the roaring twenties, he'd caught his hand in a weaving machine. The local doctor pronounced the limb unsalvageable and amputated his arm at the elbow while he'd been unconscious from shock and blood loss. No one expected him to wake up, but he did.

When the arm started to regrow a month later, he left town. The stump gradually lengthened, and after a year, the limb was perfect again. He traveled during that time, never staying in one place long enough for anyone to notice the miracle he couldn't explain taking place in their midst.

After apologizing to Mary's memory, hoping they would meet again if the afterlife existed, Spencer plotted his demise with calm, considered determination.

Freezing, stabbing in various places, hanging, drowning in the bath, starving, he tried them all. In every case, after passing out, he woke up in his bed, fighting fit and more depressed. Starvation had been the worst. It took weeks for his body weight to drop to a dangerous level. He'd experience such elation as he passed out while walking yet another slow, shambling circuit of the cabin, so that he didn't trigger a store cupboard 'reset'.

Waking up fully fit to another bright morning had been the lowest point of his long existence.

Lying there, warm, snug, horribly alone, and unable to do anything about it, he decided that whoever had put him here

had done so with the express intention of making him suffer. And he had, past what any mortal could possibly endure. But he wasn't mortal, and he'd known it since he'd witnessed the light going out of Mary's beautiful green eyes.

Mary would want him to fight.

Angus would laugh at him for giving up. He could almost hear the man's voice.

“Fight clever; if you can't win at their game, change it.”

Maybe this was Hell, but it was time to get a little of his own back on the Devil or whoever held him captive. No longer would he attempt to kill himself or display his pain. Serenity would be his weapon. Whoever monitored him would eventually get bored, and an opportunity would present itself. Spencer certainly had the time to wait.

Instead of doing the reset walk only when his supplies ran low every six or seven days, he did it every day at a run. He honed his body and mind while reciting as many times tables, song lyrics, and anything else he could remember to distract from his solitude. He practiced diligently with his recorder, fashioned better ones, and composed lilting music that fit his environment perfectly. He mashed wood pulp, learned how to make rough paper, and recorded his life with homemade charcoal. Instead of being a sign of his incarceration in this freezing hell, the marks on the doors became a homage to his resistance. Each mark felt like giving the finger to his tormentor.

CHAPTER 4



ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER RUN.

Spencer took a lungful of freezing air as he stepped out the cabin door. Squinting up at the sky, he called out, “Still alive, you bastard.”

Looking out over the never-changing landscape, he contemplated which direction to take today. He knew every tree like an old friend. Maybe after he finished his memoir, he’d carve a name into each one or start a novel.

A tiny streak of red in the snow caught his eye to the left of the cabin. He stood there like an idiot for perhaps ten seconds before the shock of seeing something new catapulted him into action. Snow flew as he sprinted across the half-mile-wide clearing. In the back of his mind, he knew his captor would be watching, would be getting a thrill out of this, but he couldn’t help it.

As he got closer, he couldn’t believe his eyes. Although the body slumped at the foot of a tree was partially covered in snow, it had the size and shape of an adult male.

“Yes!” Spencer shouted his joy into the uncaring frigid air and stopped in his tracks.

“Fuck, what if he’s dead? Burying him in the frozen ground will take forever.” He huffed out a snort. “As if time’s an issue. But first things first, it might not be a person. Could be a mannequin, put here just to mess with me.” He assessed the figure’s position, slumped over on its side, half on his front, legs bent. He’d never seen a mannequin with bent legs, but... “Doesn’t mean it’s not a movie prop. But when did it get here?”

The figure could have gotten here any time since Spencer arrived home yesterday. “Must be fake. A real person would’ve seen the cabin, would’ve... Not if he got here after I turned in for the night. This close, he would have seen the lights, would have struggled on to the cabin. And if he’s real, I really have to stop talking to myself, or he’ll think I’ve got a fucking screw loose.”

If he’s alive. Please, oh fuck, please be alive.

Spencer covered the rest of the distance at a jog, warring with himself silently.

What if this is just another ploy to break me? Get my hopes up and then dash them? Should I even try?

What if he came to rescue me? Does anyone know he’s here? He got in, maybe he knows a way out.

Breath steaming in the cold, he reached a hand down toward the prone figure’s shoulder, then stopped. Snow covered most

of the man's pale, but not gray, face as it lay, cheek down, on the ground. He'd seen hundreds of dead bodies, but this guy... He didn't know. No vapor came from the blue lips or his nose, but they were clear of snow. It pointed to at least some respiration in the last few hours.

Closing his eyes, Spencer drew on his hard-won serenity, took a deep breath, and dropped to his knees in the snow. He reached out and hesitated, not wanting to feel stiff, dead flesh.

"Pull yourself together. You're a fucking paramedic, do your damn job."

He put his hand on the man's shoulder. Dizziness swirled when the material of the red coat, identical to the one he wore, then flesh, yielded under his touch. The body, *my patient*, wasn't frozen, not yet.

His paramedic training kicked in, and after brushing away the snow, he checked for a pulse with trembling fingers against the man's neck. The stillness around him was even more profound than usual as he waited for three seconds before a tiny pulse twitched against his finger pads. His heart lurched.

"Alive, fuck, he's actually alive."

Shoveling the snow aside, he felt down the man's toned body, particularly his spine. His mind raced, considering how long it would take to run back and grab the long-forgotten sled to get his patient back to the cabin if he had a spinal injury or a significant fracture. With relief, he found no apparent injuries.

This was probably no more than a case of hypothermia. Not that hypothermia wasn't serious, but if the man was alive now and he warmed him carefully enough, he'd probably survive, even if he suffered frostbite.

"I'm not alone anymore." Hearing himself say it didn't help it sink in.

The thought of a companion after all this time stuttered his mind. He'd accepted his solitude, had come to terms with it. Could he interact with someone now?

Nevertheless, he had a job to do. Grasping the man's upper arm and hip, he rolled him over to check for injuries on his front. Shock yanked on his gut.

It's me.

In every detail, including the shirt he wore, the man currently near death in the snow was himself. Spencer sat back on his heels, mind whirling.

"Time loop, this has to be a freaky time loop." A few years ago, he'd tried to take his own life to avoid this place by lying down in the snow and waiting to freeze. He'd woken up in bed in the cabin.

"Was it here?" He couldn't remember. He'd been pretty messed up back then.

"Will you thank me for reviving you, or curse me for it?"

He blew out a breath, the indecision killing him.

Should I just leave him, me, here to die? If I do, will I, he, die or wake up back in the cabin?

Fuck, will I have to do the last six years again?

Was his current, almost content self, doomed to save his younger version during his suicidal phase forever? Was he the reason why he'd always woken up back in bed? Had he cared for himself after every suicide attempt?

The hideous circular debate spun in his mind as the man took a slight breath. An ice crystal on the blue lips melted. If this was a repeat, a time loop, eddy, or whatever those sci-fi geeks called it, he'd already made his decision, and had abandoned or saved himself, possibly hundreds of times. He was who he was; he couldn't change what his instincts dictated. People fascinated him, their emotions, personalities, and bodies. He needed to control, manipulate, and observe them; to do that, he needed them alive.

Changing from a kneeling position to a squat, he pulled his doppelgänger upright and then, with a lot of cursing, got him onto his shoulder. He set off for the cabin, holding out his other arm for balance. By the time he stepped onto the porch, his legs were trembling and spots danced before his eyes.

Laying the unresponsive body on the couch, he swiftly shut the front door he'd barged open and galloped upstairs for bedding. The bedrooms weren't cold but weren't as warm as the living room because of the fire. The man appeared even paler in the flickering light. Rather than struggling to get the

wet clothes off him, Spencer grabbed the kitchen scissors and cut away the garments. His clothes would fit his doppelgänger.

The body he revealed was both familiar and foreign. Maybe seeing himself from an angle he'd never been able to before caused the effect, but the man in front of him seemed younger, with less developed muscles. The theory that this was his younger self died as he revealed a tattoo of two linked round golden bells on the inside of the man's left biceps.

Putting away thoughts of identity, Spencer concentrated on his patient. Falling back into paramedic mode was surprisingly easy and enjoyable. He needed to be needed.

Spencer couldn't die, but he could make the ultimate difference to people on that journey. He eased their pain on their way out of the world. Death had become a fascination for several decades in the early nineteenth century, and he'd worked in palliative care to explore the one thing he couldn't do. He tried every drug under the sun, trying to recreate the alternate consciousness people claimed to experience at the edge of life. They never worked. He didn't even dream when he slept.

Then he'd discovered the BDSM world. He'd seen the euphoric state people reached when 'flying'; had paid the best in the world to get him there. He'd never managed it. The Doms claimed he couldn't 'give himself' to the experience, but he found he could induce it.

The first time he'd sent someone flying, his euphoria had been better than an orgasm. He'd done that, had given the sub that

profound experience, that natural high. He'd worked hard, studied under the best Doms in the world, and become adept at every way known to induce the state. Subs flocked to him, craving what he could give them. They needed him, wanted him more than their next breath. Their adoration, their obedience, made him feel alive rather than a mere observer of life.

This man needed him, but Spencer needed him just as much.

After toweling his patient dry, he stoked the fire, then stripped down to his holly leaf boxers and climbed on the saggy couch with his patient. If he'd had access to a hospital, he might use a warmed saline IV or a blood exchange system that warmed a person's blood outside the body before returning it. A warm bath would also have been good, but getting the man in and out would have been tricky. The last thing this poor sod needed was to be dropped and gain a concussion or a broken bone. Just because Spencer healed from any injury, it didn't mean that this man who looked like him could do the same.

After pulling the blanket over their heads to ensure the air his patient breathed was warm, he spooned him from behind and wrapped his arms and legs around him to maximize the warming skin contact. Although the man couldn't hear him, he spoke to him, telling him it would be ok, that he'd look after him. Whatever effect the words had on his patient, they settled Spencer; it felt so damn right to be comforting someone again.

Hours passed before it wasn't unpleasantly cold to touch his patient, but his breathing rate and pulse were nearer normal

levels. The man's bare butt pressed ever so slightly back against him. Spencer held his breath as the man flexed against him again.

The gentle pulsing pressure after a decade of his own fist had blood charging to his cock.

You're a professional. He's not awake. You don't even know who— The forward and back motion turned into a circular grind.

“Mmm...”

The throaty noise made Spencer rock hard, but as much as sinking into the offered heat tempted, this was a patient. A patient Spencer knew nothing about, including why they appeared identical except for a tattoo. Clone, plastic surgery, relative, time loop? In this fucked up world, he couldn't discount anything.

A warm drink would help as soon as his patient was fully conscious. Spencer slipped out from under the blankets. Even almost naked, he wasn't cold; the roaring fire kept the room almost uncomfortably hot. After adding another couple of logs, he padded across to the kitchen and put a pan of milk on the range to heat. Although clichéd, warm milk, or hot chocolate, would soothe and provide warmth and energy. The festive supplies had never included tea or coffee, although he wouldn't have given a recovering patient coffee if he had some.

While he waited for the milk to heat, he popped upstairs to grab a clean set of clothes for himself, an extra pair of socks,

and the bathrobe for his patient.

As he came back downstairs, the sound of chattering teeth tugged his lips into a smile. He poured the hot chocolate into a mug and returned to the sofa and his violently shivering patient.

“Don’t worry, shivering is good news. You’re safe now, but it’ll take a while for your body temperature to get back to normal. Gently does it is the key.”

The man laboriously turned over, pulled the blanket off his head, and frowned. He didn’t appear shocked by seeing his doppelgänger, but then again, maybe he didn’t believe his eyes.

“I know this must look odd, but don’t panic. You need to keep calm and let your body warm back up slowly,” Spencer warned. “I found you unconscious out in the snow. You’re lucky to be—”

“W..w... what’s your name?” the man managed to get out through chattering teeth.

“Spencer Ward. You are?”

“R... r... royally fucked,” the man stuttered as he sat up, curling his feet under himself and tugging the blankets tighter around his shoulders.

“Well, I can’t call you that,” Spencer said. “Can you swallow?”

Green eyes. He has green eyes, not blue. This isn’t me with a tattoo. Not a time loop or not a backward time loop anyway.

Maybe I'm the younger version. I could have had my eye color changed in the future, or is he wearing contacts?

“B...bit soon for that, isn't it? You don't even know my n... name.”

Spencer blinked. Flirting was the last thing he'd expected.

The man grinned as his teeth chattered and his body shivered.

Spencer waved a hand toward the mug of steaming hot chocolate on the small table in front of them. “I meant that. It'll help warm you up. I asked the question because hypothermia can affect the swallowing reflex; I don't think you'd fancy choking.”

“Never happened before.” The man reached a shaky hand out of his heap of blankets, and Spencer leaned forward to get the mug for him. His look-a-like took a sip, grimaced, then drank the whole mug with determination.

“Don't you like hot chocolate?” Spencer asked.

“Love it, but that's the problem.”

“Ookay. Well, that made sense, not.”

The man smiled again. Seeing as it appeared to be his own face smiling, Spencer suddenly didn't doubt why he succeeded at seducing just about anyone he fancied. His doppelgänger's smile was infectious, sexy.

“There isn't a lot that will make sense if you still think you're Spencer.” They both froze as the ground rumbled; it didn't last

long, but the ornaments on the Christmas tree carried on swinging for a few seconds.

“Does that happen a lot?” the green-eyed doppelgänger asked, not worried in the least by experiencing an earthquake.

Spencer froze for several seconds, waiting for it to happen again. When the baubles stopped swinging, he answered.

“Nope, never before, although a lot of odd things go on in this place.”

Watching his own lips twist in derision was a surreal experience.

“Say your name again,” his doppelgänger instructed.

“Why?”

The man rolled his eyes. “They all told me I’m an argumentative sod, but I never knew how annoying I could be. Just say it will you?”

Wondering if the cold had affected his patient’s mind, he said, “Spencer.” Nothing happened.

The other man waited for a second, then repeated, “Spencer.”

The ground rumbled again. It didn’t seem to bother his doppelgänger at all.

“Well, that sorts that out,” he said and stuck his hand out of the blankets. “Pleased to finally meet you, Jingle. I’m Winter, and I’m you.”

With trepidation, Spencer shook the man’s only mildly chilly hand.

“Got some questions, huh?” Winter said, but he didn’t release his fisted hold on the blankets at his throat. At least he had color in his cheeks now.

“Just a couple.”

“Thanks for saving my life, by the way,” Winter said with a slight smile.

“Did I? Would you have died if I hadn’t found you?”

Winter shrugged. “Probably not, unless he made me mortal as well as dumping me here. Even so, I would have been stuck under a snowdrift for a bloody long time if you hadn’t. But you know that, don’t you?”

Spencer nodded slowly. “You know me, right?”

Winter’s lips pressed together as he looked Spencer up and down. “I know of you.”

“So what are you, or should I say, what are we?”

“This could take a while. Have you got any spare clothes?”

CHAPTER 5



“I’M A FAIRY, SO are you.”

Spencer blinked. He’d heard being attracted to your own sex called many things over his lifetime, but ‘fairy’ was one he’d thought relegated to the mists of time.

“It’s not polite to assume someone’s sexuality, but for your information, I’m bi, not—”

Winter sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is going to be harder than I thought and not in a fun way.”

An hour later, sitting on the sofa, sipping yet another hot chocolate and eating shortbread, dressed in identical green shirts and black jeans, Spencer asked, “Let me get this right, I’m, we’re, Christmas fairies?”

Winter blew out a breath. “For the third time, yes. Although if you want to be pedantic, technically, we’re festive djinn. It’s not too difficult a concept. Magic is real. You’re a magical being, which is why you haven’t died or produced a thousand little Jingles; our kind don’t reproduce that way.

“You got exiled, without your magic and memory, because our creator, Santa Claus, caught you doing the dirty with the fairy he later married, Mistletoe, or at least that’s what we all assumed. She doesn’t remember you. Most of the others do, though. Bit of a hero-worship/pity thing going on, to be honest. They miss you. They accept me because, well, I’m you without the tarnished reputation.”

“And I’m here because Rich—who was sometimes Garland, an old fairy friend of mine—was about to tell me all this.”

Winter’s lips pressed together as he nodded.

Spencer opened his mouth to say, “You’re nuts,” then paused, recalling a drunk, fevered Coal spouting similar nonsense about ‘naughty lists’.

“Do you know a guy called Coal? Masochist, annoying, wears Christmas-themed clothes all the...” He trailed off as Winter nodded.

“Now you’re getting it. Angus’s secretary wished for him to be happy, and Coal took it upon himself to take the job.”

“Wished?”

“Wished.” Winter rolled his eyes. “That’s how it works with our kind. Wishes produce magical energy, which we then use. That’s four times. Is there a specific number of repetitions before you get this because I’m knackered. How else do you explain why you’ve not aged in what, over five hundred years? And what about this place?”

“I’m a stranded or exiled alien.”

Winter's lips twitched, so did Spencer's cock.

Was it narcissistic to get a tingle when looking at someone wearing your face, your body?

“Alien? You think there's a planet filled with gorgeous immortals who somehow mislaid you and removed your memory just in case the Earthlings rose up in rebellion?” He waved a hand at the festive decorations. “How do you explain all this then, spaceman?”

Winter's sarcasm annoyed but also amused. Spencer knew he was stretching the conversation out just to hear another person's voice. Even if they sounded identical to someone else, listening to Winter talk wasn't the same as hearing himself speak.

Plus, he liked the guy's tenacity. People who gave their respect like free samples didn't interest him. Respect needed to be earned to mean anything.

“It's a holodeck. It explains how, whichever direction I go, I always end up back here. How everything is replaced every time without a sign of a person. It's all beamed in. The plumbing and power don't have sources either.”

Winter held still for a second before he lost the battle and burst out laughing. “Oh fuck, that's funny; Gene Roddenberry has a lot to answer for.” He managed to compose his face and held up a hand, fingers splayed in a Vulcan greeting. “Live long and prosper, right?”

“Well, I’ve lived long, and my bank account is prospering, although I doubt that matters as we’re not on Earth anymore.”

The alien theory had rattled around in Spencer’s head since he’d remembered the TV show Winter mentioned. Once he’d connected the dots, it kept him saner than the ‘I’m in a coma’ theory. There was no getting out until whoever held him allowed it.

“You’ve got to admit it makes more sense than being the creation of a mentally unbalanced fictitious character,” Spencer said.

“And I suppose all this festive food, clothes, and other stuff is part of our planet’s culture?” Winter plucked at his shirt. “This is a starship uniform?”

Spencer smiled, pleased that this fellow traveler, this alternate him, had finally seen sense.

“I’m only going to say this once more,” Winter said, rolling his eyes, “and I’m not going to argue about it. These are the facts. We’re in a magic snowglobe, probably on Santa’s desk, so he can watch us all the time.”

This stupidity had gone on long enough. “Look, Winter, there is a logical, scientific explanation for—”

“So, how do you explain this?” Winter waved a hand between them.

“Clones.”

Winter leaned back, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“If it helps, I’m probably not the original either,” Spencer added, then drank in Winter’s long-suffering look and exasperated sigh. This had been the best day since he’d arrived in this festive frozen hell, and he didn’t want to miss a moment of his surprise companion’s reactions.

“I’ve had a very trying day. Frozen solid, remember? And I’m finding I really don’t give a shit what you think. My creator, whom I have served without a problem for my whole life, dumped me here for one negative thought. So for the last time —” He began ticking points off on his long fingers.

“We’re not aliens. We’re magical beings, created just as we are, by Santa, at the North Pole, and we grant wishes to gain magic energy. This isn’t a holodeck on a spaceship; it’s a snowglobe. You’re the original; I’m the copy. And that doesn’t make me happy in any way whatsoever.” He pulled his arm out of the shirt to display the tattoo on his bicep. “I got this to remind me not to make the same mistakes you did.” He put his arm back in the shirt.

“We’re here because,” he tilted his chin toward the ceiling, “that overworked dick—” The cabin shook. Spencer froze, but Winter ignored the sloshing hot chocolate as he continued. “—wants to mess with you because Mistletoe preferred your cock to his.” The cabin shook more violently; a crash came from the kitchen as a cup fell off the draining board.

Winter’s shoulders slumped. “And I’m just another thing he’s using to punish you. There’s probably another one of me, of you, already working alongside the others, and I bet he’s more

of a walkover than me. I agreed with my fellow fairies once, the first time I've never considered not toeing the line, and now I'm stuck here with the guy they haven't stopped whispering about in five hundred fucking—”

Without thought, Spencer moved over to the exhausted, depressed man, slung an arm around his shoulder, and pulled him in for a hug. Winter remained stiff for a moment, then leaned against him.

Tension Spencer hadn't acknowledged leached out of his body. Not alone anymore. Someone needed him.

“I don't believe we're the same person. We might look alike, but that's it.”

Winter didn't reply, simply accepting the contact. It only confirmed Spencer's suspicions.

How would spending your life thinking you were a copy, a constructed facsimile, affect your mental health? Spencer didn't know, but he thought they might have a lot of time to work it out. Right now, this man, this... whatever he claimed to be, was in physical and mental shock. Changing the subject seemed appropriate.

“So, what happened to July? Did he make it, keep his spleen?”

Winter looked around. Spencer saw him focus on the notches on the door, the carved fireplace. Spencer had used the mantelpiece to record his third year here, but the wood now sported a chain of carved exotic animals. Lions, whales,

snakes, giraffes, monkeys, and other beasts not connected to an arctic environment.

“How long have you been here?” Winter sounded drained.

It was an odd question. Winter had already mentioned Rich at the hospital, so he knew about July getting hurt, would know how July’s surgery had gone.

“Ten years, almost to the day.”

Winter’s eyes closed briefly. “On my timeline, you were in the hospital with July a few hours ago. He survived, so did his spleen, in case you care.”

Spencer tried and failed to get his head around this new bizarre information. “I care.”

Winter snorted but didn’t comment further. Spencer knew his patient was exhausted, but he couldn’t help asking another question. “So, time is flexible for our kind?” Fuck, that depressed him. He could endure centuries here with only days passing in the outside world.

“Our magic lets us pop to and from the North Pole to see wishers, and we can see past and possible future Christmases. Time travel is a lot trickier than location and appearance alterations. Some of the older fairies could probably do it; I can’t. I’m the youngest adult fairy by several centuries. You’re one of the four oldest.”

Winter gazed into the merrily crackling fire, not seeming to realize he wasn’t alone. “Jingle, Tinsel, Garland, and

Mistletoe, the four originals. There's only Tinsel left now, but if he put me here, who knows what he did to her.”

Not being in control of this situation, of having this—other him—know more than he did, bugged Spencer. He'd dominated every interpersonal interaction he'd experienced in a century, but he was losing this one.

Even though he had a thousand questions, Spencer could see his patient needed rest, and he needed to think. Unfortunately, time probably wasn't something they had to worry about.

“Come on, off you go to bed. You're falling asleep. The bedroom to the left is yours.”

Without saying a word, Winter stood, then turned stiffly for the stairs. He might have wandered out in the woods for hours, days, before ending up where he'd collapsed. It'd take him a while to recover physically. Spencer recalled the first time he'd done the run twice in one day, just to see if he could. He must have appeared just like Winter did now. Those stairs had seemed like a mountain when he finally got back.

There had to be a difference between them. *HAD* to be. Spencer heard Winter shuffling about upstairs for perhaps two minutes before everything went quiet.

His doppelgänger seemed so sure of his explanation. To be honest, it blew Spencer's half-baked 'alien' theory out of the water. He'd spent his early life believing in magic, gods, and devils, like the people around him. He'd considered himself a fallen angel or demon for over a century.

Only the evolving march of science turned him to more concrete explanations of his circumstances rather than faith. But he couldn't prove any of it, any more than he could prove God or Satan existed.

Fetching himself a large whiskey, he sat on his sofa, a sofa he now shared with someone who looked like him, but wasn't him, would never be him. Winter had accepted his comfort, his direction. Spencer was dominant down to his toes, but although Winter had argued and pressed his point, he didn't think the man shared his disposition.

The fire crackled, the flames reflecting in the decorations that taunted him anew. If what Winter said was true, they were the trappings of his captor, his creator. Did that make Santa his god? A god he'd apparently defied by coveting his favorite creation.

So why did he create Winter in my image?

Whatever the purpose of Winter's presence, his existence, it remained the most exciting thing that had happened in centuries. He determined to get as much stimulation out of the situation as possible in case Winter disappeared as quickly as he'd arrived.

Fear clenched his belly. Putting the half-finished drink down, he took the narrow flight of stairs two at a time. The spare bedroom door squeaked as he flung it open; he fully expected to see the bed carefully made and empty.

Winter lay on his side, one bare leg folded over the quilt, hair messy. He'd foregone the Santa pajamas and only wore the

least festive boxers out of the lot, the ones depicting Rudolf.

Is this how I look when I sleep? Innocent, fragile? Winter didn't lack muscle, but thanks to his twenty-mile daily run, Spencer's physique was harder, more defined.

Winter said he'd been sent here purely to mess with Spencer's mind, to make him suffer.

They'd have to see about that.

To prevent a reset from occurring without him knowing, Spencer slipped out of his clothes and into the bed.

Winter frowned, snuffled. For a heart-stopping moment, Spencer thought Winter would wake and order him out. Instead, the younger man inched closer. An arm fell across Spencer's chest, and Winter snuggled in.

"Mmm nice," Winter murmured and stilled again.

Ideas about how to spend their time that didn't involve debating about the nature of the universe and their existence sprang into Spencer's mind.

CHAPTER 6



ARIOCH STORMED BACK TO the transport chamber in the Council complex under the Himalayas. He should have dealt with this decades ago, and now that fucker Nick had stolen his prime witness. Well, if Nicky boy thought he'd won by hiding Jingle from him, the djinn didn't know him as well as he should. Nick might have spent the last thousand years finding ways to make humans happy, but Arioch had spent that time making people miserable.

An air elemental appeared in the bubble-like space ahead of him along with the hulking figure of Henry Lloyd, the Alpha canine shifter, and the current carnivorous shifter representative on the council.

"Shouldn't you be going the other way?" the shifter asked as the air elemental vanished.

"Shouldn't you try to stop your pack from hemorrhaging members? How many have you lost to that feral incubus now? Four, five?"

Henry's brows drew together, not that they were far apart anyway. *Damn ugly canine shifters.*

“My sons chose their own paths, because unlike you, I allow my people to make their own—“

The shiver of magic as he passed into the portal area, marked on the floor by a never-ending, series of black dragons, each biting the next beast's tail, meant he didn't have to listen to Henry-fucking-Lloyd any more.

With a thought, Arioch transported to his office. The warm glow of fire through the walls settled him a little. Throwing himself into his demon-hide chair, he magicked a lit cigar into his hand and puffed on it, trying to calm himself.

“Who would know what Dear old Nick has done with Jingle...” Garland and Coal wouldn't know; they were out of the North Pole loop now. He didn't want to expose either of his other potential witnesses to Nick's wrath, but he needed to know if they were ok. With a thought, he checked for the magical presence of a djinn, festive or otherwise, in his lair. The last thing he needed was a spy telling Nick everything he did. To pull this stunt, Nick must know what he was up to.

Nothing. Not a single being had been in here since he'd left. With a flick of his finger, images of Coal and Garland appeared on the wall opposite his desk. Garland's dove gray suit with the cuffs pushed halfway up his arms placed him firmly in the 1980s at some sort of board meeting. He dismissed the image. Garland seemed safe enough, except from the fashion police.

A cough broke free as he turned to Coal. A dog. A damn hairy yellow dog was wiggling and jumping all over him, and he seemed utterly delighted. He'd known the kid was a masochist, but that was a completely next-level punishment. Coal's big ginger human went up a notch in Ariocho's estimation, but punishment or not, Coal seemed fine.

Who next to ask? He could seek out one of Nick's child-like fairies, but they'd undoubtedly snitch on him and might not know anything. Besides, they might squeak and wish him a Merry Christmas. A shudder of revulsion went up his spine.

The remaining Adult Department fairies were his best bet. One after the other, he focused on them and got nothing.

Something is definitely going on. He hated feeling like a mushroom almost as much as cute skipping fairies.

Jaw jutting, he went to his final, dangerous option before he'd have to drag his sorry carcass back to the council to beg Avery for help. Santa probably had improved his security; a lightning-quick glance was all he could risk.

Before he could focus on Mistletoe, a golden ticket floated down from the ceiling.

Reindeer shed, now!

M

“Well, alrighty then,” Ariocho murmured, and with a thought, he concentrated on the blonde bombshell and found himself standing in a stable. One foot squished. He didn't look down. Instead, he kept his gaze on the blonde, curvy woman dressed

in black jeans and a tight-fitting red jacket, feeding a carrot to a deer with an impressive rack of antlers.

“I hate you. I hate reindeer and their crap, but most of all, I hate Nick.”

The reindeer snorted, its breath steaming in the cold.

Mistletoe eyed him as the deer finished the treat. “I’m not exactly keen on you either, but we need each other. Temporarily at least. Have you spoken to the council?”

Mistletoe had lost none of her sharp, manipulative ways. He didn’t doubt that she had Nick wrapped around her little finger, but as she’d been beside, or more likely behind, the most powerful djinn on the planet for the last five hundred years, he’d be a fool to underestimate her.

“Not a lot of point. It’s tricky organizing a trial without a prime witness. I’d be laughed out of the council chamber.”

“He hasn’t told me a thing. I’m so fucking fed up with playing the bimbo.”

His lips twitched. “But why? You do it so well.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not joking, and we don’t have much time. If he catches us together, I’ll be in a snowglobe on his desk like the rest of the Adult Department. And yes, that includes your star witness.”

Her not mentioning Jingle’s name had to be intentional. Nick had probably set a magical alert.

“Why are you telling me all this? I could just fetch them out, present them to the council, and claim all the credit.”

“And what happens to me after he’s convicted? What if he isn’t?”

“Hardly my problem, sweetie. Revenge Demon, remember?”

“Things need to change around here, and you know it. I want to be in charge of this operation, but I’ll run it like a cooperative. No more draining the children of the magic they produce.”

“Children?” he queried, one eyebrow raised.

Her chin rose, and he realized he was in the presence of the most dangerous being on the planet, a mother whose offspring had been threatened. “That’s what they are. They need the ability to grow, to choose their paths in life.”

That many extra free djinn in the world, all granting positive wishes with abandon, would compound the problem the djinn council moaned about, not solve it, but he wasn’t going to argue with her.

“You do you, sweetie. I’m not in the djinn business anymore. I’ll just go pick up my witness and—“

“You can’t. He’s put a lock on them. Even I can’t get in there. Which is why I need your help. Your witness, he—“ tears filled her eyes, ”—he’s suffering so much, and he hasn’t done a damn thing to warrant it.”

“You didn’t cheat on Nick with him?”

Her fist landed on her hip, and for a second, Arioch thought she might try to slap him. “No, I didn’t. He’s my brother, for fuck’s sake.”

“And Nick is your maker. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Of course it damn well does, but I didn’t have a lot of choice, did I?”

Arioch shrugged. “I fucked and killed the demon who turned me, it didn’t bother me at all, but non-justified revenge does. Nick’s made a fool of me. But as I can’t see them, I don’t know what I can do.”

“Would a genuine call for revenge help?”

“If I heard it, perhaps.”

Her gaze ran over him. “I know you can get bigger, but can you get smaller?”

His interest piqued. “How small were you thinking?”

“Elf on a shelf?” A giggle bubbled from her as he tried to convey that he was about to disembowel her with a spoon via a scowl.

“Highly amusing. That might solve the viewing issue, but what about the clear call for revenge?”

She gave him a wink. “I’m sleeping with the enemy, remember? I’m sure I can come up with something.”

Arioch grinned and transformed into his favorite femme fatale form, a dark-haired, red-lipped curvaceous minx. “Honeytraps are some of my favorite revenge scenarios, but if he damages

my witness, I'll scratch your eyes out, and I don't mean metaphorically." With a sly smile at her shocked expression, he popped back to his lair.

CHAPTER 7



WINTER HARDLY REMEMBERED GETTING upstairs. He fell into a bed that smelled like spiced apples, like home, and slept. He dreamed of warm, comforting bodies, being cared for, being safe, wanted, special.

The following morning, he lay still, eyes shut, trying to work out what had woken him but not wanting to start the day. His aching limbs felt anchored to the bed. It couldn't be morning, not yet. No singing, no annoying, enthusiastic greetings outside his room broke the silence, but daylight filtered through his eyelids.

Fuck, did I spend the night with a wisher? I'm not allowed to do long wishes yet.

His eyes shot open. Snowflakes drifted past a small window sticking out of a sloping roof above him. The view was familiar, the room... wasn't his, he had a single bed, not a double for a start, even if the Nordic bedding felt appropriate for the North Pole.

Double fuck. Did I spend the night with another fairy? That was so far outside the rules it wasn't even funny. He rubbed his thumb over the Jingle tattoo. *Not me.*

A knock sounded on the door. He sat up so fast his head spun. A quick check of the rumpled bed showed no fateful 'golden ticket' messages from Santa. More than one fairy's day had been ruined by a summons to Santa's office. Whatever he'd done, it either wasn't against the rules, or Santa hadn't found out yet.

A smiling face topped with slicked-back white hair peeked around the door. Everything came back.

Jingle.

Snowglobe.

An overturned sleigh's worth of FUBAR.

"Come on, sleepyhead, time to get up."

Winter flopped back down and pulled the quilt back over his head. He couldn't deal with any of it.

The bed depressed beside him. He remained still, hoping Jingle would get the message and leave him alone to try to make sense of this shitty situation.

"Look, I know exactly how you feel. It took years before I accepted that I couldn't get out of this. Believe me, I've tried. All we can do is survive until someone lets us out."

Winter pushed the quilt down again. "You do get that the reason I'm here is to mess with our heads, right? He wants us

to suffer.”

Winter decided it was damn odd watching yourself smile, especially when it sent a spark of desire through him. *Turned on by myself. That’s...*

“And are you going to try to make me suffer, Winter?”

He blinked. *Is he flirting?* “Well, I do that for wishers if that’s what they want, but you? No, of course not. I doubt you’d get off on it, and you being any more miserable would only give that tub of brandy butter his jollies.”

The house shivered. Winter couldn’t help returning Jingle’s grin.

The next instant, he stood just outside the house. The shock of the change in temperature from the warm bed had him wrapping his arms around himself and hunching.

“What the—“

A slight rumble gave him a fraction of a second’s warning before a pile of snow slid off the roof and onto his head. Wiping his eyes, he gazed up at the swirling grey sky. Although it took pulling courage up from his currently freezing naked feet, he wouldn’t take this lying down. He’d obeyed the rules all his life, but one tiny infraction had landed him here. It wasn’t fair.

“Very fucking funny, you baggy-arsed, big-nosed—“

Winter found himself two hundred yards from the cabin, looking back at a worried Jingle standing in the doorway. His bare feet sank into four inches of fresh snow.

“Oh, come on, seriously? Haven’t you done enough? All I did was—“ he called out.

His boxers disappeared. The frigid temperature had his balls trying to climb back up inside him.

“Ok, ok, I’m sorry, no more insults—“ Black boots appeared on his feet, but he remained butt naked and in the same place.

With a sigh, he started back toward the cabin. Santa still seemed to think he was funny. Winter could almost hear the ‘Ho, ho, ho’s’ from here.

“Suppose I’d better be thankful for small mercies,” he mumbled, “At least you gave me boots.”

He felt pressure on his balls. With a wince for what he’d see, he looked down. He now wore a white fur-trimmed red bikini with black fishnet stockings. He finished the walk with his lips pressed together.

Jingle’s mouth twitched as Winter stomped toward the cabin.

Winter tried for a scowl. “Don’t say a thing.”

“Wouldn’t dare. How do you feel?” Jingle called back.

“Like I’ve got a career as a butch drag queen. What do you think of Rhoda Lott as a stage name?”

Straight-faced, Jingle replied. “I’d consider Demanda Refund if I were you.”

“Aha, ha, I’m splitting my sides. Reindeer crap duty is funnier than you. Just for that, you can do breakfast. I’ve never cooked anything in my life.”

“No problem, but what I meant is how do you feel after yesterday? Fingers and toes ok? Aches, pains?”

Winter frowned, working his back from side to side a little. “Bit achy. Fingers and toes tingly. Which is odd. Never felt anything the day after an injury before.”

“You get hurt a lot?” Jingle’s lips pursed as if he was unhappy, even angry at the thought of Winter being hurt. Or maybe he was pissed about his ‘own’ body being abused.

Winter shrugged. “Depends on the wish. If I’m the villain—“ Burning pain seared his chest, then vanished.

“Winter? You with me?”

He blinked. Jingle stood in front of him, holding both his biceps. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine, just...” he trailed off, mind whirling.

Despite Santa’s earlier prank, this was a punishment, and he’d better find a way to get back onto his creator’s nice list. Calling Santa names probably hadn’t been the best idea. In fact, he could have suffered a much harsher punishment than embarrassing clothing.

What does Santa want me to do? The options included making Jingle miserable and/or modeling good fairy behavior.

A hand on his shoulder gave a slight push and got him moving back toward the cabin.

“I think we’d better stay indoors today and just relax,” Jingle said. “We need to keep your extremities warm. Hopefully, you haven’t been out in the cold long enough this time to do any

more damage. We've got enough food." Jingle left his hand on Winter's shoulder all the way back to the cabin, but he gave him a slight push as they climbed back onto the decking under the overhanging eaves.

"Go get dressed before I change my mind about you in that outfit. Remember, I've been celibate for a decade."

Winter's mind stalled, and for the first time, he felt damn glad of the freezing temperature. There was no way this bikini would hide an erection. Not glancing at Jingle's crotch to find out if his double was turned on or just fooling around took a lot of willpower.

"There are clean clothes in my room, and then I want to know how much you enjoyed getting that tattoo." Winter lost the fight and glanced at Jingle as he stepped inside the wonderfully cozy cabin.

Whether he'd intended it to or not, Jingle's comments took Winter's mind entirely off their creator. Despite the hint of lightness, there was something powerful, disconcerting, in Jingle's gaze.

The man moved with coiled strength and confidence. Winter knew he couldn't replicate it even if he tried. Jingle raised an eyebrow.

Scowling, Winter headed for the stairs. "Don't look at me."

"It's my house."

The words, "well, it's my body," died unspoken. It wasn't his body; it was merely a copy of the man behind him. A man

who used it far better than Winter did, judging by the hard, toned forearms exposed by his pushed-up sleeves.

He climbed the stairs, horribly conscious of Jingle's gaze. He must make quite a sight in his fishnets, heavy boots, and bikini, and he bet Jingle was enjoying his discomfort. He raised his chin and tried to walk as if he didn't care.

Once upstairs, he relaxed a little but still grabbed clothes from Jingle's room, averting his gaze from the neatly made bed. He headed back into his own room, where the rumpled bedclothes called for him to climb in again and warm up.

In a sexual wish scenario, he would have done just that. It wasn't as if he hadn't done it before, and wearing outfits that weren't too different from this.

He shut the door, just in case Jingle got the same idea. Jingle was bi, all Adult Department fairies were, including himself. The only one who hadn't been bi was Coal, but he'd been a special case for many reasons.

Adult Department fairies reacted to what their partner wanted, even changing their appearance to match their wisher's preferences. The only fixed characteristic during a wish was a fairy's physical gender. If Jingle fancied him, did that make him the ultimate narcissist?

And what did he mean about enjoying being tattooed? Winter had the disquieting feeling that Jingle could see right into his head. Maybe he should have kept more to himself last night, at least about his feelings about being a lesser version of Jingle. He'd sounded both needy and pathetic.

The familiar clothes gave him some much-needed mental and physical armor. Jingle wouldn't get to him again. He'd model appropriate behavior, get them both back in Santa's good books, and hopefully get out of here.

Whatever the case, when he came back down the stairs, Jingle crouched by the counter in the kitchen area, carefully cutting a notch in the wood. And damn, his ass looked fine as the black jeans hugged his backside.



“Excuse me?” Winter said, positive that he must have misheard.

“I said, how long have you known you're a submissive?” Jingle repeated the question as if it was about the weather. They sat at the kitchen table halfway through a simple breakfast of poached eggs on toast.

Winter carefully replaced his glass of orange juice on the rustic, heavy table. “I'm not. And given that I'm you, that question says a hell of a lot more about you than it does me.”

He put his elbow on the table, earning a scowl from Jingle. “We all thought the dungeon at your mansion was for subs you brought home, but we got it wrong. You're a switch.”

Jingle's expression didn't change. “Elbow off the table when you're eating. This is my home, and you'll mind your manners

while you're here." Jingle's eyebrows rose when Winter didn't move. "Elbow. Now."

After a count of three, the house rumbled. Winter eyed the sloshing juice in his glass and removed his elbow. "Was that for you or me?"

"Hardly matters. You moved your elbow." Jingle nodded at the now obedient limb. "Manners don't cost anything, but they make the world go around."

Winter knew all about manners, he could dine with Royalty without a problem, but he wasn't with a royal now. Not a human royal anyway. As Christmas fairies went, Jingle fitted the 'Black Prince' description perfectly. Whatever game Jingle wanted to play, Winter wasn't a page boy, and he refused to behave like one.

"Look, we haven't got a choice about being here. Let's just try and make the best of it, shall we?" Winter said, trying to work out if Santa was pissed off at him for not obeying Jingle or at Jingle for giving him orders.

"Oh, I intend to." Jingle smirked, and Winter's jeans got a little tighter. He shifted on his chair, trying to ease the pressure.

"Cut it out, will you? You're worse than Rudolph in the mating season."

Jingle's eyes didn't leave his as he took a sip of orange juice, looking as calm as a glacier. "When were you in my dungeon?"

“I wasn’t. The monitoring globe in the Adult Department follows all fairies on wishes for safety reasons. One of the others was watching when you took Coal down there. They told me about it.”

Jingle leaned back in his chair, eyeing Winter like a science experiment. “Did anything particularly interest you?”

“Why, do you fancy getting a whipping?” As he spoke, Winter put both elbows on the table. *No rumble. It’s not me disobeying that pisses Santa off, it’s Jingle’s orders.* The older fairy didn’t give Winter time to contemplate the revelation.

“I’m starting to work out why our creator became vexed with me if I was anything like you as a youth.” Jingle’s tone hardened, and disapproval sparked in his eyes. “You don’t seem to be able to retain an instruction for more than a few seconds. Elbows.”

That hit a little too close to the mark for Winter’s comfort. “Finally accepted the truth, have you? For your information, Mr. High and Mighty, Santa corrected his errors when he created me. I can follow instructions just fine when I choose.”

Jingle took another swallow of his orange juice. Winter couldn’t help focusing on his bobbing Adam’s Apple. He bet it looked just like that when Jingle gave head. Which meant he looked like that too. Hot. Sinful.

“Prove it, or I’m going to think Santa didn’t fix a thing.”

It felt like another load of snow had been dumped on his head. He’d been outmaneuvered by a pro. Whatever he said now,

he'd lost, but remaining quiet would be ten times worse.

"I'm not a submissive. Your manipulation games won't work on me."

The tip of Jingle's tongue touched his top lip. Winter couldn't stop imagining the implied hot, wet promise. "Did I say we were playing yet?"

"Not playing at all. Ever," Winter snapped, annoyed at himself for being so easily manipulated.

Jingle took another sip of his drink, clearly loving every fucking second. "My mistake. I thought I caught something in your eyes."

"They're your eyes too," Winter blurted out.

Jingle's lips quirked. "No, no, they're not. And you're not me, you just admitted that. Wouldn't you like to explore our differences? Find out how unique we both are, despite what He—" he raised his eyes to the ceiling "—might like to think?"

Teasing or fast? Winter shoved the thought of how Jingle fucked out of his head. This couldn't continue. If there was one thing he was sure of, Santa didn't want them to get jiggy.

"We can examine any differences without getting physical. Why complicate things? What do you usually do this time of day?"

"I run to trigger the reset. I'd usually be about halfway around by now."

“So why aren’t you doing that now?” Winter said. Frankly, he would welcome a little time away from those intense, knowing blue eyes that seemed to strip him bare, body and soul.

“Because I’m not letting you out of my sight. You’re not fit enough to make the run today, and I’m not risking losing you as part of the reset while I’m out.”

Winter blinked. “I could leave?” Pain lanced in his chest. He clutched at the spot just above his left nipple.

In the next moment, Jingle crouched beside him.

“Where does it hurt?”

Winter batted Jingle’s hand away and pulled his shirt up. An almost black bloody bubble, about an inch across, bloomed on his chest. The bubble burst, and blood flowed down his chest, stark against his pale skin. His gaze shot to Jingle’s wide eyes.

“What the—“ he said, heart pounding.

Jingle yanked him off the chair and onto the floor. “Stay still,” he warned, then ran in a crouch across to the sink and grabbed a tea towel. On his way back, he wadded it up, then pressed it against the wound. Winter grunted at the extra pain, panic rising.

Jingle raised his eyes from the wound. “Stay down. Deep breaths. In...” He pulled in his own breath and let it out slowly, modeling what he wanted. “And out. And again.”

Winter clamped his gaze on those blue eyes as if they were an anchor and did as he was told. *Am I dying?* Jingle seemed pretty damn concerned, and he’d been a medic.

“Well done, keep going. Hold the towel on the wound. Keep pressure on it while I check out a few things.”

Tipping Winter onto his side, he examined his back, tapped on it in three places, then rolled him over again and did the same to the front of his chest. Jingle’s hair tickled as he pressed his ear to his chest. Winter didn’t know whether to hold his breath or not. Jingle would say if he needed him to do anything, wouldn’t he? Just having Jingle here, looking after him, made his panic subside a fraction.

“All good,” Jingle announced as he moved his attention back to the wound. “You’re doing great, lungs sound fine, just—“ he fell silent as he lifted the bloody cloth from the injury.

“This might hurt, but I need to do it.” Winter grit his teeth as Jingle used two fingers to press around the wound, then checked the amount of blood on the towel. It was soaked.

“That... that doesn’t make sense. I would’ve sworn—“

“What, what was it?” Winter looked down and saw an angry, blood-seeping... white snowflake. A tattoo? It certainly hadn’t felt like a tattoo. The one on his arm had stung, and burned a bit afterward, but this felt like he’d been stabbed.

Jingle got to his feet and examined the kitchen window opposite where Winter had been sitting. He even ran his fingers over the smooth pane of glass.

“That had all the characteristics of a bullet wound, but there’s nothing here.”

Winter looked up from examining his chest. The sharp pain had faded to severe soreness. He didn't want to touch it, but the snowflake looked pretty good. He focused on that rather than what had caused it.

"I need a new shirt," he mumbled and got up.

"We need to talk about this," Jingle insisted.

"Nothing to talk about. I haven't got a clue what happened either," he said, but it wasn't true. Santa was playing with them, or he was playing with Jingle, and Winter just happened to be unimportant collateral damage.

"You obeyed beautifully, though."

Winter gave the smiling Jingle the finger and made his way back upstairs. There were no more clean shirts in the wardrobe in Jingle's room. The only option left was a white t-shirt top from a pajama set, with a grinning Santa on the front. He turned it inside out, ignored the rumble, and put it on. His creator could find out what it felt like to be the angel on top of a Christmas tree for all he cared.

The thought of his maker's soul-destroying disinterest in him, and Jingle's scrutiny, had Winter moving to the bedroom window and looking out on the serenity of pristine snow. Absently, he touched the fabric over his Jingle Bells tattoo.

Even though they'd only just met, the fairy downstairs had haunted his life. A ghost that never quite left, however hard Winter tried. Jingle gazed back at him in the mirror and

reflected on the faces of his colleagues. The example of what he shouldn't be, what he should be.

"You obeyed beautifully."

For the first time in his life, Winter considered an observation about himself to be accurate because of the person who had given it. Every other flattering or disparaging comment he'd received, he'd mentally passed on to the man downstairs. And he'd praised a submissive behavior. Jingle had never been submissive, not even to their creator, but he knew plenty of submissives.

Up until his moment of defiance, which had been directed by Tinsel and Cedar, he'd pretty much done everything anyone ever asked him. Being the bottom of the pecking order in the Adult Department hadn't bothered him. *Is there some truth in what Jingle said?* If there were, if he was submissive, it meant he and Jingle were different. As appealing as that sounded in one way, it hurt his ego in another. Submissives were weak-willed needy creatures.

That isn't, couldn't be, me.

A knock at the door had him suppressing the urge to say he was resting, but he wasn't a coward any more than he was a submissive.

"Yes?"

The door crept open. "You ok? Any more pain?"

"I'm fine."

“If it’s going to work, we have to be honest with each other. You’re not fine. None of this is fine.”

Jingle stood there, relaxed, his shoulder leaning against the doorjamb. He didn’t show an ounce of the turmoil going on inside Winter. Anger bubbled, then faded into depression.

“We haven’t exactly got a choice about it working though, have we? We’re stuck here.”

“That’s true, but we have each other, which is a hell of a lot better than being on your own. Believe me, I know.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I get the impression that you’ve always felt unsure about your identity because of our resemblance. You’re not me, I’m certain of it, but I think exploring our differences will help your confidence.”

“What differences?”

Hooking his thumbs into his belt loops, Jingle modeled cool, calm, and collected detachment. That his hands almost framed his groin made Winter aware of his own package.

Winter bet their genitals were identical but did they suck cock in the same way?

Winter shoved the thought away and consciously relaxed his shoulders. No point in communicating his emotions any more than he already had.

“I’d like to try a little experiment, an exercise,” Jingle said. “Nothing heavy, just a mind thing. Dominance is about controlling yourself as much as anyone else, as I’m sure you know.”

Winter rubbed at a sore spot on the top of his shoulder, then cursed himself for performing a defensive ‘self-hug’.

“Me obeying your instructions downstairs was because you’re a paramedic and I was hurt, nothing else. I don’t have any secret submissive tendencies. I’m you, remember?”

A smile tickled the corner of Jingle’s mouth. “I beg to differ. I think our resemblance is purely superficial, about as significant as plastic surgery, but this is just for fun. A way to pass the time. I bet we both have many stories to tell. But as we could be here a long time, how about we eke them out instead of laying everything on the line straight away?”

“Fine with me. Let’s get on with this experiment of yours.” Winter took a step toward the door, wanting to take the initiative away from Jingle for once.

“I think it would be better to wait until this evening. We might as well do a little work outside while we have the light.”

“What work? I thought Santa provided everything.” The slight crease between Jingle’s eyebrows cheered Winter up. “Don’t tell me you’re still stuck on that idiotic alien theory?”

“Just because a being takes a certain form and does things that can’t be explained by current technology, it doesn’t prove he’s ‘magic’. Philosophical debate aside, whoever, or whatever, is controlling this place provides chunks of wood that need splitting to fit in the fire, but there’s only one axe. I’ll chop; you stack.”

“I’ll chop; you stack,” Winter immediately replied, then felt stupid as Jingle smiled. The bastard had manipulated him again.

“Fine with me. Might be good to see if whatever happened earlier has a residual effect. Stick two pairs of socks on though, you need to keep your extremities warm after the hypothermia.”



Keeping motionless and quiet while he sat on Santa’s mantlepiece in an idiotic elf costume felt like the most difficult thing Ariocho had ever done. Although watching Nick brood over his little collection of snowglobes on his desk helped.

The one containing Jingle and Winter sat front and center, and he could hear their voices as if they were in the room. He couldn’t work out what Santa was trying to teach the pair.

Nick’s finger stabbed toward the globe when Winter mentioned leaving, then he heaved himself to his feet. “Fuck, I didn’t mean that much. Let’s just dial it down; he’ll never work it out otherwise.”

Santa’s body obscured Ariocho’s view of the globe, but from what he could gather, he’d somehow wounded Winter.

A knock came on the door. Nick twitched. Hastily, he pushed the globes into a group on the corner of the desk.

“Come,” he called, voice deep and resonant.

The door opened, and Mistletoe came in wearing her formal, stout, gray-haired, Mrs. Christmas form.

“What is it?” Nick snapped.

“I thought I’d come and get you for lunch, seeing as you haven’t eaten what I left you for the last two days.”

Nick let out a heartfelt sigh. “I’m busy, my love. I promise I’ll —“

Mistletoe transformed into her blonde-bombshell mode. “But boys who don’t eat their dinners don’t get dessert.”

“Come here, my little Christmas pudding,” Nick, still in his Santa form, leered at his wife.

Kill me now. Am I really going to have to watch them fuck over the desk?

“Let’s move all the globes. I haven’t seen these before,” Mistletoe bent, peering at the festive prisons.

Santa caught her around the waist, pulling her away from the globes. “Actually, let’s go home, make an afternoon of it.”

Mistletoe’s red lips bowed into a smile, and the pair vanished.

Arioch stayed put, there was no telling when Santa would return or look in, but his words had piqued his interest. What was his wily old brother up to now?

CHAPTER 8



“EVER SPLIT WOOD BEFORE?”

They stood beside the cabin under overhanging eaves that sheltered the already split firewood and the foot-long log sections.

Winter scowled. “Can’t be that hard. Axe. Wood. Chop.”

“There’s a technique to it that’ll save your toes. Mine grow back; I’m not sure about yours yet. Besides, even if they grow back, it hurts like a bitch,” Jingle said and picked up the black-bladed, black-handled axe.

“This is a splitting axe. Lighter than a maul, wider than a standard axe. Put your log on the base.” He picked up the first log in the pile and put it on the shin-high chopping block. “Check for existing splits and cracks; it’ll split easier that way. Avoid knots, and stand back to stop chips from hitting your face. Aim at the side opposite you rather than the edge facing you. There’s less chance of a miss landing in your shin.”

Jingle pointed to a crack on the log. Winter moved a little closer to see. Even through their identical red coats, Winter

could feel the heat of him. They stood so close that he'd only need to turn his head to kiss his infuriating double. Winter was utterly confident that he didn't want that to happen. It was a shame his cock didn't feel the same way. The damn thing was trying to sit up and beg.

"I had a dream about you last night. Want to hear it?"

Winter froze, his mind filled with heaving, sweat-slicked, passionate bodies.

"No," Winter blurted. "We've got work to do."

Jingle's mouth twitched, and his gaze swept over Winter's body. "If you like. But the rest of you is saying yes. The question is, are you lying to yourself as well as me?"

"Chop your own damn logs." Winter turned back to the house, hoping to hide his erection.

Did he have some sort of glowing sign on his forehead saying 'please fuck me' or something? What he did know was that when Jingle mentioned his dream, he'd pictured being on his back, his partner's hand tight on his throat as he fucked him hard and fast. Ice-blue eyes stared back at him.

No, no way would that happen. If anything, it'd be him holding that sanctimonious bastard down. He was the improved version, the better one, the—

"Oh, come on. We're in this together," Jingle's cajoling voice broke into his thoughts. "Come and have a go. A good hard chopping session can relieve a lot of tension."

Winter turned around. “Why don’t you do it then? You seem pretty tense to me.”

A slow smile spread across Jingle’s face as he leaned his shoulder against the side of the house, relaxed as could be. “No tenser than you. And you know that I’m just going to follow you if you go back indoors.”

Being trapped inside the small building with this confusing, impossible, alter ego would be worse. Winter turned back and held his hand out. When Jingle didn’t immediately hand him the axe, he raised his eyebrows, not daring to tell Jingle, ‘Well, are you going to give it to me?’

He hoped to all that was festive that his host wasn’t going to make him ask for it. Not to mention that the number of ‘wood’ and ‘chopper’ jokes Jingle could use to make him squirm stretched into infinity.

The twitch of Jingle’s lips told him that the other man was on the exact same wavelength. *Bastard.*

Turning the axe around, Jingle presented the handle. Winter tried not to snatch it and almost succeeded.

“Manners,” Jingle murmured.

Irritated beyond endurance, Winter performed a florid bow. “Why thank you, kind sir,” he said, sarcasm dripping like whipping cream.

“You’re welcome, Junior.”

“Junior? Seriously?” Winter spluttered.

Jingle smirked. “I thought you’d like it better than *boy*.”

“I’ve got a name. It’s Winter, just like yours is Jingle.”

“I beg to differ. I don’t remember being given that name or ever using it. I’ve been Spencer all my life, and—“

“You’ve been Jingle for longer,” Winter said as his chest itched.

“And I only have your word for that. But before I pop back inside to put lunch on, let me tell you my dream. It happened right out here. You were on your knees, naked, hands cuffed behind your back, face in the snow, begging for my whip so prettily, with your ass burning hot enough to keep us both warm.”

Heat rose up Winter’s neck, not believing what he’d just heard. So Jingle was older than him; it didn’t give him the right to say stuff like that. It didn’t— Winter’s furious thoughts stalled as his dick pressed painfully against his zipper. Even his balls ached.

Jingle’s face morphed into a shit-eating grin Winter ached to stop with a punch. But the images Jingle had put in his head refused to let go of his mind or his lust. Before he could come up with a biting reply, Jingle turned away. Winter focused on Jingle’s tight backside.

He’s taking the piss, and I’m standing here, virtually with my tongue catching snowflakes, staring at his damn ass, as bright as a set of tree lights stuck on red.

“Oh, I am so going to enjoy you,” Jingle’s amused comment as he headed indoors had Winter swinging the axe into the log hard enough to split it straight through and end up embedded in the block.

After twenty minutes of furious work, Winter stripped off his coat. At least the hard, physical work took his mind off Jingle. *Fuck, who am I kidding?* He couldn’t think about anything else. Every time Jingle baited him, he’d reacted. Still, it felt kind of nice to be pursued; he always did the chasing during wishes.

He halted mid-swing as the first noise other than his or Jingle’s voice broke the air. The simple, haunting melody rose and fell; it spoke of loneliness, regret. It was so far from the cheerful noises a Christmas fairy should be producing that tears welled up in Winter’s eyes. It wasn’t right what Santa had done to Jingle. Their kind were gregarious; they needed to make others happy and content.

Jingle wandered around the corner of the house. The melody stopped as he lowered the wooden recorder from his lips. Silence battered at Winter as each stared at the other.

“You’ll get cold,” Jingle stated.

“That... that was so beautiful, so... sad.”

Jingle inclined his head. “I call it Mary. Haven’t played it for a while.” He held the raw, unvarnished recorder toward Winter. “Do you play?”

His expression must have given his dirty thought away as Jingle grinned. “I meant the recorder.”

Winter frowned, trying to ignore the innuendo. “I know that, and I don’t know if I can play it; I’ve never tried. A lot of the normal fairies play them.”

“Stick your coat on and have a go while I stack this lot.”

Winter took the instrument, turning it over in his hands. Even though he couldn’t remember ever holding such an instrument, it felt familiar. He blew a quick scale, then started on *Oh Christmas Tree*. After Jingle’s composition, playing anything overly cheerful would be crass.

When the last note died, he looked up to find Jingle watching him as if Winter’s head was a clear glass bauble, and he could see everything going on inside. Maybe he could. It didn’t mean Winter could work Jingle out in return.

“Very nice. But I don’t suppose you know anything not festive related?”

Jingle made him sound so... limited. He’d never been ashamed of being a fairy before. He’d been proud to make people’s long-held wishes come true, but Jingle, the failed fairy, the fuck-up used to keep others in line, dared to criticize his lack of experience?

Jingle watched him as if he owned the world, owned him. Well, he didn’t. Nobody owned him. *Except for the bastard who put me here. And that’s Jingle’s fault too.*

Rage boiled up like an avalanche, and before he knew it, his balled fist connected with Jingle's jaw.

Jingle grunted, falling sideways against the wood he'd just stacked. Seeing the mighty Jingle looking up at him, the one all his friends idolized, the one they all wished he was, rather than dull, safe Winter, felt damn good. His chest burned again, but he didn't react.

Jingle climbed to his feet, rubbing at his jaw. "So, you do have balls. I was beginning to wonder."

This wasn't a joke; he wasn't a joke. Winter threw a wild cross punch. Jingle hit his elbow. Using Winter's own momentum, he spun him around. Winter had no idea how Jingle accomplished it, but he found his face mashed up against the rough cabin wall, his arm wrenched up his back. Jingle pressed against him, breath hot against his ear.

"Was I going too slow for you? Is this what you wanted?" Jingle yanked his arm higher; the pain made Winter gasp, but at least his chest had stopped stinging.

"You think you can manipulate me, Junior? You don't fool me. You're playing with someone who knows what you're thinking, and it's got nothing to do with us looking alike. I know what you crave, even if you don't. You want someone to need you so damn much they forget about nice, they forget about everything but possessing you, mind, body, and soul. You want them to need to experience every gasp, every breath; to push you to heights you can't reach alone. Stop fighting

yourself. Stop fighting me. And when you're ready, I'll do something about it."

Winter couldn't answer as shame and desire warred within. He couldn't pick which emotion topped the other, but one touch, maybe one more word, and he'd come. With balls so tight they ached, he did his best to relax and wait for Jingle's next move. He needed Jingle to either touch him harder to finish what he'd started or vanish so he never had to set eyes on him again.

Jingle must have felt him relax. The next instant, he spun him around, slammed his back against the wall, but his hand still locked around Winter's wrist. They stared at each other. Fierce hunger shone in Jingle's eyes.

Winter had a second to wonder what Jingle saw in his before his wrist got pulled above his head. Jingle's lips hovered over his, sharing breath, but he didn't touch or speak.

Winter didn't dare move. He didn't want this to stop, but more than that, he didn't want to admit that this turned him on like nothing ever had before.

Jingle ducked his head, mouthed at his neck. Without thought, Winter tilted his chin up, giving Jingle more access.

Wrong, this is so damn wrong, but by Rudolph's balls, I want it.

Jingle pulled back, leaving Winter cold, bereft, and so damn confused he couldn't think straight. He lowered his arm,

feeling foolish as he realized he held it above his head after Jingle released him.

“Lunch will be ready,” Jingle said. He turned to go, then spun back around and cupped Winter’s face with a cold, muddy hand. A dark bruise stood out on his jaw.

Guilt rose. He’d never hit someone in anger in his life.

“Even if we weren’t stuck here together, I’d want you, and not because you look like me. Your reactions, your need, speaks to me, Junior. I could be your ultimate fantasy, your wish. But only on my terms. Understand?”

Blue eyes bored into jade ones, daring him to make the next move. Push away or pull toward?

Winter held his breath, mind whirling. Jingle had been alone for a decade; no way could he be thinking straight. Hell, Winter wasn’t, and he’d only been here a day. Santa must have known the effect being pushed together would have on them. Whatever it was, their creator wanted this.

“We need to stop this right now. He put me here to mess with you. Let’s not play into his hands.”

Jingle didn’t move. Winter hated that he had to be the one to make this choice, but he had to protect them both. Slowly, Winter took hold of Jingle’s wrist and lifted his hand away from his face. The small smile that lifted his doppelgänger’s lips made him scowl.

“I’m not playing hard to get. I mean it; we can’t have that kind of relationship.” Ducking out from in front of Jingle, he

headed for the cabin door, trying to ignore both his aching chest and cock. That he knew Jingle was checking out his backside didn't help.

“BDSM doesn't have to include sex.”

Winter's hand froze on the door handle as Jingle's voice rang out in the silence. The first snowflakes—of what Jingle had told him was the daily blizzard—drifted down.

“You need it, Winter, and so do I. Stop lying to yourself.”

Winter carried on into the house, Jingle's words swirling in his head like the snowflakes he'd left outside.

CHAPTER 9



LUNCH CONSISTED OF SOUP made from leftover ham and warmed, nearly stale bread. Tonight's meal would be soup made from whatever else remained. Feeding two had devastated his pantry, but Spencer wouldn't change Winter being here for anything, except perhaps freedom.

Tomorrow Winter would have to do the trek whether he wanted to or not because there was no way Spencer would leave him behind in case his companion was lost in the reset.

Spencer found the way Winter pointedly ignored what had gone on outside amusing, but if he let Winter get away with hitting him, their roles would become confused. The scene outside left Spencer with no doubts about their attraction to each other, even though his doppelgänger still might.

Food eaten, they both moved to the sink. "I'll wash, you dry," Spencer said. Satisfaction bloomed as Winter simply picked up the tea towel.

"Care to tell me why you clocked me earlier?" Spencer rocked his aching jaw from side to side. "You pack quite a wallop for

a guy who's never had to fight.”

Winter snorted. “Thanks, I think. I’m sorry about the punch, though. I don’t know what came over me; I just saw red. As for not fighting, I could have fulfilled a dozen bare-knuckle fighter wishes, not to mention ‘fighting for the damsel in distress’ ones. Probably why I could play the recorder too. I could have been in an orchestra or something.”

“So is that what made you angry? I can remember what I’ve done when you can’t?”

He heard a sigh and glanced up from the plate he was cleaning. Winter’s head bowed forward like the weight of the world sat on his shoulders.

“I remember some wishes, but I can’t deny there are gaps.”

Spencer’s heart ached in sympathy. “Look, it doesn’t matter,” he blurted. “We can explore what you know together. I can’t wait to find out your other talents.” His attempt at banter fell on deaf ears.

Winter’s jade eyes turned to him. “It still hasn’t sunk in, has it? I’ve only got a few years of hidden memories; you’ve got hundreds. You, Mistletoe, Garland, and Tinsel were the first adult fairies. You’ve done so much, both as Jingle and as Spencer.” The house shuddered, but they both ignored it. “And I’m... I’m like that damn ‘Santa Got Run Over By A Reindeer’ song; irritating, a bit funny, and not worth remembering because there’s always been something better.” Winter winced, almost as if his emotional pain had manifested physically.

Spencer needed to nip this self-pity depression in the bud before it spiraled out of control. This place took poor mental health and blew it all out of proportion. Winter's constitution was remarkable for a human, but Spencer hadn't established his doppelgänger's immortality. He didn't want Winter testing his limits as he'd done during his suicidal phase.

He itched to offer physical reassurance. Being held, a gentle understanding caress, would work wonders, but he didn't think Winter would accept that, not yet anyway. He found he liked the thought of working for what he wanted. Any achievement worth having took time and effort, and all he had was time.

"We've both got pasts. Things we can remember, things we can't. But here and now, this is what we have. And if we're not honest with each other, all we'll do is produce more hurt. Which, if you're right—" at Winter's cute scowl, he held up his hands. "—and I'm definitely coming on board with the Santa theory, we're only playing into his hands if we let this get to us."

Winter stared at him. For a moment, Spencer thought the green-eyed man would lean in and kiss him, despite what he'd said about not wanting a physical relationship. Desire curled in his belly as Winter's hands went to the hem of his inside-out top and pulled it up.

"Well, if we're being honest, you'd better see this."

Two more red, raw, new 'tattoo' snowflakes showed on his chest, trickling down from the first one this morning, from just above his nipple toward the side of his body. Blood welled up

where Winter had moved his shirt; the scabs must have adhered to it.

Spencer hastily dried his hands. “When? How? Have you washed these?” The possibility of infection with no access to basic antibiotics sent a shudder through him. He’d lived through the Napoleonic wars. Infection and disease had killed thousands more than immediate battlefield wounds. In the wrong circumstances, a splinter could kill.

“The big one was when I punched you. The third one was when I turned you down outside. And yes, I washed them.”

“You need to keep your shirt off while these heal over. We don’t have sterile dressings, and your shirt will stick to them. Come and sit down.”

Winter followed him over to the sofa, taking his shirt off as he went. When he was seated, Spencer propped his patient’s arm on the back of the couch, then fetched a blanket from upstairs and covered Winter’s other side.

Spencer tucked him in, careful not to touch the wounds but wanting to retain as much body heat as possible.

“You enjoy looking after people, don’t you?”

Spencer finished smoothing the cloth down, considering what to say, before he sat beside his patient.

“I do, especially people on the edge.” At Winter’s drawn-together eyebrows, he added, “Not that you’re near the edge of anything right now except confusion. I suppose caring for people is the only thing that’s remained consistent throughout

my life. People are fascinating, their bodies, their minds. You only get to see the real person when they're under stress."

"I only like to see people happy," Winter announced as if that was the only way to exist. His naivety was appealing, but he'd said he wanted to explore their differences.

"But wouldn't seeing that happiness be more profound if you'd also seen them in pain or struggling with something for a long time first?"

Spencer couldn't help smiling to himself as Winter frowned and grimaced through his thought processes. Leaving Winter to battle through the concept, he returned to the kitchen.

After finishing the washing up, he fetched a project he'd shelved some time ago and set himself up on the lone armchair. After creating the black pieces of the chess set, modeled after Napoleon and his army, he'd stalled when carving the white pieces representing the British. The two-inch high pawns, modeled on soldiers he'd known, brought back painful memories.

The set sparked a discussion, and he found himself remembering happy times with comrades rather than the bloody aftermath. Winter laughed along with him when he related the story of seducing a French soldier to escape capture. He'd captured Etienne's likeness as a bishop, knowing that the corporal would have loved the increase in rank.

Afternoon drifted into evening. The conversation lulled as he worked on the first white pawn. Winter dozed in front of the

fire Spencer kept stoked.

When Winter stirred, they ate the hearty, thick soup he'd made with leftovers and then sat watching the fire with tumblers of whiskey, or rather Winter watched the fire. Spencer watched Winter, still not quite believing he wasn't alone anymore.

Winter appeared relaxed, sleepy, and gorgeous with his bare shoulder peeking out from under the red and white Nordic blanket. The pale flesh begged for Spencer's touch, his fingers and lips, but not yet.

The mysterious tattoos appeared to be healing well, and Spencer had to admit, they looked damn good. He imagined tracing the delicate white designs with his tongue as Winter's skin reddened with desire. The points of the snowflakes begged for needle play, but that would have to remain a fantasy as he didn't have any needles. There were other ways to make a subject fly.

“So, I've shared some of my past, now it's your turn. Have you ever experienced erotic pain?” Spencer continued as they sat on either end of the couch. “A hard palm on your bare ass or the wonder of subspace?”

Winter, to his credit, didn't gasp at the audacity of the change of subject. *Maybe he's been waiting for it.* Spencer's belly tightened.

“Firstly, I told you that's not happening. This—“ he waved a hand between them ”—is complicated enough as it is.” Winter took a large mouthful of whiskey.

Spencer's dominant streak flared at Winter's nervous gesture. His mouth might be saying no, but he might as well have been screaming yes. Winter wanted more; he just couldn't give himself permission to go for it. Spencer was fine with that. He'd already given Winter all the permission required.

"Secondly, as Cedar and Snowflake would get a kick out of that stuff, they would be allocated those wishes. If I've ever fulfilled a wish like that, I don't remember. Santa removes memories of wishes that the fairy finds uncomfortable."

A telltale blush covered Winter's face and the exposed portion of his chest. *He protests too much.* Winter had definite submissive tendencies, although he refused to admit it. The reluctant ones always provided the most challenge, the most eventual satisfaction.

The urge to watch him, guide him, through the intimate experiences he'd shared with others gnawed at the necessity to take this at a pace Winter could absorb without spooking.

I'd see what I'd look like if it were me. The possibility of the ultimate connection, seeing the dynamic from both sides simultaneously, made his mouth water.

"I'd guess, being one of only three guys, you'd be fulfilling far more heterosexual dominant fantasies than submissive ones. And if this Cedar is naturally submissive, I guess you're right; he'd get any roles like that."

Winter's demeanor perked up. "See, told you I wasn't into all that groveling stuff," he said, then drew in a sharp breath. He lifted his arm.

A red, snowflake-shaped welt, perhaps an inch across, bloomed on his exposed flank. Fascinated, Spencer leaned closer, but the mark didn't progress further than an outline. No blood or white ink appeared.

Spencer couldn't help it. Reaching out, he traced the raised, red mark with a finger. "That's..." Spencer didn't finish his sentence. Telling Winter the marks were fascinating, beautiful, might not help.

"Weird? Fucked up? Tell me about it. If I knew why he was doing it, I might be able to stop it before I look like Jack Frost."

Spencer's gaze shot back up to Winter's scowling face. "He's real?"

The pink lips that matched his own twitched. "Oh yeah, Jack's a real sweetheart. The Easter Bunny is an uptight asshole, though. Runs his chocolate egg hens ragged. And don't get me started on Frosty the Snowman."

Spencer opened and shut his mouth. "I have no idea if you're bullshitting me or telling the truth." He grinned. "I like it."

It was Winter's turn to look surprised. "You like not being able to tell if I'm lying?"

"Yeah. Gives me another puzzle to work out."

Winter turned back to the fire, face pensive.

"Talk to me, Winter. Let me in."

“They’ve watched you, you know, over the years. Tinsel, Garland, and the others. You get bored when you’ve worked someone out. You move on. And as I’m you, that won’t take long.”

Spencer reached out and took his hand, biting his tongue not to say that as they were stuck here, neither of them could ‘move on’ physically. However, this provided an ideal opportunity to move Winter on mentally. The first items on his agenda were removing Winter’s residual loyalty to his old life and any discomfort he experienced about their similarities.

“You’re not me,” Spencer said, radiating sincerity. “Yes, we look alike, but we’re not the same person, and I’ll keep on saying it until you believe it.”

Winter pulled his hand away and hunched his shoulders. “You’re just trying to manipulate me.”

“If trying to get you to see clearly is manipulation, then I’m guilty as sin. Tell me, why do you think he created you?”

Spencer worked to keep his expression neutral as Winter fell headlong into his trap.

“To help out Garland and Cedar. With the rising human population, the adult wish list was getting longer despite working their asses off.”

“But why did he create you specifically? From what you say, he could have created any fairy. Why one who looks like me?”

Winter shrugged. “You were friends. You got on well until you and Mistletoe—“ he glanced up at the ceiling, ”—became

better friends.”

“And do you have that sort of relationship with him? Are you friends? Do you hang out?”

Winter shook his head. “He doesn’t hang out with any of the fairies these days, hasn’t done for centuries. He works, then disappears off with Mrs. Christmas. They’ve got a cabin a bit like this one on the outskirts of the village. I’ve hardly spoken to her, and Santa always pops up whenever I see her.” Winter shrugged, but the nonchalance didn’t fool Spencer. Not being trusted bothered Winter a great deal; he felt the same way.

“They usually keep their traditional forms around us; it keeps things separate. I’ve only seen them not in Mr. and Mrs. Christmas roles once. She’s as stunning as any other adult girl fairy; he’s a little more rugged than us.”

Santa’s appearance didn’t matter; Winter’s mental state did. The challenge of enticing a new sub had always been a relationship highlight. If Santa wanted to punish him, this certainly wasn’t the way to do it.

“So, Santa didn’t want a lookalike me, either as a worker or a friend, right?”

Winter frowned. “What are you getting at?”

Spencer’s aim was removing any residual loyalty to Santa but saying that could be counterproductive.

“Have you considered that he made you because he wants to see me suffer again? It took a long time, but I’d come to terms with my existence as an immortal amongst mortals. Perhaps he

takes the memories of the wishes you fulfill because they disturb you, and he wants to see you suffer over and over again. And because you don't remember, your pain is fresh each time."

Spencer couldn't tear his eyes away from what was essentially his own face going through a crisis of faith. Rather than punishment, this was a gift that kept on giving.

"So you reckon I was created as one of those squeezey stress reliever balls he uses every time he gets angsty?" Winter paused, eyes unfocused. "Wow, that's... I'm not even useful for fulfilling wishes."

Making Winter feel worse was the opposite of what he'd intended. Spencer grasped his hand again.

"I'm sure you are fantastic at granting wishes. You probably do the ones that would upset the others. You save your friends that stress."

Winter shook his head. "I'm an adult fairy, not a drunk-on-Christmas-Spirit ordinary fairy. You can't put a positive spin on being a walking, talking, punch-bag clone."

Knowing this could easily go horribly wrong and dump Winter into a deep depression, Spencer blurted, "No, no, you're not a clone. Don't you see? That's what proves we aren't clones. You've put up with that for years; I would've thrown my rattle out of the pram as soon as I worked out I wasn't being treated the same as everyone else. I bet I knew playing with Mistletoe would cause waves, and I still did it. Whereas you—"

As if noticing Spencer held his hand for the first time, he jerked his hand out of the older man's grip. "Yeah, yeah, don't rub it in. I'm a doormat."

"Look at me."

Huffing like a brat, Winter flopped his head in Spencer's direction.

Not smiling took effort, but Spencer managed it. "Self-pity is not attractive, but you are. Your ability to trust is amazing, and although he let you down, I never will." As soon as he said it, he realized that for the first time since Mary died, he meant every word.

He couldn't pinpoint when the shift between humoring Winter and believing him occurred, but it had. Although there had to be a scientific explanation for the 'magic' Winter claimed was behind their existence.

Winter's expression held all the warmth of his name. "Trust, as I'm beginning to realize, is for idiots. I was naive to trust Father Christmas, and I'd be doubly stupid to trust you. You haven't exactly got a good track record."

It was almost too easy. Within hours, he had Winter's trust in his creator hanging by a thread. Winter clearly needed to trust someone, and with Santa out of the picture, it should be child's play to transfer Winter's loyalty to himself as the only other option. That idea irritated him. He didn't want to win by default, but maybe Winter himself would prove a worthy opponent, at least for a while.

Usually, Spencer conducted this process with cold calculation but having his subject wearing his face and their creator/captor looking in, produced unsettling, intriguing dimensions.

“The thing with Mistletoe, not that I remember it, happened a long time—“

Winter stood up. The blanket slid off his shoulder, leaving him naked to the waist. Anger flashed in those bright green eyes. Spencer clenched his teeth to stop physically putting this stunning, hurting man in his rightful place, happy, content, stress-free, and under him.

“I wasn’t talking about her,” Winter snapped. “I’m talking about all the people who’ve trusted and relied on you over the centuries, the ones you walked away from.”

Spencer got to his feet too, not liking how Winter loomed over him.

“If you’d been paying as close attention as you claim, you’d know that after Mary, I never promised forever to anyone. But you’re different; I wouldn’t have to watch you grow old and ___“

Winter raised his hands, palm up. “How, by everything festive, do you know that? Santa could make me mortal just to fuck with you. Would you still care for me, or would you walk away as you did with all the others, including Spice, when I got old?”

Focusing on the one thing he could refute, Spencer kept calm. “I never walked away from Spice. One minute I was with him,

the next I—“

Winter's eyes lit with knowledge Spencer didn't possess. Spencer hated being on the back foot, but he needed to find out if Winter knew more about Spice, so he relaxed his jaw and didn't correct Winter's almost unforgivably rude interruption.

“Garland tried to abort the wish before Spice got beaten up. Being cruel to Spice upset him so Santa showed him Spice's future if he'd left him to you. His doctor diagnosed him with the beginning of arthritis in his shoulder. You left within days.”

With every muscle tense, Winter carried on twisting the knife. “You told him you were going on a business trip, then faked your death. After your funeral, he got so fucking drunk that he passed out, set your home on fire, and turned himself into a human candle. *He died*, Jingle, not immediately, but ten days later, in agony, heartbroken, because of you. And I bet he wasn't the first. You don't look back; you just stride ahead without thinking of the chaos you leave behind.”

Winter's words cut all the deeper because he knew that in those circumstances, he probably would have done precisely what Winter described. Hell, just because he couldn't remember doing it to Spice, it didn't wipe out the times he'd done it to others.

Usually, he ensured the person had a support network in place, but he still left and never looked back. He stopped grasping for a possible defense as two red patches bloomed on Winter's

chest. Winter didn't acknowledge them as he carried on, shoulders now slumped in defeat.

“You said that seeing someone happy after you've seen them distressed makes the experience more profound, but the same goes the other way around. Seeing someone you've made happy, degenerating, and in pain with nothing you can do about it must be the most hideous thing in the world. So you run, not caring that your presence would have helped them through it.”

Blood dripped from the rapidly forming wounds.

“Your chest, it's—“ Spencer blurted.

“Bleeding? Yeah, I know. Hurts like fuck, but neither of us can do anything about it, so why don't we both pretend it isn't happening? We can also pretend that I'm not a gullible idiot, and you're not an egocentric, callous—“ Winter grunted, and his hand went to his lower back.

Spencer held his hands up, palm forward. “Listen, whatever you think of me, I need to look—“

Eyes narrowed in pain, Winter shook his head. “No, you don't. If I've still got my immortality, I'll heal. If I haven't, I'll try to die with as little fuss as possible so you don't have to witness too much pain. Goodnight.”

Winter grabbed the blanket, draped it over himself, so it covered his back, then walked away, body stiff. Spencer's heart shriveled with the rejection, but if Winter spoke the truth, maybe he'd never had one.

Sitting back down, he decided that Winter had won that round, hands down. The amber liquid in the cut crystal glass offered anesthetic, but even if he managed to dull the sharp blade of Winter's words, he'd remember them in the morning.

If Santa aimed to torture him, maybe leaving Winter alone was the best way to keep him safe. Perhaps if they feigned indifference, Santa would take Winter back. The pang at the thought of being alone again confirmed Winter's opinion.

I'm a selfish bastard because I'll do damn well anything, including condemning Winter to physical and mental pain, to avoid spending any more time alone.

The game was still in progress between him and Santa. He picked up a piece from the chess set and plotted his next move as he fingered the undefined pawn. If he and Santa were the opposing generals in this game, he wondered if Santa considered Winter a pawn or the prize that Spencer did.



Arioch's nose itched, but he didn't dare scratch it. The spontaneous snowflake wounds were a nice touch, almost worthy of one of his own revenge scenarios. He had to admit to being a little jealous.

He could probably go back to Avery and tell him everything, get Santa to release his prisoners, but every additional

unjustified wound Winter suffered was another nail in good old Nick's coffin. Besides, he wanted to know how quickly Jingle and Winter would work out why the wounds were appearing.

Arioch had worked it out after the second bloody tattoo appeared, but then again, he'd spent nearly a thousand years thinking up imaginative ways to make people suffer.

CHAPTER 10



WINTER PAUSED ON THE top of the stairs, half hoping that Jingle would follow him to try to change his mind or at least insist on checking his wounds. No creaking from the sofa, no scuff of feet on the floorboards.

Being right about Jingle didn't feel good. His limbs felt heavy as he opened the door of the bedroom he'd been allocated. He wasn't accustomed to the after-effects of hard physical labor or pain that lasted more than a few seconds. With the ability to pop back to the North Pole and heal in the blink of an eye, no fairy had to experience discomfort or pain for long, unless they enjoyed it like Coal.

Apart from Jingle.

And now me.

His eyes adjusted to the moonlight streaming through the window, and the serene landscape drew him over. It looked unreal, too perfect to be true, and it was. This was a fake scenario designed to wear Jingle down, to make him suffer.

He believed Jingle about the reason he'd been created. He pictured himself as a Christmas tree ornament, hanging around, waiting for a sadistic child to pick him to play with, choose him to break.

The snow blanketed everything, cold, emotionless. Wishing it could do the same for him, he stripped off his jeans, gritting his teeth as the fabric dragged at the raw flesh above his left buttock. He climbed into the bed naked, arranging himself so none of the wounds contacted flesh or cloth. It left a lot of bare skin exposed to the chilly air.

He never thought he'd miss the seemingly endless cheerful goodnights that had always lulled him to sleep, but he did so much that his heart hurt worse than the damn snowflakes his maker had branded into his flesh.



He woke to the clattering of saucepans. Blurry-eyed, he checked that he hadn't gained more magical tattoos while he slept. The ones from last night no longer seeped fluid, so at least he could cover up. Taking a deep breath and ready to do battle, he put on the dressing gown and headed down the creaking stairs.

“There you are. I was just coming to wake you.” Jingle smiled as if they'd done this every morning for years. It wasn't quite the enthusiastic greeting Winter got at home, but it was a damn

sight more cheerful than he'd expected, given what he'd said the night before.

Maybe Jingle accepted that he abandoned humans who cared about him when the going got tough. It had been a horrible way to treat people, but hand on heart, could Winter say he wouldn't do the same under identical circumstances?

"Good morning, lovely day," Winter said automatically as he made his way to the bathroom.

"You might not think so later."

Alarm bells clanged. He thought he'd made himself clear last night. "What?"

"Reset run, remember?"

"Right," Winter mumbled and escaped to the bathroom.

No mirror. He could see the snowflakes on his chest, which were still angry and red, but he couldn't twist enough to get a good look at the mark on his back. Telling himself it didn't matter, he used the facilities and came out.

"Everything ok?" Jingle asked.

"Fine."

"The tattoos?"

"I said they're fine." Winter tried to keep the irritation out of his tone but failed, especially as the damn snowflake on his back chose that second to burn again.

"So you're that flexible that you can see your own back? That's another difference between us. What was it, another

snowflake?”

Winter ignored him and eyed the creamy sludge in the two bowls Jingle placed on the table. “What’s that?”

“Oatmeal. Slow-release energy to keep you going. And I won’t give up until you tell me, or I see it; I’m a persistent bastard.”

Winter ignored the urge to tell Jingle he was only persistent when it suited him and slipped into his seat. That would only lead to more arguments. He wrinkled his nose as he contemplated his breakfast.

“Looks like warmed-up reindeer food, minus the hay.”

“Same concept, but we only have to do twenty miles, not circumnavigate the planet in an evening.” Jingle sounded unnaturally enthusiastic, considering he’d just announced what sounded like torture.

“Twenty miles? Very funny.”

Jingle shrugged. “Give or take, it’s not as if I can google the distance. It took me eight hours the first time, but I was pulling a sled. Now it takes me about two and a half.”

“I can’t run twenty miles in that time.”

“What time can you do?”

Winter scowled; he’d never run five miles as far as he knew.

“I’ve got better things to do than run.”

“You might have done back where you were. Here, running twenty miles provides food. We are about to eat the last of our

supplies. And although I know I can survive without food, I'm not sure about you. Plus, starvation is bloody uncomfortable."

So you've done that too, have you? Three cheers for the mighty Jingle.

Winter refused to pick up his spoon. "You running twenty miles resets this place. No one said anything about me having to do it. How about we have a little experiment? You run on your own, and we'll see if the place resets as normal."

He twisted in his seat as three stripes of fire lanced across his back. "Fuck!"

Jingle was immediately beside him, pulling at the front of his top.

"It's my back; feels like someone—" By this time, Jingle had pulled the dressing gown down his shoulders and lifted the back of Winter's top.

"Whipped you," Jingle finished, his voice tight with anger.

"The fuck?" Winter twisted, fruitlessly trying to see.

"Calm down. Deep breaths." He held Winter's gaze, modeling what he wanted. Seconds passed, and Winter's panic faded a little.

"Well done. Now, I know this might sound stupid, but say something you know will upset me."

Anger swept through Winter's veins. "I'm not playing your damn games. Is there a mirror in this place?"

"Sit still and breathe. Do it."

Jingle's determined expression had Winter wondering if he'd tie him down to get him to comply. *Then he'd be able to do anything to me.* He froze, trying to process the implications of the flash of lust the thought caused.

"No, no mirror," Jingle said. "But each time you've experienced pain, it's coincided with me being annoyed or disappointed with you. I think whoever is playing games with us might be punishing you for it."

His arousal fled as he processed Jingle's words. "And me not running with you upset you that much?"

Jingle shook his head. "No, the thought of this place being reset back to what it was before you arrived, as in minus you, upset me."

Winter opened and closed his mouth. "Oh." That was fair enough. Bracing himself for more pain, he said, "I don't want to be here." Nothing happened.

Jingle's eyebrows rose. "Not upsetting news. I don't want to be here either. Try again."

Winter looked Jingle right in the eyes. "I've spent my whole life resenting you, trying to prove I'm not you. Yet every time you do something wrong, I get side looks. Whatever I do, however hard I try, I'm treated as the watered-down, the 'not quite as good' you."

Jingle's blue eyes pierced his soul, but Winter experienced no physical pain.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but I had nothing to do with your creation or how the people who knew me as Jingle treated you.” He took Winter’s hand. The warm skin contact grounded him. He should have pulled away but didn’t.

Those blue eyes bored into his. “However, I am glad you’re here. But if we can’t leave together, I don’t want either of us to go.”

Winter blinked. “You’d keep me here, make me suffer with you when I could leave? They were right. You are a selfish, unfeeling bastard.”

“Selfish? Yes. I’ve never claimed otherwise. Unfeeling? Perhaps. I’ve had to insulate myself from painful emotions over the years to cope with being around people. But watching everyone—” Fire touched Winter’s back again, but he kept still. “—you care about die, over and over again, would harden anyone.”

Winter stood up. “We were both wrong. You’re not unfeeling, and it’s more than negative feelings about me that cause the effect. I’ll get dressed.” He stood up, not caring if Jingle saw the blood he could feel dripping down his back.

“Stop right there. If you get dressed with your back like that, you could get an infection, and the scabs will form onto your shirt.”

Within a few minutes, Jingle returned with a basin of boiled salted water and a clean towel. Shirtless, Winter leaned his elbows on the table. Jingle dampened the towel. The heat of

the cloth almost burned his back, but he didn't move. After a single stroke, Jingle paused.

"These have stopped bleeding already," he said but continued to clean away the blood.

"Done?" Winter asked as Jingle stopped patting his back with a dry towel.

"We can stay here another day if you like," Jingle said.

"And eat what tonight? I'm fine, good as—" He winced then scowled at Jingle. "What did I do to piss you off that time?"

Jingle glanced away, his cheeks coloring. "You said 'fine'. You say it when you're anything but fine. I'd like you to be honest with me."

Winter gritted his teeth to keep the comment, 'Shame you didn't do that with the humans who loved you' inside. He didn't need to bleed anymore today.

Instead, he said, "How about we keep interaction to a minimum? I'll try not to piss you off, and you try not to get annoyed."

Jingle inclined his head. Winter felt only a dull ache in his chest. His host wasn't happy, but at least he appeared to be attempting to moderate his reactions.

Ten minutes later, Winter stepped outside the cabin. The cold bit at his nose as it did at home. As they were in a snowglobe, it didn't matter which direction he went in, as long as he kept going in a straight line. He wondered how many laps of the globe he'd done that first night before he stumbled to the

center. It only took a few seconds for his jogging footsteps to be joined by Jingle's.

They ran, Jingle trailing Winter in silence until the cold air burned Winter's throat and his legs ached. He slowed to a walk. Without saying a word, Jingle took off a backpack Winter hadn't noticed him wearing and handed over a water bottle.

"Thanks."

"Welcome."

Only the crunch of their boots in the two or so inches of snow under the trees broke the silence. Winter opened his mouth to start a conversation more than a dozen times but stopped before speaking. He wasn't used to not interacting with the people around him.

How the hell had Jingle coped with a decade alone?

Winter lasted another mile before he broke his self-imposed silence. "You said you wanted me to be honest with you."

"That's right."

Winter noticed that Jingle didn't say he'd try to be honest in return. As always, Jingle wanted everything to be one-way. If the pain magic worked both ways, Jingle would be suffering right now; his sanctimonious attitude sucked reindeer balls.

Winter didn't look at his doppelgänger as he said, "What if my honesty pisses you off?"

“Then I guess you’ll bleed again. But being lied to, or you being evasive, will piss me off more.”

“Fan-bloody-tastic. I bet you’re a picky bastard too.”

“I can’t change my nature.”

Winter scowled as Jingle’s lips twitched with amusement.

“How about you do me a favor and try.”

He flinched as his chest twinged. Jingle stepped toward him.

Winter held up his hand to stop his progress. “How about you don’t ask me how I am, and I won’t say I’m fine. Maybe we might get back without me ruining another shirt.”

Winter alternated jogging and walking. His legs ached and his lungs burned with the cold air. The vague sore spot on his left heel evolved into raw flesh that he imagined bleeding through his sock. He dropped to a walk again, working hard to keep his lip buttoned and his limp to a minimum. Jingle carried on running for another ten paces before glancing behind him and slowing to a walk too.

Chest, back, and now his foot. So Jingle was disappointed with his fitness. Big deal. Yet another way in which he didn’t match up to the original.

They finished the trek nearly two hours after the snow began to fall. Jingle bounded up the three steps to the porch, as fresh as he’d started.

Winter hated him just a little bit more.

“Go grab yourself a set of clean clothes while I run you a warm bath. Might stave off some stiff muscles.”

Winter sat in the bath, said a polite “No, thanks” to Jingle’s offer of a massage and a meal when he came out and collapsed into his freshly made bed.

Not wanting to upset Jingle and suffer more punishment, when the other inmate of this festive prison knocked on the bedroom door a few hours later, he came down for dinner.

Every muscle screamed as he limped down the stairs. After eating what Jingle put in front of him, he said, “Thanks,” and retreated upstairs. He lay in the bed, light off, wondering what had become of the other adult department fairies and the rest of the North Pole.

The next three days followed the same routine. They did the reset trek. Winter’s muscles continued to ache. He ate the oatmeal, padded the raw spots on his heels with the bandages Jingle silently handed him, and set off. When they got home, he soaked in the bath, ate what Jingle put in front of him, politely refused a massage, ignored the various pains his attitude caused, and went to bed. He didn’t spare his colleagues a thought on the fourth night as exhaustion overwhelmed him. Never had a pillow and quilt felt quite so good.

The knock on his door came far too early the next day. He tried to move and groaned as everything hurt. The pain concentrated in his back and knees. He’d thought it would get

easier with time, but four days in and he gritted his teeth to stop another moan escaping as he hauled his ass out of bed.

Jingle's displeasure at his lack of stamina literally gave Winter a pain in the back as he limped out the front door. A stumble on the way down the porch steps gave an instant shot of adrenaline. He tried to break his fall with a hand, but he'd already stuffed them in his pockets. A twist let his shoulder hit the snow before his face. The thought of the twenty miles ahead of him added lead to his limbs. He lay there, trying to pluck up the energy to get up, let alone run twenty miles.

Seconds stretched, and he expected the pain of Jingle's disappointment as his eyes bored into his back, but he really didn't give a leftover sprout what Jingle thought. He wasn't sure if the sharp pain in his back was muscular or more of Jingle's negative emotions.

With a sigh, he pulled his hands out from under himself.

A hand hauled on his bicep as he attempted to wipe the snow off his face.

"Come on, up you get; no running for you today."

"Oh, thank fuck for that," he mumbled, drawing a chuckle from Jingle.

"And you're going to let me massage you."

"Yeah," he mumbled, letting Jingle pull him to his feet.

"Good lad, you know it makes sense."

A warm glow bloomed his chest, a little like the one he got when fulfilling a wish. He would have stumbled again, had it not been for Jingle's steadying arm across his shoulder.

This couldn't be a wish scenario after all, could it?

Santa could alter all sorts of things about a fairy and a wisher to secure a successful wish, including appearance, personality, and memories. The revelation stunned him.

I might not be Jingle's clone.

Jingle the Fairy might not even exist.

This guy could just be the most narcissistic human in history who arrived here minutes before I did. And the sooner I fulfill the wish, the sooner I can go home. But if I go straight from 'Never in a million years' to 'Yes, Master,' he'll smell a rat.

Time to be the one doing the manipulation for a change.

CHAPTER 11



AT LAST, THE PIGHEADED ass had given in. Spencer's relief as Winter leaned on him, let himself be helped back indoors, felt almost as good as a post-orgasmic haze. The last few days of watching Winter struggle, not admitting his discomfort, in body or mind, had pinged every instinct Spencer possessed to step in and control the issue. That his own disappointment with Winter's stubbornness, his lack of trust, might be causing much of the man's pain annoyed him even more.

Spencer attempted to rationalize the effect of his own negative emotions on Winter in the same way he did when driving a subject toward subspace. Pain had to happen for the desired outcome to occur. It shouldn't upset him, just like a midwife didn't get upset when ministering to a laboring mother.

This situation with Winter, this setting, confused the hell out of him, so he focused on the sub/dom aspect of their relationship. He knew that dynamic inside out. Clone fairies in a snowglobe? Nope, not going there. Despite Winter denying it,

there was no doubt in Spencer's mind that his doppelgänger had a submissive nature. Every time he really pushed, Winter yielded, but he liked that it'd been a bit of a fight.

The immediate punishment inflicted on Winter when Spencer experienced irritation, disappointment, or sadness, added a peculiar, both painful and fascinating, dimension to their relationship. Having the sub know precisely when he upset the Dom wasn't productive, especially with a new sub. Training was an ongoing process; it took time, like fashioning a clay sculpture, as both parties learned and adapted to each other. Things he'd correct further along were allowed now, but he noticed them, and Winter experienced his displeasure physically.

Spencer had spent the last decade feeling and behaving exactly how he wanted. But he'd never had to control his inner emotions, second by second, to this extent, even when he had been in the world. It would be an exercise in self-control for them both; he relished the new challenge, the puzzle.

He found himself staring at the other man, wondering how many snowflakes now graced his body, marveling at every utterance and committing it to memory. Although it had been nearly a week, he still woke several times a night to check Winter hadn't vanished. But letting Winter know just how obsessive he'd become would be counter-productive. Winter needed a confident, consistent, no-nonsense Dom, not someone who spent every moment gazing at him like a moonstruck calf.

“Go upstairs and strip; I’ll get some oil.” Spencer watched with satisfaction as, without comment, Winter went to the stairs. But he hadn’t said, “Yes, Sir.”

Winter stumbled. Spencer’s buoyant mood soured. It appeared they both had many things to learn.

He opened the kitchen cupboard, and his heart beat a little faster. Next to the olive oil he’d intended to use sat a bottle of coconut oil; his preferred massage oil and lube. Merely its scent, hell, even the sight of the bottle, was enough to perk up his dick. The bottle hadn’t been there when he’d made breakfast less than thirty minutes ago.

We’re nothing but exhibits put here for entertainment. For a moment, he considered not playing, not giving their tormentor a thrill. But Santa didn’t want him to be happy, and right now, making Winter feel good would give him an incredible high. Grabbing the bottle and a couple of towels, he headed upstairs, wondering how far he should push Winter.

Stunned by the sight in front of him, he stopped at the open bedroom door to drink it in. Winter lay, naked, face down on the bed, his forehead resting on his hands. A sprinkling of white snowflakes curled over his side; only one appeared inflamed, and the redness faded as he watched.

There were far more than he’d imagined, but he couldn’t help thinking how perfect they’d look if Winter ever developed a tan. If Santa thought Winter having marks on his body that Spencer had caused would upset him, he could think again.

He couldn't think of another word except beautiful to describe the sleek muscles under the pale skin. Shoulders, back, and thighs that blended into a muscular, firm backside built for pumping. Truly a wish come true.

The urge to mark this pale canvas took his breath away, to add stripes of red with a cane and decorate it with blood-red ropes. Or perhaps green to match his eyes.

"Stop gawking and get on with it," Winter grumbled.

Spencer let himself smile. "Feeling eager?"

"You are."

The implication that Winter didn't feel the same enthusiasm caused a wave of irritation.

The man on the bed jerked as a welt line appeared across his shoulders.

"Ah, fuck." Winter twisted around to look at him, a scowl on his face. "I meant I could feel you were eager, not that I wasn't. Chill, will you?"

Spencer let the fact that Winter had given him an order go as he concentrated on the implication of his words. "You literally felt it, or you imagined it?"

Winter turned his head back to his hands, but Spencer swore his face had turned a little pink.

"I felt it. Sort of a warm feeling in my..."

"In your what?" Spencer pushed, his lips quirking at Winter's cute embarrassment.

“In my belly. Happy now?” Winter growled.

“Can’t you tell?” He didn’t bother keeping the amusement from his voice.

Winter pushed up from the bed, his biceps and ass muscles tensing. Spencer wanted to take a bite.

“That’s it; I’m done. I don’t care if you do hurt—”

Spencer put his hand on his flighty sub’s ankle. The touch was light, but Winter froze as if it’d been a leg iron.

“I’ll never want to hurt you unless it’s to help you get somewhere you want, or need, to go. And right now, I’d like to ease some of the muscle pain you’re feeling. Lay back down.”

Winter complied without a word. The mark on his back had already faded to near invisibility. How long would marks Spencer intentionally gave him last? He hoped they’d stay longer than the wounds he’d caused with his uncontrolled emotions.

Rubbing his hands together, he warmed the oil he’d poured into his palm. “I’ll start with your shoulders,” he announced, not wanting to spook Winter again and risk the consequences of his own disappointment. “Keep your eyes shut and breathing easy. You might experience a little discomfort as I ease a knot, but it won’t last long if you stay relaxed and work with me.”

Winter drew in a long breath and let it out slowly.

Spencer couldn’t help it; he waited, counting in his head. He got to ten before the muscles in Winter’s back tensed. Not bad,

but they could work on that. Some of Spencer's previous subs would've waited hours after receiving a similar instruction.

Usually, he set those ones free soon afterward. Training and correcting had always given him the most pleasure. A perfect submissive had never been born or created, but micromanaging every word, gesture, and movement just so he had something to correct, bored him. He preferred taming wild horses to tweaking a competition dressage mount. He hoped Winter would never become that compliant.

Reaching out, he trailed a finger down his spine, smiling as Winter twitched under his touch.

"There now, don't worry, I've got you. All you have to do for me is relax." He could almost feel Winter grinding his teeth. He probably recognized the technique of setting an obedience precedence, even when the subject would have done exactly what had been asked anyway. And yet, Winter hadn't protested, hadn't moved.

Complying with an instruction because he'd been about to do that behavior anyway would shift into complying because instructions were logical, and then, fingers crossed, Spencer would see true obedience as the trust built. For most of his subs, obedience had been his primary goal, but with Winter, for some reason, he wanted his trust more.

The one person whom Winter should have been able to depend on, his creator, had crapped on him from an incredible height. That Winter had hunched his shoulders and carried on showed

the man's strength; most subs would've been curled in a corner rocking.

Keeping his voice low, unhurried, Spencer said, "Don't Move," then climbed on the bed and straddled Winter's thighs.

He began with long gentle strokes to warm and loosen the tissue, then worked on one side of the spine, with medium pressure, easing his fingers from the center to the flank. Millimeter by millimeter, Winter relaxed into the mattress. But it wasn't until Spencer pressed his thumbs into the back of Winter's neck, found a knot and began to work it, that he got a groan.

"Ah, fuck, that's so damn good."

"Are you going to argue about me noticing you're in pain again?"

The sigh, followed by the singsong answer, "No," earned Winter a slap on the butt.

"Watch your manners," Spencer barked.

"Am I meant to say 'ow' now because I know that didn't piss you off?"

Spencer decided he'd have to put some serious thought into how to manage a sub able to read his emotions.

"No, it didn't, but carry on being disrespectful and it might. Or I might decide that turning your ass red is what makes me happy."

Winter settled down, and Spencer began counting again. Winter tensed twice before he spoke again after a count of thirty.

“Would you please finish the massage,” he said in a respectful tone, paused, took a breath, and added, “Sir.”

Spencer hoped his satisfaction had been communicated via the ‘warm feeling’ Winter had mentioned. Verbally praising him right now might force Winter into more unproductive resistant behavior. Pride in a sub who thought obedience meant weakness always provided a hurdle to overcome.

Spencer began to work on his shoulders again.

“Mmm, you really like doing that, don’t you?” Winter murmured.

Spencer could only presume Winter could feel his pleasure via the ‘glow’ rather than his rock-hard cock. This immediate feedback might just work in both their favors after all.

Finally having his hands on him, hearing his groans of pleasure, made Spencer ache for more. Winter had responded well so far, but how far could he push him? If he went too far, too fast, Winter might spook, but although he’d learned a good deal of patience in his life, Spencer had always gone for things he wanted. Seeing what was essentially his own face gasping in pleasure? No, he didn’t think he could wait another day to experience that.

Given Winter’s physical condition an hour ago, he usually would have left his subject to sleep after the massage, but

Winter appeared to be recovering rapidly. Whatever Spencer did, one thing he would never do was ask for permission.



Not leaning forward to get a better look took a lot of willpower, but with Nick almost caging the globe with his hands Arioch couldn't get a good view. Whatever was going on, and it appeared sexual, had Nick's rapt attention.

He wants this. Wants them to get closer. So he can drag Winter away and increase Jingle's suffering?

The theory didn't hold water. If Santa was doing this to make Jingle mentally rely on Winter, surely the connection would be the other way, with Jingle experiencing Winter's pain and pleasure physically?

Arioch decided to watch a little longer and work things out before taking his findings to Avery.

CHAPTER 12



WINTER CONCLUDED, YET AGAIN, that it would have been so much easier if Santa had given him the deeply submissive personality this wish required. Having to bite his tongue pissed him off, but feeling his wisher's emotions helped. The balance between being reluctant—but not too reluctant—took a lot of thought and self-control. It was damn tough to concentrate when his wisher's fingers were so talented, not to mention the delicious weight of the outstandingly fit Jingle on his thighs.

Jingle or Spencer? Winter debated on what to call his wisher. Yes, the wisher called himself Spencer, but from the rocking snowglobe, he clearly wanted Winter to think of him as a fellow fairy.

Now that he'd worked out that the man touching him was a wisher rather than his clone, it made the whole conclusion of this wish easier. Yes, the scenario the man had dreamed up was weird and complicated, but when it came down to it, like

many adult wishes, it involved sex the wisher wouldn't be able to experience in the real world.

Jingle shifted down, slowly working his knowing fingers up Winter's right thigh, massaging deeply. *By Rudolf's balls, that feels good.* He felt about as tense as custard being poured on a Christmas pudding. Jingle's pleasure in touching him had chased his aches and pains away. His mind turned to the real reason he'd been dumped into this confusing situation, making a Christmas wish come true.

When Jingle moved lower, giving his feet the same slippery treatment, Winter moved his legs apart in the hope that his wisher would take the hint.

Oil dripped onto his buttocks, a little flowed into his crack, and he flexed his hips back, begging. The sharp sting and sound of the slap on his butt caused lust to hit him like a freight train. Something changed, clicked. Instead of manifestations of his wisher's displeasure, he now felt his desire.

A groan wrenched out of Winter's throat. "Again, do it again."

His words produced a chuckle. "I told you you'd like it."

"You love it," Winter blurted. "It's fucking fantastic. Do it again, but harder this time." Winter lifted up to give his poor squashed cock some room and pointed his butt higher.

"Not trying to tell me what to do, are you?"

How the hell does he sound so calm if he's even half as horny as me?

Winter shook his head. “No, no, I wouldn’t dream of it; just please do that again. I’ve never felt anything like that. I need —”

“Stay still, keep quiet, do what you’re told, and I might.”

Holding still while Jingle’s thumbs rubbed oh so gently over his balls took more than Winter thought he could possibly endure. The twenty-mile run would be easier than this. The touch became firmer; a finger stroked over the delicate skin between his balls and ass. But it took Jingle’s finger pressing into his hole lightly before it left to continue teasing his balls to make him forget the rules again and moan.

A sharp tug on his balls, followed by an increasing grip, had him dropping his forehead to his folded arms, but he didn’t dare move his hips. He had no idea whether he wanted Jingle to stop or squeeze harder. Pleasure and pain swirled. He didn’t know which sensations came from him and which from the wisher.

“Aw fuck, that’s—” He trailed off, not knowing how to express or process the sensations. The world faded as Jingle tugged again.

“I wish I had my cock and ball torture gear, the things I could do to you.” The hunger in Jingle’s tone shone through, but it didn’t eclipse the transferred desire. Winter had never wanted his balls hurt before, now he couldn’t think of anything but a twist of pain as he climaxed.

“You suffer so beautifully.” The compliment came with a harder squeeze on his balls, and he nearly came.

“Turn over.”

Winter flipped over. He focused blurrily on Jingle, who reached out and ran his finger, slippery with oil, across Winter’s cheek.

With their gaze locked together, Jingle moved his hand down to Winter’s throat and curved his fingers around it. Winter swallowed, his cock pulsing. Had his personality been altered? Did he get turned on by being dominated, by pain, in real life? He could stop this by grabbing Jingle’s wrist and forcing it away, yet he stayed still, cock like iron, and loving how his wisher drank in his every twitch and gasp.

Jingle tightened his grip, cutting off Winter’s ability to breathe. Winter lay there, cock rigid between them, heart banging in his chest, every nerve alive with anticipation. Just as Winter’s vision darkened, Jingle let go, a smile on his lips.

“Beautiful, just beautiful.”

Pride swelled before Winter realized that Jingle could be complimenting his own face; they were identical.

Jingle’s smile broadened. “I meant the way you kept still; it can’t have been easy.” Reaching out, he traced the snowflake tattoos next to Winter’s nipple. “I don’t like why they’re here, but I love them. They suit you.”

“Then why—”

Jingle’s finger on his lips and the ache in his chest silenced him. “All you have to do is experience what I give you. Some

of it won't be easy, but I promise the result will be worth it. Now, hold on to the headboard and don't let go."

"What are you—" He grunted, hips arching up as a thin line of fire touched his ass.

Jingle frowned. "I told you to be quiet. If you want me to leave you alone, I will. If you want me to stay, you'll do what I say. Do I need to check your back?"

"It was my ass. Felt like a cane. It's not bleeding."

"Headboard. Hands."

Jingle trusting him enough not to check what Winter thought was a welt on his backside enforced the need to trust his wisher in return. Lips pressed together, he reached up and grasped the heavy carved headboard.

Jingle's hands resumed roaming, tracing the snowflakes down the sides of his belly. He ached to tilt his hips up, to grab Jingle's hand and put it on his cock. He'd touched his balls mere minutes ago; why not do it again now?

Winter's eyes widened when Jingle touched his finger to Winter's lips.

"Lick."

How one small word set him on fire, he didn't know, but it did. Winter obeyed, craning his neck forward to wrap his tongue around the digit. The taste of coconut burst on his tongue, and he didn't think he'd ever be able to smell or see one again without thinking about Jingle. He gave it a slow dirty suck for good measure. The finger popped out of his mouth.

Jingle's lips quirked up. "Hints are allowed; manipulation is not."

The finger returned to his nipple, traced over it, tweaked. Jingle's gaze remained on Winter's face as he subjected both nubs to the same treatment.

The tweak turned into a pinch, then a savage twist. Winter's hands left the headboard, got halfway to knocking Jingle's hands away. His ass smarted again. Gritting his teeth, he held on again.

"Well done, but you're fighting it. Trust me to know what you need." Jingle cupped Winter's balls, squeezed, just on the verge of pain. He released them, only to slap Winter's cock hard. He couldn't help curling to the side a little, but straightened out quickly, his cock throbbing more than ever.

They locked eyes, and Jingle stripped off his clothes. It wasn't like looking in a mirror. Apart from the snowflake tattoos, Jingle's body was harder, sharper, more ripped than his own.

Jingle gave Winter's cock another slap, then his mouth came down hard on his. Winter gasped into his mouth as Jingle's hand went between his legs and squeezed his balls. The hand moved up. Still slick with oil, it fisted his cock, once, twice.

"You'll get what you want, probably a little more than you think you can handle, but only on my terms."

It felt so damn good that Winter could only nod. His hands tightened on the headboard, determined not to let go and risk stopping things again. Kissing as he went, Jingle moved down

Winter's body biting, licking, and drawing red marks with his nails.

Winter's erection twitched against his belly, leaving a wet spot on his skin. His hips thrust up, desperate to feel Jingle's lips around him. How alike were they? Would Jingle know precisely what he wanted, when he wanted it? He almost came at the thought.

Jingle grabbed his balls again, gave them a tug as if *feeling* how close he was. "Greedy boy." But Winter could hear the smile in his voice, felt the warmth in his chest.

A tap on his inner thigh had him bending that leg up, spreading himself as if Jingle controlled his body. The warmth of Jingle's pleasure in his chest told him he'd done exactly the right thing.

Jingle ran his nose up Winter's shaft, breathing deeply. At the same instant that he pressed a finger into his hole, he engulfed the tip of Winter's dick in his hot mouth.

"Please. Please, please, please," fell from Winter's lips as he tilted his hips back and forth, mindlessly trying to get more of both sensations.

A hard slap on his thigh had him freezing, teeth gritted. Jingle pulled off.

"You moved. Naughty boy. If you carry on like this, you'll never get on the nice list. Do you want to be on the nice list, Winter?"

“So fucking much.” He didn’t care that he sounded desperate; the heat in his chest proved Jingle was enjoying the game as much as him. It almost hurt to get the next words out, but he was here to fulfill a wish, and Jingle wanted this. “What can I do to please you, sir?”

“Ah, fuck,” he cried out, jerking his hips up as Jingle’s displeasure translated into a stripe on his ass.

Jingle pulled back. “Hands and knees.”

The thought of Jingle going into medic mode and this stopping had him blurting, “No, no, it’s fine, I’m—” He flinched as his ass burned again.

“Do what you’re told. I want to see the stripes I made on your ass while I fuck you. Hands and knees,” Jingle demanded, voice deep with lust.

Winter almost made himself dizzy with the speed he flipped over. Holding himself still as the heat of Jingle’s body moved up behind him was virtually impossible. A thumb rubbed over the welts on his ass.

“So red. I can’t wait to turn it all red, can you?”

Winter’s jaw creaked with the effort not to swear at the possible delay. “No, sir.”

Jingle chuckled. “Said with feeling that time; I can appreciate that.” The amusement dropped from his voice as he added, “Hands in front of you, forehead on the mattress. If you touch your cock without permission, this stops.” Jingle’s commanding voice didn’t leave room for disobedience.

Winter got into position, ass high. Lust warred with the itch of vulnerability. Would Jingle carry out his threat to turn his ass red before he fucked him? With surprise, Winter realized that not only would he not mind the delay, but the idea of having his ass hot and burning while being fucked turned him on like nothing else.

A thumb brushed over the welts, and he flattened his chest to the bed, exposing himself further. He heard the slap of Jingle's hand on his backside a fraction of a second before the sting exploded in his mind. He sucked in a sharp breath, legs shaking with the need to escape, but he stayed still.

"Hmm, well done. You're stunning like this."

Fragrant oil trickled between his cheeks. A finger rubbed over his hole, pressed in. A second followed. Two fingers burned. Jingle's dick was the same size as his. *It can't hurt that much, can it?*

The blunt head of Jingle's cock pressed against him. He froze.

A warm hand rubbed his lower back. "Easy now, just relax. You know how it goes."

He didn't. Winter couldn't recall ever doing this before, but that didn't mean he hadn't. All he had to do was trust in his body and Jingle.

"That's it, push out, let me in." The warmth in his chest showed just how much his wisher loved this, but it was too much; he needed to say something. And when he did, Jingle's

disappointment... fuck it'd hurt like a bitch. *Stick it out, he's my wisher; I need to fulfill—*

His body tensed, but Jingle kept up the pressure, then popped inside. Jingle's thrill mixed with the burning. Winter held still, struggling to cope with the fusion of sensations, the instincts to please and escape. Both his mind and his ass felt as if they were splitting.

He shook his head. "I can't, I—"

Jingle's hands tightened on his hips. "Hang on, just a little more," he said as he eased in and out, a fraction of an inch. "You can do this. Trust me, in a second it'll feel so—"

Pleasure bloomed, making him gasp as Jingle's cock rubbed a spot inside him. Between one second and the next, he wanted, needed, more.

Reaching behind himself, he grabbed onto Jingle's thigh, trying to pull him in harder.

"Ah, ah, not happening." Jingle held his wrist, pulling his arm behind his back. "Other hand."

Resting his forehead on the mattress, Winter presented his other wrist, crossing it under the first at the small of his back. Jingle captured it in the same hand, pressing down on both. The vulnerability of his position caused his cock to lurch back toward his belly. He could have broken free if he wanted to, they both knew it, which somehow made his submission more profound.

“Fucking perfect, you’re so fucking perfect,” Jingle murmured as he rocked back and forth, slowly picking up the pace.

He reached underneath Winter, grabbed his cock, pressed his thumb against the slit then circled over the head. Once, twice, then he pumped Winter’s cock in time with his thrusts. Everything apart from sensation vanished; it felt as if he was inside someone else while Jingle was in him. Whether it was the odd feedback loop kicking up a level or Jingle’s talented hand and cock, he didn’t know or care. Winter couldn’t decide whether to thrust forward or back, but in his current position, all he could really do was accept and give himself over to his wisher.

Just as he began to get used to the slow sensual strokes, Jingle thrust hard, forcing a grunt out of him. The next one was slow, but that was the last respite Jingle granted. Winter imagined his wisher putting a decade of frustration into every thrust; he absorbed it, reveled in fulfilling the wish.

“That’s it; take it for me.”

Giving everything over to the other man freed the last ties on Winter’s desire. His balls buzzed, his climax building, but it didn’t matter; he belonged to his wisher. It felt so damn good, so right. Jingle hit his prostate in consecutive hard thrusts. Three, four, five. Winter seized as Jingle stripped his orgasm from him with his hand and cock.

Winter relaxed, boneless and spent, almost unconscious in his post-orgasmic haze. Jingle let go of Winter’s cock and wrists and hauled him upright. One hand held Winter’s throat, the

other arm wrapped around his waist. Jingle held him tight, fucking him for all he was worth. He was a ragdoll, a toy fit for nothing but the pleasure of the man inside him. Winter couldn't remember ever feeling this fulfilled, this *right* as his vision darkened.

Jingle stuttered, groaned, and his hard body strained against him. Only their heavy breathing broke the silence. Jingle fell sideways, pulling Winter with him until they were spooning, Jingle's cock still lodged inside him.

Satisfied. Fulfilled. *Wanted and appreciated.* Winter's heart went out to the man who had enabled him to feel those emotions. He didn't want to leave. But now that Jingle's wish had been fulfilled, Jingle would go back to his mundane human life, whatever it was, and Winter would return to the North Pole.

Will I even remember him?

Winter lay still, listening to Jingle breathe, feeling cold after the heat of passion had passed. By Jingle's deep slow breathing, his wisher had already fallen asleep. It only took the blink of an eye for the view out the small eaves window above them to go dark. It appeared Santa had seen enough for the day.

That he had probably pleased his creator didn't stop the niggles of resentment Santa's scenario caused. Reconciling what felt like a lifetime of bitterness toward his probably totally innocent wisher wasn't easy. Winter pulled up the blankets and settled back, wondering if Spencer was the man's

name. Did they even look alike? The magic could make a person appear any way a wisher wanted, and the lack of a mirror in the cabin made far more sense.

He expected to hear the tinkling of a snowglobe that would precede him being pulled back to the North Pole. But only the sound of Jingle's breathing broke the silence. Minutes stretched into an hour, then another.

I'm not finished.

Winter wondered what else Jingle had included in his fantasy that needed to be fulfilled before they could return to their lives. If he was lucky, it'd take a long time. As Winter lay on the verge of sleep, he contemplated the fine line he'd have to tread between appearing to be working on a wish for the sake of his creator, but not completing it so he could stay with Jingle as long as possible.

CHAPTER 13



SPENCER WOKE, STRETCHED, AND smiled as he heard the lilting, cheerful melody of *I Saw Three Ships* being played on his recorder cutting through the usual silence. That he'd slept right through surprised him, then again, he hadn't experienced this level of contentment in he didn't know how long.

Not alone anymore.

He still had trouble getting his head around it. Winter was everything he could wish for, a bolshie, difficult, passionate, but unwitting submissive. Someone he could teach, enjoy, and watch his understanding of his nature grow.

Spencer tilted his head, listening. For someone who didn't know if he could play, Winter wasn't bad at the recorder. He put working on another instrument on his list, maybe a larger one to produce deeper notes. A duet would be perfect. Mornings running, afternoons creating, evenings by the fire composing, nights playing with Winter, pushing his limits.

Strange how the addition of a single person, the right person, had turned hell into near heaven.

The sound cut off, and a whiff of burning drifted up the stairs. Spencer rolled out of bed, adding cooking to the things he wanted to teach Winter. After pulling on a set of the unchanging clothes, he headed downstairs. Winter stood at the sink, washing a pot of what smelled like burned oatmeal.

“After bringing it to the boil, you have to turn it down and keep stirring to make sure it doesn’t stick and burn.”

“Thanks. Should’ve waited for the recipe first,” Winter said but didn’t turn around.

Spencer moved up behind him and wrapped his arms around his waist. “Nah, experimenting teaches you more than following a recipe. Besides, you probably like it in a different way to me. Nice playing by the way.”

Winter stilled. “You’re talking about the recorder, right?”

Spencer chuckled and gave Winter’s ass a squeeze. “Yeah, I was talking about the recorder, but you were damn good last night too.”

Winter looked, felt, better than anyone had a right to. His eyes were like liquid emeralds, with muscles sleek under his decorated skin. Spencer ached to retrace those tattoos with his tongue.

“Yeah, well, got to get some breakfast in us to do the run. Excuse me,” Winter said and slipped out of his arms.

Having his sub move away when he wanted physical contact annoyed him. “Stop. Now. What’s your problem? Don’t pretend you didn’t love last night. You came in my hand while I was in your ass, remember?”

Winter moved over to the cupboard, picked out some more oatmeal, mumbling under his breath.

“Speak up and look at me when you’re talking to me.”

Winter’s eyes flashed as he spun around. “Just because I—” he swallowed “—did what I did last night, it doesn’t mean I’m going to obey you like a dog all the time.”

Spencer resisted scowling at Winter’s naivety about how D/s relationships worked outside the bedroom. He’d already proved he could handle Winter’s aggression and didn’t want to demonstrate again before breakfast.

“What happened last night has nothing to do with you being less than me or inferior in any way. It’s how we’re both made. I need to control; you find being controlled a turn-on. You said we were the same person, but we’re yin and yang, two sides of the same coin. We belong together.” He stared into Winter’s eyes, willing him to understand the truth he’d only just realized himself.

Winter held his gaze. *Is that sadness, regret, or denial in his eyes?* Whatever it was, Spencer didn’t like it. Unlike the games he’d played with subs before, this wasn’t a case of ‘shrug and move on’. There was something between them, something so momentous and unique that Winter couldn’t

possibly deny it. And yet it seemed the bolshie, exasperating fairy intended to do just that.

The urge to show, to prove to Winter what he meant, what he *knew*, took over. He caught Winter in a rough embrace, pushing him up against the sink kitchen unit. Grabbing a handful of Winter's hair, he pushed his leg between Winter's and used his body weight to pin him.

"I can't, we—" was as far as Winter got before Spencer ground his thigh against his balls, drawing a gasp from the younger man. Spencer took his mouth, holding him in the position he wanted by the fist in his hair. Winter held himself stiffly for a moment before melting against him. His hand clutched Spencer's hair, and he kissed back just as hard.

Triumph hit as hard as his lust.

Spencer could feel Winter's cock, desperate like his, as they pressed against each other through the millimeters of canvas. It would be so damn easy to let lust overcome them both. But he was the one who had to make the decisions, the one who needed to exhibit control whatever his hormones dictated.

Jingle moved his hips back a fraction and rested his forehead against Winter's. "We need to eat before we run. And we have to go soon, so we don't end up running in a blizzard."

"We do," Winter agreed but didn't move.

Spencer lied to himself that he was waiting for Winter to obey his implicit instruction rather than enjoying his sub's body heat, his touch.

“So... breakfast. Running,” Winter added.

“Uh-huh. That,” Jingle murmured as he nipped at Winter’s throat that begged to be squeezed like he had done last night.

Winter’s lips quirked into a smile. “You really are a slave driver, you know that, right?”

Spencer coughed and stepped back, pulling himself together. “Yep, that’s me. Slave driver. And if you don’t do it in under four hours this time, I’ll spank your ass.”

Winter’s eyebrows rose. “And what do I get if I do?”

Spencer tried for a scowl, but as Winter bit his lip to stop laughing, he deemed his attempt at a ‘Dom face’ a failure.

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll come up with something.”

Winter scooted past him, grabbed his coat, and opened the door. The bright grin he flashed Spencer took his breath away.

“I’ve already come up with something for you, old man.”

Winter turned his back, reached for the hem of his shirt, and pulled it up to reveal a new angry red mark in the shape of a snowflake. Before Spencer’s mind kicked into gear, Winter was out the door and running.

He baited me when I came down. He goaded me until I was pissed off enough that he earned another punishment tattoo because I told him I liked them. That has got to be the most extreme example of brattish, topping from the bottom I have ever—

And with every moment he stood there, Winter was getting farther away. With a grin, Spencer hastily put on his boots, grabbed his coat, and took off after his sub who was now firmly on his naughty list.

As soon as he stepped outside, he scanned the area for the telltale red coat. Nothing. His heart pumped a little harder. Looking down, he searched frantically for footprints. His entire body tensed as he found nothing but pristine snow.

“Jingle!” the pain-filled cry had him spinning and sprinting around the back of the house.

The red of Winter’s coat stood out like a bloodstain lying on the snow halfway to the tree line. By the time Jingle caught up, Winter had struggled to his feet, but at least he was waiting for him. Without saying a word, Spencer threw his arms around him and held on tight.

“Bit too much?” Winter gasped.

Spencer didn’t know whether to tie the idiot to him or lay him out with a punch. He pushed his own emotion down as he felt Winter’s stiff posture.

“How bad? Let’s get you back to the house; we can—”

Winter held up his hand. “Before you get upset and give me another mark, I’m ok to carry on. The bleeding seems to be less each time, although they still hurt like a bitch. I shouted to stop you panicking.”

Spencer glared at him. “Don’t argue; I’m looking.”

Winter gave him a half-smile. “Wouldn’t dream of it.” Taking off his jacket, he handed it over and pulled off his green shirt. The red-rimmed white snowflake tattoos flowed down his side like an avalanche, even disappearing under the waistband of his black jeans. By unspoken agreement, Winter usually wore a green shirt and Jingle wore the red version, although their coats never varied from scarlet.

“Fuck,” Spencer said, then hastily shut his mouth.

“Fuck good, or fuck bad?” Winter said, twisting and peering down at his side.

The marks were healing as Spencer watched, but he decided it was time to turn the tables and have a little fun at Winter’s expense.

“Fucking beautiful, but how low do they go? Are your jeans going to rub on them? Let me see.”

“What? You seriously expect me to strip out here?”

Keeping his face straight, Spencer said, “It’s not as if there’s anyone else to see, is there?”

Winter frowned. “It’s not someone seeing I’m worried about. I’d just rather keep my balls unfrozen, thank you very much.”

Spencer put on his best Dom face. “Jeans. Now.”

Winter rolled his eyes. “Oh, for pity’s sake,” he said, but he undid his jeans and pushed them down to his knees.

The snowflakes disappeared into his bright red ‘Rudolf’ boxers and continued to flow down his thigh to his knee.

“Huh. Didn’t even feel those.”

Spencer reached for Winter’s boxers.

“Seriously? My balls will be fucking snowballs if you do that. They’re already trying to migrate north.”

“You can never be too careful when it comes to your health,” Spencer said, trying to keep his voice steady.

Winter pushed his boxers down, leaving him naked from nipples to knees. “Happy now?”

Spencer shoved his shoulder, and with his jeans around his calves, Winter didn’t have a hope of avoiding eating snow.

Spencer had one delicious flash of Winter’s ass poking up out of the white blanket before he took off, laughing, for the trees.

It took around twenty minutes for Winter to catch up. They jogged in silence, side by side, for perhaps fifty paces before Winter spoke.

“I have blue balls and not the happy kind. I hope you’re satisfied.”

“I will be, and so will you when I warm them up later.” Spencer grinned as Winter stumbled.

When he recovered and caught up, he growled, “Sadist.”

“You’d better believe it, Junior. Now shift that gorgeous ass, I’ve got plans for it.”

To his credit, Winter only dropped to a walk half a dozen times during the run, but Spencer bet he’d still be aching and sore by the time they reached home. Like him, Winter preferred to run

in silence most of the time, but having someone else's footfalls and breathing breaking the silence remained a wonderful experience.

Winter's happy groan as they broke through the trees and saw the cabin sitting in the clearing, with smoke curling from the chimney, made Spencer smile again. A chatty companion annoyed him, but the noises Winter made in passion and pain were perfect.

As they stepped through the door, Spencer said, "Go run yourself a hot bath; I'll get lunch sorted."

Winter walked through the cabin, spreading snow everywhere.

"Boots," Spencer reminded.

Winter halted, then carefully reversed, stepping in exactly the same footprints.

"That's called being a brat. It earns spankings."

Winter's mouth opened and closed, and his face turned an interesting shade of pink.

Spencer already had spanking high on his list of things to try, but Winter's expression and blush had just pushed it up to number one.

"Bath," he reminded as he set his own boots next to the fire to dry.

He had his head in the fridge, thinking that a turkey stir-fry would be an easy lunch, and, more to the point, quick, when Winter called out.

“We’ve got a new door.”

He joined his doppelgänger by the heavy, honey-colored wooden door next to the bathroom. It matched every other door in the house precisely, except it lacked the notches he’d carved in the others to mark the passing days. If Spencer hadn’t known better, he would’ve sworn it had always been there. The outside of the cabin hadn’t changed, but with magic at work, he guessed it didn’t have to.

“Ideas?” Winter asked.

Without answering, Spencer pushed the door. It opened without a creak, revealing a set of concrete steps heading down. Nothing in this place was concrete. Familiarity niggled at the back of Spencer’s mind.

“Stay behind me,” he said and headed down.

A scuff on the wall at shoulder height compelled him to reach out and touch it.

“What, what is it?” Winter’s nervous voice came close behind him.

If this was what Spencer thought, Winter didn’t need to see it, even if he’d been told about it. It could send him running like a reindeer with a wolf pack after it.

“Go back upstairs.”

CHAPTER 14



ALTHOUGH WINTER'S ATTEMPT TO tease his wisher had backfired and caused Jingle to panic, Jingle's glee when he'd pranked him back had more than made up for the pain of the emerging tattoos. He'd only called out to save Jingle's distress rather than his own pain. In hindsight, it'd been a damn stupid thing to do to a man paranoid about being alone.

Now it was Winter wondering what Santa had up his sleeve. At least his wisher appeared confident as they descended the concrete steps. Winter could sense the space in front of him, although the light filtering down from the kitchen didn't illuminate anything, but it was oddly warm down here.

"Go back upstairs."

Winter gaped. "Seriously? After you nearly turned me into a blizzard because I was out of your sight for less than five minutes, you want me to leave you in some magical cellar? How do you know those stairs go back up to the cabin now?"

Jingle stilled. "That's possible?"

“Of course it’s possible. Magic, remember? In case you haven’t noticed, it’s warmer down here. Even the walls are warm. I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.”

Jingle’s voice held no inflection as he said, “Are you saying that if we go back up those stairs right now, we might be where this place is in the real world?”

Winter bit back on his sarcastic comment. “Yes, it’s possible. Outside the snowglobe, I can pop to the North Pole whenever I think about it. And I’m not sure we’re still there right now. Want me to try?”

Pain lanced down his other side as Jingle’s hand shot out and grabbed his arm. “Don’t you dare. I told you, wherever we go, we go together.”

“Could you please stop getting upset?” he gritted out through clenched teeth as he leaned up against the wall.

“If I’m right, there’s a medkit in here.”

Winter caught the movement of Jingle’s arm as he reached up. Light stabbed his eyes. He flinched, shutting his eyes, then squinted as he opened them. Jingle’s blue eyes focused on him, not the room in front of them.

The dungeon.

Winter gaped. Swords, whips, branding irons, floggers, his eyes bugged out at the selection of implements displayed in the many racks and hooks on the black walls. The art, and art it certainly was, depicted backs, arms, thighs, with swirling patterns made by medical cannulas in different colors inserted

under the skin. He had no doubt that his wisher had either made them or *thought* he'd made them.

The larger equipment around the room, a set of stocks, a padded bench, a St. Andrew's Cross with some wicked-looking manacles hanging from it, looked even worse. Not to mention the fucking black metal dog cage. Jingle had wanted to put Coal in there.

How did I forget about this?

No, no, this was not ok. Although this was a wish, he couldn't do this. Santa had fucked up; he should have chosen another fairy or given him a more appropriate personality.

Closing his eyes, Winter willed himself back home. Nothing changed. He slid down to the hard, concrete steps.

Fingers held his chin, tilting it up until he met Jingle's emotionless blue eyes.

“Stay there. I'm going to get the medkit, then we're going back upstairs together. Whatever's up there, we'll deal with it. I'm not leaving you, and I won't ever do anything that I don't think you'll enjoy or find satisfying, understand?”

Winter nodded, guilt rising. Jingle headed back into the dungeon, and Winter rested his head in his hands. He'd just tried to abandon his wisher without fulfilling his wish. Santa had been right to stop his magic.

He'd failed his wisher.

He'd failed his creator.

He should be sorting fucking letters, not being an Adult Department fairy.

When Jingle put his arm under Winter's a few minutes later, he got to his feet and let Jingle help him upstairs. The door at the top of the stairs had swung shut. Jingle paused for a second, then pushed it and revealed the kitchen of the cabin.

"Sorry," Winter mumbled as he shuffled through the kitchen area and over to the sofa.

Spencer squatted down in front of him, his hand on his thigh. "You've got nothing to be sorry for. You know that was the cellar at my place in England, right?"

Winter nodded, suddenly too tired, too depressed, to talk.

"It's a set, like a movie set. I've never used the vast majority of that stuff. Most of the things on the walls are antiques I've collected over the years. I've even got daft gothic candelabras on the walls." His mouth quirked in a self-deprecating smile. "We don't have to use anything down there."

Winter eyed him. "But you want to."

Jingle's blue eyes twinkled. Warmth spread through Winter's chest.

"I do have to admit to a fondness for needle play and my red leather cuffs. You'd look fantastic strapped down as I turn you into art. I've got a tiny cock flogger too."

Winter's eyes widened, and Jingle chuckled. "Yeah, I thought that might interest you. Now, let's get on with the food and washing. You stink."

“And you don’t?” Winter shot back.

Jingle sniffed his armpit. “No, that’s manly workout. It won’t be stink for another twenty minutes. Bathroom, now. I’ll get you some clean clothes.”

Winter rolled his eyes. “Yes, sir.”

Jingle’s smile warmed him inside. “I’m glad you’re here, Junior.”

Blushing like a damn schoolgirl, and eternally grateful that Jingle didn’t know he’d tried to abandon him, Winter headed for the bathroom.

They spent the afternoon and evening eating and chatting. Jingle taught him a few more songs on the recorder, none of which sounded remotely festive.

His eyelids were drooping by the time Jingle approached the elephant in the room.

“Why did you get upset downstairs?”

Winter blew out a breath and lied through his teeth. “It just hit me how different we are.”

“And that’s bad?”

“Well, yeah. Usually, I know exactly what my wisher wants. I’ve got a set plan to follow.”

“And I’m a fairy too, right?”

“Yeah.” Winter drew the word out, not knowing where Jingle was going with this. But Winter had to go along with what his

wisher wanted, although he now knew this guy wasn't a magical being.

“Well, I also have a set plan to follow, and I know exactly what my wisher needs, which is you, in case you haven't worked that out.”

Jingle's smile caused a fizz of lustful apprehension to run up Winter's spine.

“And—” Winter licked his suddenly dry lips, “—what does your wisher need?”

“Consistency.”

“Uh huh. Care to expand on that?” Winter said, but he didn't really want to know the answer. This had stopped being his show almost from the moment he'd arrived, and his wisher needed to express himself.

“Oh, I'll certainly be expanding, but first we need to make a little trip downstairs.”

“Not happening,” Winter blurted. Jingle's relaxed posture and his ‘cat's got the cream’ demeanor had already caused a part of Winter to take the ‘expanding’ suggestion as an order. He certainly didn't want Jingle to think the dungeon turned him on.

“Were you, or were you not, disrespectful to me this morning? And did your actions cause us both considerable distress?”

Even Winter had to admit his laugh sounded hollow. “That was a joke, and you know it.”

Jingle leaned forward, all trace of amusement gone. “The marks on your body prove just how funny I found it. Now, for the sake of consistency, do you agree that misdeeds deserve punishment?”

Winter licked his suddenly dry lips. “Punishment?”

Jingle smiled, and relaxed back in his seat. “I’m so glad you agreed.”

“Now hang on a minute, I wasn’t—”

“Do you recall last night?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts. I told you you’d enjoy it, and you did. I’m the boss, right?”

He’s your wisher. Winter clenched his jaw against the retort bubbling up, squeezed his eyes shut then purposefully relaxed before opening them again.

“Yes, you’re the boss.”

“Excellent. Now, come and sit on the dungeon stairs while I fetch a few items. For the time being, we won’t be spending any time down there.”

Winter opened and closed his mouth, then stood up without arguing. Jingle’s pleasure warmed his chest.

When it came down to it, he did trust Jingle, or at least Winter trusted him to fulfill his Dom role while they were here. Who the man was in reality, Winter didn’t know. The thought that he might never see Jingle’s actual face, or know the real

person, added a heaviness to his movements and thoughts that had nothing to do with anticipating his upcoming punishment.

Without either of them uttering a word, Winter followed Jingle to the door in the kitchen, then halfway down the stairs, before he sat down.

The light went on in the room below. Winter's imagination ran wild about what Jingle was selecting, and his dick certainly seemed interested.

Would whatever Jingle planned hurt? Of course, it would, but will I let him do it? He wondered if Jingle was as apprehensive. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on his wisher. They had a connection, although it only extended one way.

Confidence. Anticipation. Desire.

Winter's cock hardened from a semi.

Jingle appeared at the bottom of the stairs, and before he turned the light out, Winter spotted a black sports bag in his hand.

"Go on then, up you go," Jingle said. Winter turned and climbed the stairs, feeling Jingle's lust as he watched his ass move.

When they got to the kitchen, Jingle fixed toasted sandwiches and soup for dinner. Winter couldn't recall what the food tasted like, and with Jingle staring at him, he was shocked he didn't choke. The man's focus made him hyper-aware of every tiny movement or noise he made. Anticipation and dread swirled together, became one.

After dinner, Jingle simply said, "Shower," but didn't get up. With a scowl, Winter went to the bathroom.

When he came out, the remains of their meal had been tidied, and Jingle looked... annoyingly smug as he leaned up against the sink.

"Right, off you go to bed."

Winter blinked. "You're not coming?"

Jingle gave him a wolfish smile. "Well, that's up to me, isn't it? But you're certainly not going to be coming because you'll be wearing this."

Winter's eyes almost fell out of his head like poorly sited coal on a snowman's face. From the shape, the shiny coil of stainless steel resting in Jingle's hand could only be a cock cage.

"You're kidding, right?"

Lips pressed together, but failing to hide his amusement, Jingle slowly shook his head. "No, but I will trust you to put it on yourself. Only you will really know if you've obeyed. I won't peek."

"Sadist."

"It'll only hurt if you have thoughts that'll put you on the naughty list."

Grumbling, Winter snatched the device from Jingle's hand and stomped upstairs.

Ten minutes later, after having wrestled himself into it after putting on his pajamas, he called out, “I hate you.”

A chuckle from the bedroom next door met his ears.

“Go to sleep. We’ve got a long way to go in the morning. Oh, and I sleep in the nude.”

All at once, he remembered Jingle’s hard body holding him down, the grip on his throat, his hot body pumping, grinding, owning and—

The steel around his cock must’ve shrunk. The ache transformed rapidly into crushing pain, but he didn’t attempt to remove the cage.

“Wanker!” he shouted.

“Yep, the North Pole’s got nothing on me right now, but maybe this’ll teach you to think twice before scaring the shit outta me.”

“Would a sincere apology promote me to chief pole polisher?”

Winter grinned at the strangled noise Jingle made.

“Go to sleep, Junior.”

“Fancy tucking me in?”

“Winter, I’m warning you, go to sleep.” The steel in Jingle’s voice, as well as that around his cock made him decide that discretion was the better part of valor.

“Yes, sir.”

CHAPTER 15



HOW SPENCER DIDN'T GIVE in and step things up the next day he didn't know, but Winter's upset over the dungeon couldn't be dismissed. Despite his insistence that he'd granted many wishes, it was clear as day that Winter was a complete novice at BDSM. It was also evident that Winter needed a D/s dynamic in his life as much as he did. But they had time, boy, did they have time to explore.

The urge to go slow and savor every first, every victory, defeat, and teaching moment because Winter would be the only person he'd ever play with, warred with the urge to do everything he'd assumed would be denied him for eternity.

He'd left it three days, and more importantly, three nights of Winter stewing with the cockcage on. But his sub hadn't been the only one to suffer. If Winter knew Spencer spent his nights creeping back and forth across the tiny landing to listen at Winter's door like some sort of perverted stalker, he never said.

During the day, Spencer eased him into obedient acts, and the bolshiness subsided. New snowflakes stopped appearing, which was a shame as Spencer loved the body art, but he was willing to pay that price for their progress.

One day, maybe not soon, he'd make his own patterns on Winter's skin, but before that, he yearned to try something else. The thought of it kept him awake at night. *Can Winter fly?*

The urge to experience subspace vicariously through his doppelgänger itched like a bug bite he couldn't reach.

Today, at the end of their run, Winter sprinted ahead and bounced up the porch steps instead of dragging himself up them as if they were Everest. The entire way around, Winter had glanced his way, lust in his eyes. He was ready for more; Spencer could almost smell it.

Alarm bells rang as Winter froze in the doorway. Jingle sped up, nerves jangling. Had the rest of his mansion appeared? His mouth almost watered at the thought of his books, maybe his electronic devices. He didn't have anyone to call, except the managers of his properties and businesses that ran themselves, but finding out what had—

Winter stood stock still, staring at a dark-haired man lounging on the sofa wearing a red business suit and a white shirt. His dark eyes held a sparkle of amusement that both comforted and disturbed.

“Nothing to say to your maker, boys?” The man's gruff voice belonged to a much older man.

“You’re here,” Winter blurted.

“Indeed I am, young fairy.” The man paused, waiting for one of them to speak.

Winter seemed unable to move, let alone utter a coherent sentence. Spencer didn’t have that problem, and he didn’t like anyone intimidating Winter into silence. This man, this being, was ultimately responsible for all his pain. He had questions, so many fucking questions.

“Why now? Have you finished whatever it is you hoped this —” Spencer waved at the room “—would accomplish?”

Winter’s shoulders slumped. “I’ve failed, haven’t I? I’ve been trying, really I have, but he isn’t—”

A booming ‘ho ho ho’ rang out. The man held his belly as he laughed. “Oh, young fairy, you thought this was a wish? That he was somehow a narcissist who wanted to bed himself? Too cute.”

Spencer stared at his companion, stunned. *Winter had done it all just to fulfill a wish? Were none of his emotions genuine?*

Grunting in pain, Winter went to one knee, clutching at his chest. Spencer crouched beside him. Whatever Winter did or didn’t feel for him, he didn’t deserve this.

Glaring at Santa, who was again chuckling, Spencer growled, “Stop it, just stop it; he’s done everything you wanted.”

The laughter stopped. Only Winter’s ragged, gasping breath filled the room.

“Who are you trying to convince, me, him, or yourself?” Santa said. “Winter got it right when he first arrived. He’s my creation; you both are. And this doesn’t matter because I can remove his memory and make his body pristine again with a thought.”

Spencer tried to lunge toward that smiling face but couldn’t move.

He struggled, fighting against limbs that refused to obey him. Impotent, but not yet defeated, he spoke, teeth gritted. “What do you want from us?”

“Why Jingle, my disobedient creation, I put you here to stop you hurting anyone else while I sorted out the mess the affection my other fairies have for you caused.”

The unfairness of it all flared. “If you’ve spent any time watching me, you know I help people. I’ve saved thousands of lives as a medic.”

Santa inclined his head. “That you have, and I’m very proud of those achievements, but you also hurt people. I feel it, you know.” Santa’s lips pressed together. “It’s part of the magic. If any of my creations produce emotion in humans, positive or negative, I feel it. And the pain you’ve given others...” he shook his head.

“Ten years. I’ve spent an entire decade rotting here. Have you any idea what—”

A hand grabbed his calf. “Please, I can’t—” Winter’s face was creased with pain.

Spencer glared at the being sitting on the sofa. “Stop it, just stop it.”

“Me, my boy? I’m not doing anything. You’re causing his pain in the same way you cause mine. I thought the experience might help you gain a little... empathy. You used isolation as a punishment, correct?”

Winter groaned again.

“Empathy?” Spencer barked. “Where was your empathy when I was trying to kill myself? Did that hurt you? Because I damn well hope—”

Santa interrupted him. “Jingle, I am truly sorry about that. I did not intend for that to happen. I was distracted and must have forgotten to turn off the time magic one evening when I left my office. By the time I realized the source of my nightmare, made an excuse to Mrs. Christmas, and returned to the office, you’d worked through it.”

“So, what now? Have you decided that I’ve suffered enough? How about Winter? What has he done to deserve this?”

Santa’s bushy eyebrows rose. “Winter? Winter has done nothing except follow the nature I gave him. Unfortunately, that left him open to being overly influenced by some of his fellow adult department fairies.

“They are all in snowglobes, each on their own. I thought putting him in with you would help you both, although I didn’t expect you to become... so attached. But I have to admit, the Adult Department is a problem I’m afraid I’m having trouble

solving. Thanks to you, I've already lost two of them to humans."

"Coal's better off with Angus, and from what Winter tells me, Garland is old enough to make his own—"

Santa leaned forward. "Garland gave himself to a damn human to save July's life. A life that wouldn't have been in danger if you hadn't interfered in an ongoing wish." A thick finger stabbed at him. "Garland was my rock, my best worker, and your best friend. Now, because of you, he's bound to a shallow, one-track mind human, and the adult wishes are mounting up, itching at me every minute of every day."

"Have you thought about asking for help?" Spencer asked.

Santa huffed. "And who do you suggest I ask? One of my creations? Or perhaps the Easter Bunny? Jack Frost? The Sandman? I don't think you have any concept about how lonely it is running the only operation of this kind in existence."

Spencer would have laughed out loud if Winter hadn't been suffering at his feet.

"You're kidding, right? Try being the only immortal out of eight billion. Have you tried talking to your wife?"

Santa's eyes narrowed. "Don't talk about my wife."

Spencer clenched his hands but hoped Santa hadn't noticed that he could move, at least a little. "Talk about her? I don't even remember her, thanks to you. But I've got Winter now;

there's no need to worry that I'd go anywhere near her. She wasn't interested in Winter, was she?"

"No, but as you've probably worked out, although you look alike, your basic natures are poles apart."

Discussing personality traits while Winter remained on the floor in pain infuriated him, but he did his best to modulate his emotions. He needed time to work on this situation, there had to be a way to turn this to his advantage. Santa could make mistakes, had made mistakes. He could do it again.

Gray hairs appeared at Santa's temples. Hope surged, but he needed to keep Santa off balance to prevent the powerful djinn sensing his emotions.

"Does it get harder, keeping this young form, decade after decade, century after century?"

Santa frowned, and the gray hairs vanished. "Being Santa isn't all 'ho, ho, ho's' you know. But dealing with bolshie fairies is a minor irritation, nothing more."

"So how's that Adult Unfulfilled Wish Book doing? How fast is it growing now all the Adult Department Fairies are locked up?"

Santa's eyebrows turned into white caterpillars. "You forget, I control time in the snowglobes. The book will wait until my formerly obedient fairies, including Winter, have learned their lessons and returned to work. But I'm afraid I won't risk putting you back into the world."

Spencer's heart seized, and he grabbed onto the man kneeling by his leg as if Santa would rip him away. "No, no, you can't take him away. Whatever I did with Mistletoe, I'm sorry, but it takes two to tango. I might not remember the details, but I know I wouldn't have gone where I really wasn't wanted. My personality couldn't have changed that much. And I wouldn't do it again. I've searched a dozen lifetimes for someone I can truly share my life with, and Winter is—"

Santa leaned forward, cutting him off. "You still don't get it, do you? I'm Santa, and I can do anything I want. I'm sorry, Jingle, it isn't all your fault; I created you after all, but I can't risk the disruption you cause. Once I've got through the current festive season, I'll return for Winter and the others. But this time, I'll ensure their memories are wiped. They won't remember you, but you may keep the memories if you wish." He shook his head, shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, I truly am, but for the sake of Christmas, this is the way it has to be."

Santa vanished from the sofa, leaving a blast of cold air and a swirl of snow in his wake.

Whatever had been holding him still, vanished. Spencer pulled Winter up into his arms, holding onto him, convinced he'd disappear as fast as Santa.

Winter grunted in pain, and Spencer released him as if he'd become red hot. His hands hovered, inches from Winter's body, scared to touch him again.

"Fuck, sorry. Where does it hurt?"

Winter batted at his hands as Spencer reached for the buttons on his sub's coat. "No, not going to happen. You heard what he said. The closer we get, the more it'll hurt you when he pulls me out of here."

"Fuck him; he can't dictate what we—" Spencer trailed off as Winter wouldn't meet his eyes.

It clicked. "He said this wasn't a wish. Is that what you thought, that I'm a human with an unfulfilled wish you were obliged to grant? Was that why you slept with me?"

Winter's eyes bugged out, then he pushed Spencer aside as he rushed for the bathroom. Spencer caught up just as Winter finished noisily throwing up in the toilet on his knees. He sat back on his heels, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, took a shaky breath while he held onto the porcelain for support. At least it was pristine, thanks to the reset.

Spencer had no idea what to say, but knew he had to say something to ease Winter's distress. "*Don't worry, or it'll be all right*" were clearly stupid options.

He went with, "I don't know about you, but I could do with a drink. Whiskey ok with you?"

Winter got to his feet, went to the sink, splashed water on his face, and rinsed his mouth.

Avoiding eye contact, Winter tried to move past him as he stood in the bathroom doorway. Spencer stuck out his arm, blocking the other man's progress.

"Talk to me."

Winter tensed and squinted at him. “Why? It won’t change anything. The less we interact, the less he can use me to hurt you.”

“You think letting him win is the right move?”

Winter straightened, seeming to grow an inch as his anger swelled. “Letting him win? Are you fucking serious? He holds our lives by the balls. One flick of a finger and we’re eunuchs, mortal, or reindeer.”

Spencer blinked. “He can turn us into reindeer?”

Winter pushed Spencer’s blocking arm down and stomped into the living area. “How the fuck should I know? What I do know, is that I’m not going to sit and look at all this festive crap while I still remember who you are and what he’s done.”

Accompanied by a cacophony of tinkling, Winter grabbed the tree and dragged it toward the door.

Spencer counted to ten, then opened a kitchen cupboard, took out a glass, and poured two fingers of whiskey. He drew professional calmness up from his boots. He needed to stay composed and keep his emotions under control to prevent Winter from getting hurt again. By the time he took his first sip, Winter was back and tearing at the garland hanging on the fireplace.

“They’ll be back tomorrow.” *Fuck, I sound like an unfeeling bastard, but this is the way it has to be.*

“And I’ll just rip them down again,” Winter ground out.

Spencer turned to the kitchen. At least one of them could do something productive.

By the time Winter had returned for his third load of decorations, his shoulders were dusted with snow from the afternoon blizzard.

“Winter,” Spencer said, “eat your lunch.” He’d made turkey sandwiches, something light in case Winter’s stomach remained delicate.

“Not hungry,” Winter mumbled as he tore at the green fir branches wound through the banisters.

Spencer ate his, watching Winter work at a furious pace. Gradually the light faded, and the temperature dropped. With the door constantly open, the roaring fire in the hearth didn’t dent the frigid temperature. He’d hoped that with the last of the decorations hauled outside, Winter would settle enough to discuss things. As bad as it seemed, Santa’s visit proved they hadn’t been abandoned. If they were being watched, they could influence the watcher.

Winter shut the door after himself as he left again. A minute later, the sound of an axe decimating innocent logs rang in the silence.

Spencer prepared a beef stew and put it on to cook. Then he worked on his chess set for three hours, listening to Winter chopping wood before silently leaving the sofa and heading down to the dungeon. His sub needed help to deal with his emotions, and as long as they were together, Spencer had responsibilities to fulfill.

After fetching the items he required, he put his coat and boots back on and followed the noise of splintering wood to the side of the house. Winter stood in just his jeans, body steaming in the falling snow. His gleaming, sweat-slicked ivory skin reflected the light from the single bulb attached to the eaves. The hard physical work and the snowflake tattoos that now covered both flanks had altered Winter's appearance dramatically since he'd arrived. Yes, Santa might have designed the base model, but the man in front of him was Spencer's creation.

As Winter raised the axe, Spencer caught sight of the golden bells Winter had chosen to have inked on his biceps. Even if Santa pulled Winter out of here and removed every memory of him, Spencer hoped the bells would remain. Maybe someday Winter would remember. In the meantime, Spencer intended to make the most profound memories possible to keep himself going in the lonely years ahead, starting right now.

Winter swung the axe, missed, swore under his breath, and repositioned the log he'd been trying to chop. The pile of logs waiting to be split had dwindled to nearly nothing.

Spencer waited until Winter successfully split the log before speaking. Distracting an exhausted, angry man mid-swing could cause injuries he didn't want to consider.

Spencer kept his voice low, authoritative. "You need to stop. It's dark. You're tired and likely to put that through your foot any second. The logs will still be here tomorrow."

The other man wiped his forehead on his arm and picked up another log.

“Junior, did you hear me?”

“Go to bed. I’ve just got to finish this lot,” Winter mumbled and swung again. He split the log, but his arm shook as he reached for the pieces to stack them.

Enough was enough. Spencer stepped up behind him and grasped the handle of the axe.

“What you need is a distraction, food, and sleep before you injure yourself.” Spencer tugged on the axe, and after a brief resistance, Winter released it. “There you go, you know it makes sense.”

After propping the axe up against the cabin, Spencer tried to pull Winter into his arms. The man remained stiff.

“Come on, Junior, relax. It’s just me. I haven’t changed, and neither have you.”

Winter shook his head, although he leaned into the embrace as if he couldn’t help it.

“You’re wrong. I thought you were a wisher, that I was here to fulfill your wish, and then we’d both—”

“And were any of your feelings for me, for what we did, a lie?” Spencer kept his voice gentle, firm, hoping Winter couldn’t feel his inner turmoil through their weird connection. Could anyone fake the emotions Spencer had seen? He didn’t know, but a fairy fulfilling a wish mission might be the ultimate liar.

Winter sighed and his shoulders dropped. “No, no, they weren’t. But—”

Spencer’s spirit soared, but he kept his voice steady. Winter needed him to be grounded. “And that means they were genuine, not created as part of a persona for a wish. What we have, it’s real.”

Winter pulled away. “Real? It can’t be real.” Pain seared his voice. “I got it wrong, so very wrong. We’re both fairies, so the no fraternization rule applies.” Winter’s eyes shone with emotion in the moonlight as he said, “And that means we can’t continue a sexual relationship. That’s what got you chucked out of the North Pole in the first place. You told him it takes two to tango, and I can’t dance anymore. Maybe if we’re good, he’ll relent.”

“Perhaps, but what I have in mind doesn’t have to be sexual.”

Winter frowned in confusion. “What—”

“Come in before you turn into Frosty the Snowman for real.” Spencer took his arm and led the stumbling, emotionally wrecked, and physically exhausted man back into the house.

He couldn’t say he wasn’t sad that Winter had cut him off, and it’d be a challenge not to touch him, but if this was what Winter needed to trust him again, he could do it. Santa could go fuck himself.

Spencer had played with subs who didn’t want sexual contact with him many times. Some wanted a couple’s teaching session; others were not interested in him sexually but wanted

his ability to control and make them fly. Until Winter indicated otherwise, Spencer mentally placed Winter in that category. By exhausting himself chopping wood at this hour, Winter had proved he still needed someone to provide control and keep him safe from himself.

As soon as he stepped into the house, Spencer hung up their coats, took off his boots, and walked over to the kitchen table where he'd left the two floggers he'd fetched from downstairs.

"I'm going to flog the stress right out of you. We can do this here, with you kneeling on the sofa or downstairs on the spanking bench," Spencer said, not giving Winter a 'no' option or spooking him by mentioning a bedroom.

Winter's jaw tensed, but Spencer spoke before he could open his mouth and deny what he needed. "Don't fight me on this. I know what you need. People like you, when you're brave enough, fly better than anyone else."

Spencer knew he had him when Winter's eyebrows scrunched.

"What do you mean, people like me?"

"Courageous people, ones brave enough to withstand the pain until the high kicks in. I'm going to take all that stress and turn it into the biggest high you've ever experienced. Take off your clothes and kneel on the sofa, arms folded on the back."

Winter's eyes narrowed. "Why do I need to be naked if this isn't going to be sexual?"

Spencer smiled. "Because my arm will drop off before I can make enough of an impact on your ass through your jeans to

make you fly. The ass and upper thighs are the safest places to strike when you've got a low level of body fat. We want pain, not damage. Besides, I need to know if I'm marking you."

Winter focused on the two implements but paid more attention to the larger flogger. Newbies were always the same; they equated size with pain. In this case, the smaller flogger had wicked knots at the end of each strand that would sting like a bitch and hopefully send Winter into orbit.

"What's my safe word?"

Spencer gave him a wolfish grin. "You don't need one. Medic, remember? I'll know when you've had enough. Trust me."

The words hung between them. Potent. Potentially devastating or magnificent. People thought dominants were in charge in a D/s relationship, but they were wrong. With one word, Winter could crush Spencer's ego and their relationship like a bug, and they both knew it.

Winter held his gaze for another ten seconds, then his hands went to his belt. Spencer draped the towel he'd fetched over the back of the sofa, then politely watched the fire as Winter stripped.

When Winter said 'ready,' he turned back around. He'd done this a thousand times, but this felt so damn different, hell, it was different. He couldn't let Winter know the butterflies the younger man must be feeling came, in part, from him.

Telling himself to get in the game, Spencer started on the familiar, settling, spiel.

“I’m going to touch you every now and again to check your skin temperature and muscle tone. I won’t go near your cock or balls, you have my word on that, and I’ll keep my jeans on, ok?”

Winter nodded.

“I need you to speak when I ask a question if you can.”

“Yes, sir.”

The warmth that spread through Spencer’s chest at Winter’s words surprised him. He’d given this speech a thousand times, with hundreds of subs, but it had never given him this warm feeling before.

“I’ll start slow, warm your skin to help prevent bruising then rev it up, got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Selecting the bigger soft suede flogger, he draped it over Winter’s shoulders then started gentle soft circles. Shoulders were good, but real pain—and the safest, most reliable way to subspace—came from the ass and thighs. He just hoped he could do it after promising so much. They were physically similar, but this was a mental thing more than a physical one. To fly, you had to give in, and he’d never done that apart from during his suicide bids.

He’d had the best dominants in the world, including Quinn Fredricks and Missy Bennett at the legendary Bondaris club, try to push him into subspace. It’d never worked. Both asked for re-matches, but he’d never given them one. He’d just been

confirming what he'd found out many decades ago. His body simply didn't produce enough endorphins for him to fly.

Avoiding Winter's spine and lower back, he moved the flogger down, changing to upward circles on his ass and thighs. Under his flogger, Winter's almost translucent skin bloomed pink, then red, as Spencer intensified his strokes into figure eights. His arm and shoulder burned in a way he hadn't felt in a decade.

The muscles bunched in Winter's back, his ass going hard in reaction to the stronger strikes. Spencer stopped, leaning into Winter's ear. People in pain didn't always have a wide field of perceptions.

"Embrace it. Let it flow over you. Breathe through it, deep and even. You need to go through the pain to release the endorphins; it's a physiological process. Once you've done it once, you'll understand."

Through his palm on Winter's sweat-slicked back, Spencer knew the instant his sub relaxed. Pride and satisfaction swelled. Fuck, he missed this.

Even though he knew time was of the essence if he didn't want to start over again, he said, "Well done; you're doing great. Time to show me what you're made of."

Standing back up, he eased Winter back into it with a few light strikes but quickly ramped up the intensity. Without pausing, he switched the suede flogger for the knotted one. Winter resisted, fists and shoulders tense. A minute passed, then two.

“Give in, embrace it. You can do it,” he added.

He didn't know anything of the kind. Worry edged Spencer's concentration. *What if he's like me? What if he can't let go enough?* Maybe no fairy could fly like a human.

Seconds away from giving up, Spencer nearly lost his rhythm as Winter sank into the sofa, almost hanging by his arms as he breathed deeply. Changing position as he kept up his strokes, Spencer almost faltered as a half-smile appeared on Winter's face. *Flying, he's flying.* It was the nearest he'd ever get to experiencing it himself.

His eyes widened as Winter's hips flexed, rubbing his cock against the back of the sofa. Winter groaned, a lustful sound, and Spencer continued the flogging, but at a gentler pace. His subject was already flying, he only needed to maintain the state, not increase it. Winter's ass already showed the blue of bruising.

“That's it, let it go,” he encouraged.

Winter gasped. Spencer flogged his ass harder, mixing pain and pleasure as Winter climaxed. It took a whole five minutes for Winter's euphoric expression to fade to complete relaxation. Spencer eased off, finishing with a circular massaging stroke, designed to slip Winter back to reality rather than ripping him from the state.

He sat down beside Winter and pulled him down onto his lap. A sloppy smile still hovered on Winter's lips. He looked as high as if he were on heroin. Spencer, and Winter's body, had produced the effect.

He couldn't have pulled his gaze away from Winter's expression if the entire cabin caught on fire. He was mesmerizing in his contentment. If he'd had his phone, he would have captured Winter's expression for all time so he could gaze at it, pretend it was him feeling this high.

I'm so damn selfish. Like heroin, some people became addicted to subspace after just one hit, and he was the only dealer in town. He smoothed Winter's hair, reveling in the euphoria he'd caused. Even if Winter didn't remember him after Santa took him back, he might always have an inkling that he was missing out on something.

Winter rubbed his cheek against the front of Spencer's jeans, against his rock-hard cock. It would be so easy to unzip. He had no doubt Winter would willingly suck him; submissives in or coming out of subspace usually had a deep urge to share their joy. But he'd made a promise, and although Winter didn't remember it right now, he did.

He stroked his thumb across Winter's cheek, and those beautiful green eyes opened for him.

"Ok?" he murmured.

A lopsided, drunk smile curved Winter's lips. "Yeah. You?"

Spencer smiled back. "I'm good. How do you feel?"

"Mazing. Like I'm floating; a snowflake in the sky."

Spencer's eyebrows rose as he tried not to laugh. "A snowflake, huh?"

“Yeah, all...” Winter’s hand waved vaguely in the air, “floaty.”
He frowned.

Spencer could almost see the wheels turning, albeit slowly, in Winter’s head.

“Do it again.”

“Maybe in a few days. Too many treats will spoil you.”

With a good deal of huffing and puffing, Winter pulled himself upright, grabbed a cushion and pulled it across his crotch.

“It’s... um... a bit foggy. Did we... you know?”

“I’d be damn disappointed if you didn’t remember if we had. But no, we didn’t. I don’t lie. Ask me anything you like, but don’t ask if you can’t handle the answer. Time for you to shower, eat, and get some rest. We’ve got a long way to go in the morning.”

At least he hoped they’d have tomorrow. He knew he’d survive when Winter left, not that he had a choice.

He watched Winter wobble to his feet, then shuffle to the bathroom.

“Shower, don’t use the tub in case you fall asleep,” he called out.

CHAPTER 16



THE HOT WATER STUNG his shoulders, backside, and thighs, and Winter rubbed the sore areas with the washcloth, trying to recreate the sensations Jingle had given him. For however long it had been, his mind had been empty, and he'd soared in euphoria. Somehow, Jingle lifted him out of himself, and Winter wanted it back so badly he could taste it.

Winter's body hadn't listened to Jingle's promise not to do anything sexual. The other fairy's unwavering attention on his ass, the burn of the strands, turned him on like nothing else ever had. But when Jingle switched to the knotted flogger, he would have said his safe word if he'd had one. He'd tried to obey Spencer's instructions, to let the pain flow over him, had told himself he'd take twenty more. He'd got to thirteen, and everything changed.

It hadn't been a flip, not there one instant, and there the next, instead, it felt as if someone had pulled the plug on his stress. Rather than it flowing down a plughole, it'd been like a tether had been cut, and he soared upward, leaving everything

behind. He'd felt light, not really present. The slap of the flogger continued, but the pain vanished, morphing into a continuous, never-ending sexual caress.

Orgasms always burst from him, he'd grasp for them, fighting for the peak, but this one swelled, bloomed without effort. He slipped into it and it surrounded him, buoyed, and sustained him. Nothing had been necessary apart from that sensation, not breathing, not living. Had he passed out? Maybe. It really didn't matter. What mattered was that he wanted it again, wanted to exist in that endless moment for the rest of eternity.

He froze. *Did I touch heaven?*

The lassitude in his limbs remained, but damn he wished it would stay in his mind a little longer.

A knock came on the door. "You ok in there?"

He didn't want to speak, didn't want to step back into the world, but Jingle was dragging him there as surely as he'd pulled him out of it with his floggers. The bathroom door opened.

"Come on, out you come before you turn into a prune." Jingle's voice was low, calm.

Winter stepped out and into the fluffy white towel Jingle held. Without speaking, Jingle patted him dry.

"Just some aloe gel," he murmured before Winter felt cool, soothing gel being smoothed into his heated skin. Jingle hung a bathrobe around his shoulders, guiding him to the table

where he put a bowl of tomato soup in front of him. It hurt to sit, but Winter embraced the pain as an old welcome friend.

The spoon looked like it weighed a ton, but Winter picked it up anyway. Jingle let him eat in peace. Before he'd realized time had passed, the bowl was empty.

"Come on, bedtime. We can talk about it tomorrow." Jingle stood beside him. He hadn't noticed him move. Without thought, Winter leaned into him, head on his belly.

"I want to do it again."

A hand brushed through his damp hair. "Another day, I promise. Now, bedtime."

"Come with me?"

Jingle didn't answer, but he helped him to his feet and kept a hand on his shoulder all the way up the stairs. When Jingle pulled the covers back on Winter's bed, a hot water bottle lay there. Without a word, Winter climbed in. Jingle tucked him in, then leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead.

"Goodnight, Junior."

"Night. That was, this is..." he trailed off.

Jingle squeezed his shoulder. "I know, Junior, I know."

It would have been better if Jingle had climbed into the bed with him; he wanted to be held all night, but he was just so relaxed that he drifted off almost before Jingle closed the door behind himself.



As soon as he woke, Winter thought about the experience of the night before. His hand went to his ass, rubbing over the aching flesh. His heart warmed. Despite his reluctance, his defiance, Jingle had persisted, calm and authoritative, until Winter had acknowledged what Jingle had clearly seen from the beginning.

I'm a submissive masochist. I like where pain takes me, where Jingle takes me.

Nothing could ever match what Jingle had shown him last night, and he wanted to give Jingle as much pleasure and contentment as he'd provided. Being on his knees, being submissive, always put a smile on Jingle's face.

Winter climbed out of bed, intending to go find Jingle. Whatever it took, he'd please the man he loved for as long as his memory remained.

He froze. *Love?* The concept rolled around his mind. An echo of the lightness he'd experienced last night filled him. It fit.

I love him, and I want to spend the rest of my life, however long it is, with him. And if that's here, in isolation, that'll be more than fine.

The other things that happened yesterday rolled over his revelation like an avalanche. Santa intended to leave Jingle

here alone, forever.

The closer Winter got to Jingle, the more their relationship developed, the more likely it was that Santa would pull Winter out of here to hurt him. He'd probably wipe his memory and rub that in Jingle's face too.

Could you wipe out love like a word on the Adult Department assignment chalkboard? He didn't know, but he didn't want to be the guinea pig who proved the theory. Santa wouldn't wipe Jingle's memory, he'd make him suffer alone, maybe make him watch Winter with wishers just to mess with him.

His chest ached at the thought of what Jingle had suffered and would suffer again if their relationship developed. He might love Jingle, but did Jingle love him? It would be better for the older fairy if he didn't.

He let out a shaky breath as reality sank in. Being alone would be the worst thing for Jingle. Staying here must be his priority. He needed to show Santa he couldn't ever be trusted, and... his heart sank to his bare feet.

They couldn't do what they'd done last night again; they couldn't show any affection at all. With Santa watching, he couldn't tell Jingle how he felt about him. But Jingle would question, would try to draw him out, and discover his thoughts. He couldn't let that happen. Various plans flitted through his mind, but none involved happiness for either of them. The physical pain that disappointing Jingle might cause him was nothing compared to what Jingle would feel if, when, Santa pulled Winter out of here.

The smell of oatmeal wafted up the stairs. He dressed, hating the green fairy uniform more than he'd ever done before. The fabric was lighter, more flimsy than usual. The run would be cold, but if Santa thought that would break him, the old fucker could think again.

Taking a deep breath, he headed down the stairs. The place appeared odd, bare, without the decorations.

"Morning," he said as he approached the already laid kitchen table.

He looks after me so well, didn't even take advantage of me last night, and I'm about to shit all over his happiness.

Jingle glanced over his shoulder from stirring the oatmeal. "Morning, Sunshine. How's your ass this morning?"

Winter bit back the automatic 'It's fine.' "Sore. I don't want to do that again." The sting of another snowflake forming on his side didn't make him flinch; he'd already braced for it.

If he hadn't been observing the man for the last few weeks, Winter wouldn't have noticed his stiff posture, but it was there as he dished up the breakfast and put Winter's in front of him.

Jingle sat down himself and took two mouthfuls.

Just as Winter's hopes swelled that he'd accept his word, Jingle spoke, his voice maddeningly calm and level as always.

"Why? You enjoyed it."

"I did. Too much. I went to sleep thinking about it, and I woke up thinking about it. It's like heroin. Addictive. I don't want it

ruling my life like it rules Coal's."

Jingle sighed and put down his spoon. "It's part of who you are, Junior. You can't keep on denying it, you—"

Gritting his teeth against the pain he knew was coming, he said, "Watch me."

Nothing hurt.

"This is about him, isn't it?"

Damn perceptive bastard.

Winter gazed into those compassionate, understanding eyes. "It's about us not being in emotional and physical pain and staying here as long as possible. Housemates, nothing more. Ever. Got it?"

Winter held Jingle's unwavering gaze as fire burned down his side.

"Agreed. Use the aloe gel in the medkit for your ass and the dressings on the new tattoos before you start the run. I've got a few things to do downstairs. I'll catch you up."

Jingle trailed about fifty yards behind Winter for the entire run. It felt as long as the first time Winter had done it. The cold air burned his chest, and everything hurt. His boots were rubbing again. He walked the last third, determined not to stop. Jingle's sympathy and care warmed Winter from behind, but neither spoke. There wasn't anything to say.

When Winter eventually opened the cabin door, a forest of black trees decorated with silver tinsel and baubles met his

eyes. He couldn't even get into the house. At least the anger warmed him up. Grabbing the first one, he hauled it around the side of the house. Silently, Jingle joined him in the task.

It took an hour to reach the last tree. Luckily, in his annoyance, Santa had forgotten to do the decorations on the banisters and mantelpiece.

"Leave it," Jingle spoke for the first time since they'd left the table this morning. "If you throw all of it out, it'll get worse tomorrow."

Winter hauled the final tree out the door.

Day followed day. Jingle pushed, tried to start conversations, and touched him occasionally. Winter gave one-word answers and moved away. The attempts at interaction dwindled, but every day, Jingle restocked the antiseptic and dressings in the bathroom without comment.

One morning, as Jingle took Winter's empty bowl to the sink, he said, "I know why you're behaving like this. I disagree with your logic, but I've never forced anyone to be with me. I'm here for you, always will be." He put on his boots and left.

Alone at the table, Winter shed a few lonely tears before sniffing and finding his boots. He didn't want Jingle to suffer running alone until he didn't have a choice.

Conversation became minimal as they established a painfully polite routine. Jingle descended to his dungeon as soon as they got home after the run, leaving Winter to his stubborn removal of the decorations. Every time Jingle turned his back on him, it

hurt emotionally. It pained Winter even more when he did it to Jingle and physically felt his love's disappointment. Winter made lunch, called Jingle up. They ate. Jingle disappeared again.

The sound of leather impacting wood or plastic rose from the dungeon, sometimes for hours. Winter couldn't stop imagining the blows hitting his back or ass, returning him to the place he couldn't forget.

Their only meaningful interaction was through the recorders. Winter had found a rough instrument, clearly an earlier attempt, when he'd been clearing out decorations. He'd left the polished version on the table and taken the other outside when he'd gone to chop wood.

The first refrain of *Don't Worry, Be Happy* came from inside. Winter shook his head, smiling. Picking up the rough recorder, he joined in. They played the piece twice. Winter's chest warmed with Jingle's pleasure. The urge to go in, to smile and share the moment face to face, made him pause. He put the recorder down and picked up the axe. Jingle played the tune one more time. The silence when the music finished proved how lonely this place must have been during the decade Jingle spent alone.

Even if he could, Winter wouldn't dream of using his magic to leave Jingle now.

CHAPTER 17



SO DAMN BORING.

Arioch had seen enough. Jingle and Winter would probably continue their painfully polite relationship until the sun exploded. Neither of them had whispered the word *revenge*, let alone made a formal call for retribution that would trigger an entry in his book of revenge. And every minute he sat here, the longer the list grew. Yes, he didn't have to work on every request, but like Nick, unfulfilled justified revenge itched.

The pair in the globe didn't know it, but they were living at a rate of one hour per day. Not as fast as when Jingle had been alone, but quick enough to show both fairies were tenacious bleeding hearts.

Besides, it'd been the new moon last night. The council would be in session today, and then not for another month. He couldn't sit here and watch another seven hundred plus days of this, and he couldn't leave in case Nick decided to hide them somewhere else.

Time to finally get this show on the road. With a groan of relief, he willed himself to the transport chamber in the Supernatural Council complex.

“Well, that explains a lot,” a wry voice came from above him.

Arioch looked up and then up again. Henry Lloyd, carnivorous shifter delegate, loomed over him, at least six times Arioch’s current height.

Fuck. Of all the people to see him like this, it had to be the uncultured canine shifter. With a thought, Arioch changed his appearance from elf-on-a-shelf to his black-suited, red-skinned, human-sized male form.

He jabbed a finger at the still taller and broader shifter. “If you tell anyone about this, I’ll—“

Henry’s bushy eyebrows rose. Not for the first time, Arioch wondered how he’d got the scar that stretched from his temple to chin.

“You’ll what? Unwind all the toilet paper? Pose suggestively with a toothbrush? Make a mess in the kitchen or draw faces on food?” Arioch jaw clenched, but what could you expect from a being who sniffed asses to say hello half the time? But there was one surefire way to get a little payback on any pack-based being.

“How do you fancy one of your pups doing work experience at the supernatural prison? I’m sure our old chum Fabian would love someone new to talk to.” He pursed his lips. “Did I say talk to? I meant eat.”

With a roar, Henry lunged forward. Arioch expanded, stuck out his hand, and held the canine shifter away from him with his palm on the irate man's forehead. The way the alpha growled, flailed, and gnashed his teeth meant a shift was coming in three... two...

"If you kids have stopped playing, can we get on with the meeting?" Avery, annoyingly suave and gorgeous as ever, stood in the entrance to the bubble-like transport chamber.

"He started it," Arioch blurted, annoyed that he wouldn't get to see Henry in his canine form, all tangled up in his clothes.

"He threatened my pups," Henry growled.

Avery closed his eyes, shook his head. "A thousand years old, and I'm still dealing with children. Off you go, both of you, or I'll put you in detention after class."

Arioch shrank back to a little less than his regular size and stuck his hand in the air. When Avery ignored him, he bounced up and down.

"Ohhh me, pick me! Can I change my punishment to a good hard caning? Preferably on my bare—"

With a snarl of contempt, Henry strode off down the corridor. Arioch grinned.

Perfect, sandy blond eyebrows drew together. "Did you have to do that? Now he'll be growly and argumentative for the whole meeting."

Avery's mention of the meeting reminded Arioch of why he was here.

“I found my witness.”

Avery straightened, immediately the consummate politician.

“Let’s get to it then. I—“

Arioch walked up to Avery, slung an arm across those perfect shoulders, and guided him toward the council chamber. “And that’s where the issue lies.” Knowing he had the incubus’s full attention, he related the story of Jingle’s cruel incarceration.

“He’ll have excuses, of course. I’ll say the revenge wasn’t justified, he’ll say I’m lying because I hate him. Which... I kinda do. He’ll claim he did it for the good of all, yadda yadda, I made him so I can do what I want, blah blah. He’ll probably argue that there’s a precedent for using others who are weaker. Vampires enslave sex demons, Dragons keep shifters, your kind enslave humans. Humans enslave each other. Everyone is at it—“

“Not any more, not under my watch,” Avery ground out. “Air elemental!”

One of the identical blue-skinned skeletal beings stepped out of thin air. “You bellowed, council leader?”

“Bring Santa to me.”

The air elemental’s eyebrows rose. “And how do you expect me to persuade the most powerful djinn on the planet to tag along? Ask nicely?”

“Does everyone but me know he’s real?” Avery ground out.

Arioch shared a glance with the elemental, who shrugged. “Not something I’ve ever felt the need to conduct a survey about. I could, but it’ll cost you.” Blue lips parted in a smile that revealed sharp, needle-like white teeth. “So will a bounty hunter because I’m not going up against Santa alone. I reckon a hunter will want a million, depending on the charge. The bigger the crime, the bigger the pay packet. What’s the charge?”

“I’ll get him,” Arioch piped up. “Just be prepared to start the case when I get back.”

With a thought, Arioch popped back to the mantelpiece in Nick’s office and froze. Nick slumped in his chair, looking drained and frustrated as he stared at the globes. Heart in his mouth, Arioch concentrated, focusing in on the globe he hoped still housed his prime witness. Two tiny red coated figures trailed toward the cabin.

Bastard’s going to pay for making my pulse race too.

Arioch transferred to the center of the room in his normal form. Nick didn’t even twitch. *Fucker.*

“I wondered when you’d show up to gloat,” Nick commented without looking up.

Arioch nodded at the globes. “I’m not here about them. The head of the supernatural council wants more minority representation. And as you have significantly parted ways from the majority of djinn, and your little tribe outnumbers them, I suggested you could take a seat on the council.”

A seat on the council was a high accolade, not often given.

Nick's eyes narrowed. "Why would you do that for me?"

Arioch grinned. "Because the entire council could bust your ass instead of just me." He frowned. "But... that also means you'll have direct access to the council to bust my ass over leaving you in the lurch all those years ago." Arioch wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, maybe not such a good idea after all. Although... with all the paperwork piling up around here, there's no way you kept my contract for a thousand years."

Nick held up his hand, and a scroll tied with a red ribbon appeared in it. "This contract?"

"Shit!" he exclaimed, then popped back to the transport chamber and began counting. He got to seventeen before Nick, dressed in a red suit, but in his curly-haired, young form, popped in beside him.

Arioch scowled, although he wanted to crow in triumph. Nick could enter the complex as a suspect under investigation, but the magic wouldn't let him leave until he was pronounced innocent or sentenced.

"Come on then, Nicky boy, let's go introduce you to the boring old farts."



“So, let me get this clear, you have imprisoned six of your offspring, four of them in solitary confinement, for supporting the sixth?” Levine looked up from his paperwork. Ariocho despised the detail-focused, gnome-like ancient fae, but right now, he could have kissed Levine as grey hairs popped out all over Santa’s head.

“Err Nicky boy? Eyebrows.”

Nick sent him such a hate-filled look that Ariocho performed an exaggerated full-body shiver. But the festive djinn’s eyebrows returned to their former dark hue. His hair remained salt and pepper. Nick stood in the railed-off area used for suspects being tried by the council. Two guards, the only Atlas bear shifter in existence and Silas, a vampire hybrid, stood at either side of him, but they were only for show. If Nick made a break for it, and Ariocho prayed that he would, Ariocho would chase him down with glee.

Nick lifted his chin, gaze on Avery. “I did. And that’s where they’ll stay until their misguided loyalty fades.”

Ariocho stood up, and created a black judge’s robe and a curly white wig. He hadn’t had this much fun in ages.

“I put it to you, Mr. Claus, or should I say Papa Noel? Just how many aliases do you have, hmm?”

Avery sighed. “Would you get on with it? All long-lived individuals have many names to pass in human circles, we all know that.”

Arioch carried on, loving that every pair of eyes in the room were focused on him. “I put it to you, Mr. Kringle, that you are unfairly punishing Jingle, and—

“Jingle is toxic,” Nick growled “to everyone he comes across; the incident with July Spicer proved my point yet again. My other fairies don’t know him as I do.

“Putting him back in the human world will lead to more conflict. Jingle’s nature pulls him toward adults with unfulfilled wishes, he can’t help it, and—“

“Hasn’t he fulfilled many painful—“ Arioch clutched a fist to his chest and twisted his features into an agonized expression ”—heartrending wishes that your other positive-biased creations would have found horribly distressing?”

“Such as?” the witch delegate said. The middle-aged blonde human had an axe to grind for something Arioch had done to a distant relative of hers centuries ago.

Arioch turned to her. “Such as helping people on the edge of death survive long enough to say a final ‘I love you’ to someone dear to them. It would give his ordinary fairies nightmares.”

“They don’t, because I remove painful memories from fairies.”

Arioch’s hand shot out, stabbing toward Nick with a stiff, accusatory finger. “You see? He not only controls what they do, he controls what they remember and tries to control what they think too. Even I don’t control my lesser demons to that extent.”

Santa's jaw tensed. "Jingle is drawn to pain and misery rather than joy. He was disrupting all my other fairies, so I handed him over to Arioch. Once in the human realm, with his magic and memory bound, he sought out the ill, the dying, and the mentally unstable. I made a mistake."

"Too damn right you did," Arioch grumbled.

"Let the man speak, demon," the witch snapped.

"He continued to cause human suffering. Plus, he steps on toes of other supernaturals, particularly the reapers." Santa nodded to the silent James Dean look-a-like sitting next to the curvaceous siren representative.

"It's true," the reaper replied. "Jingle's djinn aura repels us. Several human spirits have had to remain attached to their bodies for uncomfortable lengths of time because he was with them. I've heard no reports recently."

Nick's triumphant expression pissed Arioch off, and he could feel that he was losing many of the thirty-strong council.

"Jingle's interference led to two of my fairies becoming bound to humans, and he was dragging others to the same fate," Nick announced. "The Djinn representative will tell you how terrible that fate can be. It's permanent slavery."

Slavery was a significant issue in these liberal, bleeding-heart times. All heads swiveled to the petite, olive-skinned man who appeared in his mid-twenties at most, but Jorife had been the head djinn when Arioch first drew breath.

Arioch had often wondered if the appearance of Disney's Aladin character was based on the djinn. In human terms, Jorife would be considered Arioch's parent.

"Debatable," Jorife replied. "An intelligent djinn can change masters frequently or stay with one they like for many decades. But yes, having a bad master can be unpleasant. What is more unpleasant is having to generate unpleasant emotions to balance all the sweetness Nick produces." The dark-eyed djinn's gaze was unforgiving. "You're making the rest of us malnourished and causing unnecessary friction between some masters and bound djinn. You and your brother were a yin and yang experiment, which failed. Your empire building has upset the balance, Nick, which is why I asked Arioch for help in bringing you before the council."

Nick gaped. "But, but you made me. How could you?"

"You made Jingle, and look what you did to him," Arioch drawled.

Nick glared at him, then turned his attention to Avery. Arioch's belly fluttered with delicious nerves. He had no idea which way this would go.

"Krampus has always hated me, either trying to hold me back or take my place. I thought letting him conduct justifiable revenge on one of my creations would smooth the way between us."

"So it's my fault now?" Arioch blurted.

“It always was. Why do you think I created those first four fairies? Because you left me after I wouldn’t give in to your demands for more power.”

Arioch snorted. “I left you because you treated me like a slave, not an equal, and as soon as I left you made exactly what you wanted. One to fuck, one to be a punching bag, and the others to leech off.”

“Why you—“ Nick lurched forward, only to be restrained by Jericho, the bearded bear shifter.

“Quiet,” Avery roared. Arioch grinned at the vampire delegate. “No offense intended with the leech comment.”

The severe-looking dark-haired woman inclined her head. With her as a potential partner, no wonder male vampires gravitated toward sex demons for bedroom fun. The one time he’d cuckolded a vampire for revenge had been an exercise in vivid imagination.

“That’s enough, councilmember Arioch. We’ve heard accusations and counter-accusations. Now I’d like to hear from Jingle, in person.”

Nick folded his arms. “He’s staying where he is. I’ll not inflict him on the world again. His co-conspirators will also remain where they are until they repent.”

“And you accuse me of trying to usurp you? Trying to run your own supernatural prison isn’t stepping on my toes?”

“Arioch,” Avery snapped, “Sit down, or I’ll have you ejected.”

Mumbling, “You and whose army,” Arioch sat down.

“Jingle is a menace to everyone he comes into contact with, including his double,” Nick stated.

“His double?” Avery asked.

“I put him in a snowglobe with a doppelgänger I created. It took only a few days for Jingle to seduce poor Winter, so I decided to show him the distress he causes others. He can’t walk away from Winter when the going gets tough.”

“What did you do?” Avery asked.

“I made his dissatisfaction manifest on Winter’s skin so he could see, physically, what his uncontrolled emotions do to people. Winter is now covered, almost entirely, in marks caused by Jingle. Because of Jingle, Winter is now an angry, frustrated, almost non-verbal shell of the cheerful, obedient fairy I created.

“I proved that Jingle hasn’t changed. He uses people and throws them away. What I did was justified.”

Arioch stuck his hand in the air.

“Yes, councilmember Arioch?” Avery asked.

“Test him.”

Santa frowned. “What?”

“I said, test him. See if he’s as much of a user as you think. Prove that revenge you asked me to inflict was justified. Put a sexy girl or guy in there and see if he goes for them. If he’s willing to hurt Winter by going after the new fairy, pull Winter out, wipe his memory and leave Jingle where he is alone.”

Avery looked around the gathered delegates. “If a willing candidate can be found, so be it.”

“Good luck with that. I’m not going to let them out or anyone else in.”

“Nick, I’m ordering you to—“

“Don’t fuss your gorgeous blond head about it, council leader. I know someone who can get in there.”

Avery’s eyes narrowed. “To be legal, it has to be an unbiased test. Does this candidate of yours have a prior relationship with Jingle or Winter?”

A sly smile twitched Ariocho’s lips. “Anyone fancy a festive field trip?”

CHAPTER 18



BLINKING TO CLEAR HIS double vision didn't work. The identical sets of sharp cheekbones and almost white-blond hair stayed right where they were, sitting on either side of him, staring at him. Both wore red polo shirts and black jeans that hugged their bodies. Definitely one of his better dreams until their less than happy expressions convinced his fuzzy mind that this wasn't a figment of an inappropriately erotic subconscious.

The right-hand one looked resigned. The left one had gone a stage further with a frown. Neither appeared to be overcome by his tremendous sex appeal and about to ravish the living daylights out of him. Not being forced to have kinky sex in every position imaginable with one, or preferably both, of these gorgeous hunks until he was a boneless, totally sated mess would have been a shame if he was dreaming. As he appeared to be awake, it was significantly better news that they were fully dressed and at arm's length.

Tearing his gaze away from the disturbingly handsome and distinctly odd pair, he examined his surroundings, hoping to settle his million-miles-an-hour, tumbling thoughts. The large, make that huge, sleigh-style bed he currently occupied looked perfectly at home in the rustic wooden room. The sharp angle of the eaves screamed of some sort of Scandinavian-style cabin.

He certainly hadn't been here the last time he was conscious, although details of where he had been were disturbingly absent. Trying to get some idea of where he'd been and what he'd been doing, he had a quick peek under the red, Nordic-patterned quilt. Again with the odd.

He wore a sexy Christmas costume, scarlet and green striped tiny shorts, a green tunic with a jagged hem, held together by a black belt with a gold buckle. Kinky elf. A short, fit, Caucasian kinky elf by the look of his exposed chest. Reaching up, he pulled a lock of curly hair down to see it.

Ginger.

He must have either been at a Christmas party or doing some sort of tacky promotion. He tried to picture himself in the costume promoting some cheesy Christmas product or festive event, then realized that he had no idea about his appearance apart from what he'd found out so far.

“Have I had a bump on the head?” he asked.

“Not as far as I can tell,” the not frowning man said in a slow, deep, erection-inducing voice. “Do you have a headache? Double vision?”

The other one snorted in derision at the second option, then twitched as if someone had poked him in the side. The talkative one pressed his lips together.

His head didn't hurt, so he cautiously shook it to indicate he felt alright.

The outfit was too revealing for a kid's event, so he went with having been at a Christmas party and had gone home with these two.

Am I the sort of person who goes home from a party with strangers? Although, if I can't remember what I look like, are they strangers?

He took another look at the pair, trying to pull something out of his cavernously empty mind. Would they be offended if he admitted he didn't have a clue what was going on or who they were? Maybe playing along until things came back would be the least awkward way to proceed.

"Your stuff is over there. We thought it'd be uncomfortable to sleep in," the not frowning one said in his oh-so-sexy voice.

He could feel his cock swelling inside his underwear, or at least he damn well hoped he was wearing something under those stretchy shorts as they wouldn't hide a damn thing.

Damn, I hope I haven't had sex with either of them and forgotten it because that would be a crying shame. Fuck, am I even attractive enough to assume they'd want to sleep with me?

With effort, he tore his gaze away and followed the direction of the less frowny one's nod. Sitting on a heavy wooden bedside table were furry Rudolph antlers on a headband, and hightop scarlet Converse. It looked horribly tacky in this perfectly accessorized room.

An uncomfortable thought popped into his blank mind and then out of his mouth without stopping.

"I'm not a strippergram, am I?"

So much for playing it cool.

The lips of the frowning one lifted in a brief smile; he had green eyes. The eyes of the chattier one were blue. At least he had a way to tell them apart.

"Shit, I'm one of those uglygrams, aren't I?"

Blue also seemed to be suppressing a smile as he replied. "Well, if you are a strippergram—and there's no way you'd get work as an uglygram—you didn't fulfill your contract."

At least I'm not ugly. The wheels in his head spun again. "I didn't agree to a threesome at a Christmas party, did I? If I did, obviously nothing happened because I'm still dressed, so I guess I owe you both an apology. I don't think I usually pass out on dates." He paused, a horrifying idea rushed past his *think before you speak* brain section. "We did have a date, right? I'm not a prostitute or one-night-stand type, am I?"

Green looked down as if trying to hide a grin—or a grimace—and Blue opened his mouth to speak. Unfortunately, the

situation's awkwardness seemed to have given his mouth a faster-than-light turbo boost.

"Sorry, but I can't remember a thing, not your names, where we met, not even who I am. Someone must have slipped me a roofie." He paused, frowning. "Wasn't one of you, was it?"

Both men shook their heads; Green appeared more bewildered than pissed off. Blue exuded calm as if this sort of thing happened to him all the time.

"I guess that's pretty far-fetched, seeing as I'm still dressed. Guys don't tend to use date rape drugs then tuck their victims up in bed alone, do they?" He glanced from one to the other. "Has anyone told you that you two really look alike?" Laughing inanely and knowing he sounded like a complete lunatic, he carried on because he couldn't find his mouth's off switch. "Of course you've heard that before, look at you two. What are you, twins or just brothers?"

"He's all yours," the green-eyed version said as he stood up. His voice was similar to the 'chatty' one's, but it held a distinct note of sadness or exhaustion, maybe both.

"Wait," he said, holding his hand out as if he could prevent the fit, incredibly hot man from leaving. "At least tell me who you are and where I am?"

The man hesitated, then carried on walking without turning around or speaking.

He turned to his remaining companion, non-plussed. "Well, that was rude. What's with him?"

“He’s...” a brief sarcastic smile twitched Blue’s lips. ”—working through a few issues.”

“In that case, unless you’re going to run away from the scary amnesic too, you get to answer my questions. Who are you? Who’s he? Where the hell am I, and how did I get here? And why can’t I remember my name?”

“All in good time,” Blue said, voice gentle. “As for who we are, I’m the older, worldly-wise version of him, or looking at it another way, he’s the fresh, heart-on-his-sleeve, version of me.”

He blinked at Blue’s cryptic response. “He looks knackered, not fresh. So you’re brothers, not twins?” he asked, then his eyes widened as something else occurred to him. “Don’t tell me you’re father and son, and you’ve had plastic surgery.” *Fuck, that sounded rude. Why the hell can’t I stop talking?* “Although finding out your son is attracting more people than you would be a bit of an ego basher, but plastic—“

“Do you ever shut up?” Blue asked mildly.

He scowled. Blue might be handsome, but polite and intelligent he was not. Still, nobody could have everything. There had to be a finite pot of abilities for everyone. A little too much of one thing, and there wasn’t enough room left for an excess of something else.

“And I’d know that how? No memory, remember?”

“What’s the last thing you recall before you woke up here?”

He wracked his brain for something, anything. Home, job, family, friends, hell, even his name. Nothing popped into his head. It was freaky, scary.

Something large and warm enclosed his hand, and he looked up into the startlingly blue eyes.

“Breath in... breath out... in... and out, nice and slow.” Blue’s slow, deep voice exuded confidence. It was the anchor he needed.

He nodded frantically as he followed Blue’s calm instructions, trying to slow his pounding heart.

“Don’t worry about not being able to remember anything. Believe me, it happens around here a lot. Any idea of what we should call you?”

Casting around the room, his eyes were drawn to the fake antlers on the bedside table. Rudolf sounded way too formal for the outfit he wore.

“Rudy? It’ll do until my own comes back to me.”

Blue’s expression didn’t hold out much hope. “Perhaps, perhaps not.”

Rudy managed to let silence reign for all of fifteen seconds before being compelled to speak again. “So, what do I call you and your evil twin?”

Blue’s lips quirked in a genuine smile. “What makes you think I’m not the evil twin? But to answer your question, he’s Winter. Call me Spencer.”

“Winter and Spencer, got it.”

A loud rumble coincided with the whole room shaking. Rudy let out an involuntary squeak as he clutched ineffectually at the red and white quilt as if it could save him.

“We’re in an earthquake zone?” He glanced at the small window behind Spencer’s shoulder in fear. All he could see was swirling white. “Was that an avalanche? Actually, where the hell are we?”

Footsteps running up wooden stairs preceded the door being thrown open so hard it banged against the wall. Winter’s face looked like thunder.

“What the hell did you do?” Winter growled, glaring at Spencer. They might look alike, but Rudy could already see differences between them. Winter had a tenseness to his body, tone, and expression that Spencer lacked.

“I told him my name; he repeated it.”

Winter’s frown deepened as he glanced at him. “Call him Jingle if you don’t want this place shaken apart.” His attention turned rapidly back to the other man as if he didn’t want to look at him for longer than necessary. “And you know better than that. Are you going to come down and help me clean up the mess you just caused, or carry on playing with your new toy?”

“Toy?” Rudy said with deep indignation. “I’m not anyone’s toy. I’m—“

Winter raised his eyebrows. “You’re what?”

He opened and closed his mouth, trying yet again to remember how he'd ended up in this room.

The tall, athletic, green-eyed man took a step toward the bed. Rudy lifted his chin as he shrank back against the pillows.

Winter jerked as if someone had poked him in the back.

“Stop it, Junior, you’re scaring him,” Jingle said in a low voice.

What was the matter with the guy? Does he have a nervous tick or ants in his pants?

“And what are you going to do about it? Snuggle up and provide lots of loving sympathy? He’s just trying to bring out your protective instincts again, so he can cause you more pain. Don’t you get it?” Pushing a hand through his hair, Winter let out an exasperated groan.

To Rudy’s surprise, Jingle got off the bed, moved without hesitation to his twin, and pulled him into a hug. Winter tensed, then relaxed into him. Jingle was perhaps an inch taller than Winter, although it hadn’t registered until they stood together. The hug lasted until Jingle’s hand descended to Winter’s butt and squeezed. Rudy’s mouth dropped open as the green-eyed man pulled away.

What on earth is going on here?

“Nope, I’ve told you before, that’s not going to happen again; he’ll just use it against you,” Winter said as he adjusted his mussed shirt.

“I can cope with it,” Jingle told him firmly.

Winter scowled, hunching his shoulders. “Good for you because I bloody well can’t.” He turned to Rudy who felt like he was eavesdropping on a private conversation. “As I said, call him Jingle, and don’t come on to either of us if you know what’s good for you. I’m crazy and he’s a sadist. Keep the room; I’ll take the sofa.”

What was with the cuddle thing? That hadn’t been a brotherly type hug; that had been a ‘this is going to get steamy’ clinch. He might not remember anything, but he knew sexual tension when he saw it. It made him feel a little better about not being so overwhelmingly attractive that they hadn’t had their wicked way with him. They were in a relationship. It still left the question of why they looked so alike. Real twins or brothers wouldn’t... would they? Although, didn’t everyone have a doppelgänger? This brought a whole new meaning to the term narcissist. Whatever was going between these two was bloody complicated.

And maybe illegal.

Not to mention the ‘crazy’ and ‘sadist’ issues.

His curiosity was piqued, but not enough to want to hang around.

Even though he couldn’t remember his name or home, as he seemed injury-free and not undernourished, it had to be better than staying with these two oddballs even if they were easy on the eyes.

Somebody must be missing him, from his outfit, he wasn’t exactly the shy, retiring type. A trip to a local police station

should sort out the mystery. He pictured walking up to a counter, and a joyful expression appearing on the face of the officer staffing the desk. He'd be greeted by name, which of course would be sexy, although 'Rudy' wasn't too bad. It certainly fit in with the festive theme of Jingle and Winter.

Who named their kid 'Jingle' anyway? It must be why he prefers Spencer.

"Can't I just go home?" he asked in a small voice.

He finally believed Winter's confession of mental instability when he barked out a high-pitched, almost deranged laugh.

"Home? You want to go home? Good luck with that. He's been stuck here for a decade, and I've been here for a month. Get used to it, Rudy, this is your home now."

Indignation rushed through him at his highhandedness. It was time to get a few things straight.

"Of course there's a way out of here; it might not be easy, but you must be getting groceries, clothes, and other stuff from somewhere." He picked at the Nordic bedding. "This isn't homemade. Clearly, neither of you is starving or vitamin deficient, and we all must have gotten here somehow."

Rudy narrowed his eyes, trying his best to look adamant. "And for your information, making a pass at either of you is the furthest thing from my mind." His face warmed as Winter gave him a 'yeah, right' look, but Rudy plunged on with his tirade regardless.

“You’ve clearly got something going on, and I’m not in the habit of breaking up relationships, even if I was interested.”

Oh boy, had the thought of being sandwiched between these two occurred to him. If he was being honest, he’d been thinking about it almost constantly since he’d woken up.

Jingle came back over to the bed and gently pulled back the quilt. Rudy braced himself for a chill, but the room felt pleasantly warm.

“Come on, let’s go and see what needs picking up. Rudy isn’t too bad until we figure out your real name. In fact, I like it. It’s a happy name, and Lord knows we could do with a little cheerfulness around here.”

“Like that’s going to happen,” Winter grumbled as he held the door open for them.

The door led to a tiny hallway. There was another door opposite, and an inclined window in the sloping roof like the one in his room.

“That’s Jingle’s room. Stay out of it,” Winter added.

“Stop it. I won’t tell you again, Junior,” Jingle growled at his counterpart.

Rudy decided he’d obey, and quickly, if Jingle spoke to him like that. As Winter only grunted slightly but didn’t reply, he guessed he felt the same way.

The ground floor consisted of a single room with a roaring fireplace and a comfortable black leather sofa. To the side was a kitchen area with kitchen units, a square sink, an old-

fashioned range cooker, and a substantial wooden table with four chairs. As had been the case upstairs, the floor and walls were made of wood. But more than anything else, what took his attention were the huge amount of festive decorations and wood carvings crammed into the space. His kinky elf outfit certainly fitted in here.

The carved spindles on the banisters, the legs of the table and the chairs were all wound with green garlands. Bright red and green paper chains festooned the ceiling. The piece-de-resistance was the eight-foot-tall Christmas tree standing in the corner. It was covered in fairy lights, baubles, and probably half a mile of red and gold tinsel. A few glass baubles lay broken on the floor and a wooden sculpture of a dolphin lay on the ground near the hearth. Winter crouched near the tree, clearing up the mess.

“So, you can’t leave, but you can get Santa’s grotto delivered?”

CHAPTER 19



WINTER IGNORED RUDY'S COMMENT about the place looking like Santa's grotto and handed him the thick white socks he'd fetched after clearing up the broken glass.

"Put those on; you don't want cold feet."

He moved around the newcomer to begin his interrupted afternoon ritual. He and Jingle had found the diminutive man snoring gently on the sofa when they'd come in from their daily run.

In his mind, Winter tried to slot Rudy into the category of just another Christmas decoration sent to irritate them. Unfortunately, he couldn't remove a person as he was about to do with all the other rubbish that again cluttered up the cabin. That his actions irritated Jingle gave him a devilish satisfaction and a profound sense of guilt.

As always, he started with the most offensive part of his creator's impositions. Reaching up, he snaked his hand through the prickly foliage and grasped the trunk of the heavily decorated tree near the top. With a firm kick at the tree

stand, he overbalanced the spruce and dragged it unceremoniously towards the door, thankful that he hadn't yet taken off his boots. Jingle had removed his before he carried Rudy upstairs. Seeing him in Jingle's arms, watching him tend to the vulnerable youngster, although he only took his pulse and checked for injuries through his clothes, had sparked every jealous nerve he possessed. He hated his reaction, but he couldn't help thinking about Jingle turning to Rudy for comfort because he'd shut him out. The fairy had been alone for a long time.

He'd thought about competing for Jingle's attention, but then decided he should do the opposite, and make sure all three of them stayed at arm's length. Housemates, nothing more, until the end of time. It would be easier, less intense, with three.

"Consider leaving it, just for once? We do have something more interesting to consider," Jingle's amused tone clearly didn't expect a positive answer.

As it hadn't been an order, Winter ignored him. 'Interesting' wasn't how he'd describe the scantily-clad sexy youngster, and he hated Jingle describing their unwanted visitor in that way.

Clearing their living space of everything that reminded him of their creator filled Winter's time, so he didn't dwell on what this new development would mean for them.

Without access to a snowglobe or the mundane entertainments humans used such as television, books, or video games, there wasn't much else to do apart from indulging Jingle in his... games. For his own sanity, that couldn't happen again. Weeks

had gone by, but whenever he relaxed, his mind returned to the floating, mindless, pure euphoria Jingle had induced with his floggers.

Winter wanted it again so bad he could taste it. Every waking moment he could, he pushed himself physically so he could sleep at night instead of lying awake, wishing things were different.

He reached the front door, flung it open, then pulled the jangling mass outside. The expected face full of snowflakes didn't deter him. It always snowed at this time, which was why he usually got on with the task as soon as he returned from their run. Rudy's arrival would not upset his schedule or his shaky hard-won equilibrium. Upsetting them, or rather upsetting Jingle, was what He wanted.

"Is it Twelfth Night or something?" Rudy asked.

Winter mentally wished Jingle luck with explaining that one as he left the cabin. But as Jingle had taken responsibility for everything else, he could take this one too.

As always, the area at the side of the cabin where he'd left yesterday's rubbish was empty. He dropped the still lit tree in the pristine snow and stomped back through the swirling flakes to the front door.

Rudy stood alone by the fireplace. Jingle was in the kitchen, checking the supplies that had, as usual, appeared during their absence. Winter stomped the clinging snow off his boots on the doorstep, then came inside and shut the door. He didn't bother taking the boots off; he'd be in and out for a while yet.

“What the hell is going on?” Rudy asked, hands-on-hips as Winter strode over to the banisters and began pulling off the green garlands.

At least the display had been fairly subtle today. Maybe Santa didn't want to freak out his newest victim. The three neon pink trees with garish flashing lights they had walked in on yesterday had given him an immediate headache.

Winter heard more than saw Rudy stomp over to the kitchen area to confront Jingle. He had to give the little guy points for the amount of noise he managed to make when only wearing socks.

Rudy's determined expression made Winter smile as he carried on with his task. Hopefully, Rudy would get a reaction from the older fairy. Jingle's cool, calm act, even in the face of extreme provocation, annoyed him almost as much as he craved the anchor it provided for his own tumultuous emotions.

“Well, is it?” Rudy asked Jingle pointedly as he continued to peel potatoes into a bowl on the kitchen table.

Winter shifted position to get a better view; he'd never seen Jingle interact with anyone in the flesh.

“Is it what?” Jingle asked mildly as he put peeled potatoes in a pan of water on the stove then took a large beef roast from the fridge. Jingle's experience of living as a mortal for the last two centuries gave him far more knowledge of the culinary arts than Winter. Besides, he seemed to enjoy using his skill to turn classic Christmas fare into non-festive dishes.

He'd offered to teach Winter to cook. So far, Winter had declined. They had time for that, so much time. And getting any closer to Jingle would be risky. The itch to please his former lover in every way possible still messed with Winter's mind, but he could feel his resistance falling away, day by day.

Will Rudy take Jingle's focus from me? Jealousy flared. Stupid, stupid fairy. Rudy's here to upset things. Don't play into Santa's hands.

"Twelfth Night," Rudy continued. "You know, the sixth of January, the day you take down Christmas decorations?"

"As far as I can establish, it's mid-June," Jingle said mildly as he selected a large knife from the block on the worktop.

Winter stopped pulling at the decorations. He could almost see steam coming out of Rudy's ears. His lips twitched at the sight of someone else getting the 'Jingle' treatment.

Winter counted to three before the urge to fill the silence overwhelmed their new housemate. Winter could now last hours before the same thing happened, but even at the start, he was positive that he'd lasted more than three seconds.

"Now I know you're lying," Rudy said.

A sour taste in Winter's mouth accompanied the thought that Rudy wouldn't resist any of Jingle's other tricks.

Will Jingle simply move on to the easier subject Santa's given him now that I've refused him?

This was what their maker had been saying all along. Jingle couldn't be trusted; his essential character trait was

selfishness.

Santa was playing them both, putting temptation in front of Jingle and making Winter doubt his doppelgänger. But Winter had to admit it was working. Before Rudy woke up, jealousy already clawed at Winter's guts.

I'm better than that. Jingle's better than that.

But a nasty little voice on his shoulder didn't agree. It whispered that every person Jingle left heartbroken had probably thought they were special, that things would be different for them.

Jingle methodically cut two thick steaks off the hunk of beef, then paused, the knife poised. "How do you like your steak?"

"With answers," Rudy ground out. At least his folded arms covered some of the skin his gaping shirt exposed.

Jingle put the knife down and gave the youngster his full attention. Although Jingle wore his face, or rather he wore Jingle's, that intense gaze always made Winter uncomfortable. It appeared he was about to get another masterclass in dominance, but as an observer instead of as the unfortunate, or rather the *fortunate*, subject.

Jealousy and guilt swirled. All Jingle had requested was his trust, and he couldn't even give him that. The lengths of paper chains didn't stand a chance as he ripped them down.

"I'm not in the habit of repeating myself—" Jingle's tone was deceptively mild "—especially to an unexpected, not to mention uninvited, houseguest. You are free to leave whenever

you like, but if you want to stay, you'll be polite. Now, how do you like your steak?"

Rudy growled in frustration, his fists clenched. "Can you even hear me? I thought you were the nice one, or did you switch places with Grumpy when I wasn't looking?"

Without haste, Jingle moved around the kitchen table. Despite his bravado, Rudy took a step back as Jingle approached, then raised his chin, clearly not wanting to admit to being intimidated by the taller man.

From his position by the fireplace, Winter saw Rudy cross the fingers of the hand he'd shoved behind his back. That Rudy was a fairy, he didn't doubt. What he couldn't work out was if Rudy was an upgraded ordinary fairy who retained the childish demeanor needed to interact with children, or if Santa had created him specifically to mess with Jingle.

Leaning down, Jingle hovered his lips over Rudy's for a long second. Winter's heart shriveled, sure they were about to kiss right in front of him.

He really doesn't care about me. Rather than rage, shout, maybe punch the fucker, Winter stood there like a damn tree in the path of an avalanche, waiting, frozen, to be broken.

Rudy swallowed and took a step back. Winter's heart began beating again, but the sour taste in his mouth didn't fade.

Rudy had stepped back, not Jingle. What would Jingle have done if Rudy had taken his dare and kissed him?

Who am I kidding? I know exactly what he'd do. He'd make the kid's toes curl, then go back to making lunch, leaving Rudy begging and prepped for the next round.

"Ever heard of personal space?" Rudy muttered, but the way he dropped his shoulders and lowered his gaze meant his brief show of defiance was, for now, over.

Is this it? Am I being replaced because I wouldn't play either Santa's or Jingle's games?

He imagined being whisked back to his old life, granting Christmas wishes while Jingle and his new playmate remained here. He bet Rudy would go down to the dungeon. He bet Rudy would *love* the fucking dungeon.

Would Santa remove his memory when he returned him to his old life? Simply erase Jingle and all that had happened? Bile rose. Winter gagged, but Jingle didn't notice as he concentrated on Rudy.

"Show respect, or you'll be put out in the snow until you've learned your lesson," Jingle stated maddeningly calmly, but he didn't move forward again. "If you want to know if it's an effective punishment, ask Winter."

Is he really trying to use me as an example to train my replacement? Winter flipped from devastated jealousy to *Rudy can have him.*

Another step back would have Rudy sitting down on the sofa, looking up at Jingle. The dominant would use the advantage if

he had to, but the manipulative sod would hold the move in reserve if possible.

Jingle didn't force; it was all about the other person choosing to submit. Not for the first time, Winter cursed his creator for giving him the one thing that differed between him and Jingle, an obedient personality.

Rudy glanced out the window at the falling snow. He couldn't really be contemplating calling Jingle's bluff?

Winter didn't need more drama today, or perhaps he simply didn't want to watch them sparring anymore.

"Not that I have the urge to order you around like he does, but he'll certainly do what he says."

Rudy whipped around to look at him. The movement caused him to tip backward onto the couch with a slight 'ompf'.

"He wouldn't; it's snowing," Rudy said, keeping his eyes on Winter rather than Jingle.

"Who are you trying to convince me, him or yourself?" Winter said. His words sparked a memory of Santa asking the same thing.

"Winter, don't go there. He's not worth it." Jingle's concern pissed him off. He might not be as old as the other fairy, but he wasn't a child who needed protection from unpleasant truths. Truths such as having to watch Jingle with Rudy.

"Stay out of my head," he snapped, tearing at the garlands again.

“It’s my head too, Junior. Let me help.”

“I don’t need any help.” But as he said it, he knew that he did. The urge to submit, to let Jingle help him fly again, tore at his soul. The stress, even for a little while, would melt away. He wanted the respite, wanted Jingle so damn much, and he couldn’t have either.

“Thick and juicy,” Rudy piped up, causing both men to look at him. “What? That’s how I like my steak. You asked the question, Jingle Balls, I’m just answering. Now, someone tell me where the bathroom is.”

“Through the kitchen, second door,” Jingle said before Winter opened his mouth.

Damn control freak. He turned back to the decorations.

“I said, second door,” Jingle snapped. “You don’t want to go down there.”

Winter shifted so he could see the unfolding scene.

“Why? Is that where you keep houseguests who don’t toe the line?”

Jingle put down the knife he’d picked up with care before looking back at Rudy. “I have all sorts of things down there, including cages, whips, and chains.”

Rudy’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second. *Excited or scared?* Winter couldn’t tell, but he bet Jingle could.

“Ookay. Good luck with that.”

Despite the rolling eyes, Winter detected a slight blush on Rudy's cheeks before he scuttled into the bathroom. *Damn, he's interested. Winter blew out a breath. Of course, he fucking is. Why would Santa send someone in who wasn't?*

When Rudy came out of the bathroom, he walked straight past Jingle to Winter.

“One, not having a mirror in your bathroom is weird. Two, do you want some help with that? I don't suppose Mr. ‘My Way or the Highway’ will accept anyone else in his kitchen, and I'm too damn freaked out to sit still.”

Winter indicated the mantelpiece garland. “Knock yourself out.”

Being the safe option didn't fill him with glee, but this wasn't a competition. Nothing would happen. They'd just gone from two housemates to three. He stamped on the little voice inside that said, “Yeah, right, pull the other one. They'll be at like Easter bunnies before sunset.”

After carefully unwinding the greenery from around Jingle's carvings, Rudy moved to the door.

“You'll freeze out there,” Winter said, reaching for the garland.

Rudy pulled the foliage back. “I can do it. Your bin cupboard is undercover, right?”

With a sinking feeling, he said, “Go get your shoes and borrow my coat. We might as well get this over with.”

Shooting Winter a quizzical look, Rudy handed him the garland and headed upstairs.

“I’m not interested.” Jingle’s voice was matter-of-fact as he continued preparing lunch.

“Bollocks, you’re not,” Winter replied, welcoming the pain that bloomed by his right hip because it meant Jingle still cared. “And even if you aren’t, he is. You don’t exactly have a track record of saying no.”

Winter winced as the pain flared over a wider area. If this was the only way he could experience Jingle’s touch, he’d take it.

Jingle opened his mouth to speak again, but Rudy came padding down the stairs in his high-top Converse. Only flip-flops or high heels would be less suitable footwear than flimsy fabric shoes.



Arioch shared a worried glance with Mistletoe. The blonde fairy, in her Mrs. Christmas form, stood next to Nick, whose arm snaked possessively around her waist. Nick’s smug expression displayed how he thought the test was going.

As expected, Santa’s office had expanded to contain the Supernatural Council delegates and the two guards, although everyone remained standing due to a lack of chairs. It appeared Santa didn’t want any of his unwanted guests to get

comfortable. The snowglobe containing Jingle and Winter sat on a five feet tall, traditionally decorated Christmas tree with a flattened top in the center of the office.

Was I wrong? The thought itched like the body lice he'd used to inflict suffering many times. If this didn't work, showing his face at council meetings would be excruciating. Henry was almost as puffed up as Nick.

CHAPTER 20



WILL SANTA EVER STOP messing with me?

Spencer's mind swirled as he carried on preparing a meal for three. Two had been so much better than meals for one, but three merely added complications.

Ever since he'd found out about Santa, Spencer's life had made far more sense. It felt easier to have someone to blame, a place to park his "*Why me?*" resentment. But Winter didn't deserve to suffer for a mistake that had happened centuries before he'd drawn breath, a mistake Spencer didn't remember.

As usual, Winter wore his heart on his sleeve. His jealousy and worry about Rudy taking his place shone like a throbbing beacon of pain. And yet, despite his mistrust, Winter was fair to the unwitting interloper dumped in their midst.

Rudy was a tempting morsel, and his clear interest when Spencer mentioned what lay in the cellar pressed every dominant button he possessed. It felt as if he'd been coached, guided, into producing a reaction from him, from Winter. Or

maybe Santa had simply created the ultimate temptation to mess with them.

As Spencer observed Winter and Rudy interact, he couldn't stop the itch that there was something familiar about the newcomer's bold attitude that died the moment Spencer pushed back. Try as he might, he couldn't place the bratty, red-haired sub, and Rudy clearly didn't remember him or Winter.

Having his memory played with again was yet another issue he'd be bringing up with Santa when they met again, even if it took another five hundred years.

Years ago, he wouldn't have hesitated to reel in any eager available sub, even if he had a current partner because he never stayed in relationships for long. The people he'd enticed—enjoyed—needed to accept his ways or move on before he pushed them out. He'd controlled his emotions—shut them down to prevent his own pain—while encouraging the trust of the people he played with.

He never let his subs into his heart in more than the most superficial ways. He told them from the start that he couldn't promise forever, and that they should content themselves with however long they had together. In his selfishness, he refused to acknowledge that he couldn't control their emotions as easily as he did his own.

Then Winter entered his life. He'd tried to put the draw he felt to his doppelgänger down to being alone for so long, or a narcissistic desire, but it was more than that. He'd found himself trying to control his emotions to save Winter's pain,

rather than using it as a convenient teaching aid. But Winter had been hurting since Rudy arrived.

Although it wasn't his fault, nor Winter's, and probably not Rudy's either, this was his mess to clear up. The three of them could be together for years and setting appropriate ground rules would save much heartache.

Rudy came stomping back in. "A snowglobe? I know he said he's crazy, but there's a little delusional and being a few baubles short of a set. And fairies? It hasn't been politically correct to call gays fairies for decades. Despite the outfit, I object to the label, especially as I seem to be the third wheel. Although—" he tilted his head looking Jingle over again "—can I watch?"

For a heartbeat, Jingle stared at him then burst out laughing. Having Rudy around might not be too bad, after all.

"No, you cannot watch, young man." Although at the moment, there was nothing to watch, but Spencer was more than prepared.

"Shame. So, if he's getting regular 'special time' why is he—" Rudy nodded toward where they could both hear Winter chopping wood "—decimating the forest? If he carries on like that, he'll be charged with crimes against woodland."

He had a point. The stack of firewood now stretched most of the way around the cabin.

"Can you toss the salad?"

The tip of Rudy's tongue touched his upper lip as his eyes undressed Spencer. "I'd rather toss you."

So much for the cute act. Rudy was attractive and gagging for a spanking, but he didn't cause a flicker in Spencer's groin. With Winter's consent, seeing as they were all stuck here together, he'd provide the dominance Rudy asked for, but he had no desire for anything else.

Jingle moved around the table, crowding into his personal space. Rudy licked his sensuous lips and tilted his face up.

Instead of kissing him, Jingle moved his lips to his ear. "That was inappropriate and crass. I suggest you save your breath. I'm not interested. Neither is Winter."

He stilled as Rudy's hand found his groin. "You sure? Because when I—"

Cold anger enveloped him and he grabbed Rudy's wrist and squeezed. "Did you touch Winter like that? Is that why you came in?"

The crunch of the axe being slammed into an innocent log with far more vigor than necessary echoed in the silence.

Rudy tried to pull his wrist away. He didn't succeed.

"He seemed a little stressed, so I—"

Despite the fact that Santa had probably imposed this personality on Rudy to provoke them both, Jingle couldn't let this go. If Rudy wanted to get naked and experience some dominance, he'd get exactly what he'd requested.

“Take off your shoes and clothes.”

Not waiting to see if he complied, Jingle fetched his boots from beside the fire and put them on.

“Why the boots?” said the voice he was beginning to find irritating.

He’d craved company for so long, but he’d be more than happy if Santa took back this unasked for gift.

“Gets me in the right headspace for punishment.”

“Ooh, are we going down to your dungeon? Shall I call Winter so he can watch?” Rudy’s eagerness to cause Winter distress pinged his last nerve.

Spencer turned around. Rudy stood there, grinning, in only a white-trimmed red thong.

“Oh, sorry, sir,” he blurted. His hands went behind his back and his head bowed.

“Stay there.”

“But—“

“You are beginning to annoy me, Rudy, and that is not a comfortable option. Stay here, stay quiet, and I might, just might, go a little easier on you.”

Stepping outside, he shut the door quietly behind himself; this needed to be a private conversation. He paused as he rounded the side of the building.

Winter’s back was toward him as he swung the ax. His physique had certainly muscled up since they’d met. But

muscle mass wasn't the only thing that had changed since he'd last seen Winter's naked back. The previously small scattering of white snowflakes now flowed down the periphery of his body, covering his sides. They also poured down the outside of his arms. The tattoos disappeared into his waistband, and Spencer had no doubt they continued down his buttocks and thighs. Many of the snowflakes were now shades of blue, rather than the initial white.

And Winter had shown them to Rudy, not him.

Winter grunted, axe held high above his head. A white snowflake on his ribs bloomed first blue and then red as blood oozed from the new ink. Spencer lost sight of it as Winter brought the axe down with a crash.

“Did you take your shirt off because you thought being out here with him would piss me off, and you didn't want to ruin your shirt or—“ Something else occurred to him. This time, Winter didn't flinch as another snowflake darkened.

The casual acceptance of unwarranted pain, launched him into action. Shoving Winter up against the side of the cabin, he wrapped his hand around Winter's throat. Their breath steamed, mingled, in the frigid air as Winter's pulse throbbed against his palm.

“Truth only,” he murmured as the tenseness left Winter's body like melting ice. “Have you been pissing me off on purpose because you get off on the pain?”

Winter tried to push him away. Spencer banded him back against the wall hard. “I asked you a question, Junior, and

we're going nowhere until I'm satisfied with the answer."

Winter's lips pressed together, but he stayed silent. The pain, the determination in his eyes flipped a switch. Still holding Winter by the throat, he slammed their mouths together, grinding up against him. Winter's erection was as hard as his own. The animalistic, mutually devouring kiss lasted three heartbeats before Winter turned his face away, chest heaving.

Having him here, half-naked and hard, begging with his body and refusing with his mind... Spencer swallowed, trying to control his desire, his frustration.

"Junior, you want this, I can feel it, and I'm about to explode. Forget about Rudy, about Santa, they don't matter, they—"

Winter's hand cupped his face. "I can't be responsible for hurting you any more. I don't get off on the pain, but—" he swallowed "it's... it's just a reminder that you still care. But if you want to, with Rudy, I—"

Winter's grunt of pain, the way he doubled up, fueled Spencer's anger. He stormed back inside.

Rudy still waited in the deferential pose, appearing to be the perfect sub in contrast to the bolshie man outside. He grabbed Rudy's upper arm, plus the last rope of fairy lights, and began dragging him to the front door.

"Hey, what the hell?"

"It's time to finish this farce." He pulled Rudy, swearing and yanking against his hold, out into the snow.

“And how are you going to do that? There’s no way out of this place, you moron!”

Without hesitation, he marched across the expanse of blowing snow toward the tree line.

“I’m going to get bloody frostbite, you bastard,” Rudy lifted his wrist where Spencer had hold of it and brought it toward his mouth. Before Rudy could bite him, Spencer spun him around and delivered three hard blows to his backside before resuming his march.

“You’re a fairy; you won’t get frostbite. Winter was out here, unconscious overnight, and he didn’t suffer any ill effects. You’ll be fine, fucking uncomfortable, but fine.”

“Ugh, I’d forgotten what an unbending bastard you are. I’m Coal, Ariocho sent me.”

He paused, noted the now dark hair and familiar features, then carried on with his march.

“Didn’t you hear me, you stubborn bastard?”

He heard running footsteps rapidly gaining on them.

“Winter, will you please tell him who I am?” Coal growled, jerking on his arm.

Coal being here, teasing both him and Winter, not to mention betraying poor Angus, really pissed him off.

“Jingle, stop. This is Coal, I remember him,” Winter called out.

“So do I, which is why I’m going to tie him to a tree until he tells us the truth.”

Coal was now using him like a water-skier uses a motorboat. Spencer was literally towing him through the snow. It didn’t bother him. Coal weighed no more than half what Spencer did.

Winter got in front of them and held up his hand. “No, just no. You’re not doing that. We need to find out why he’s here.”

“And I’ll happily tell you if I get back indoors without my nuts freezing off, sheesh.”

“Maybe I should tie you both up out here,” he growled. “You’re both masochists; I’m sure you have a lot to chat about.”

Coal finally wrenched his wrist out of his grip. “Have you ever looked up what masochist means? It means getting turned on by pain. Being tied to a tree is not painful, it’s—“

“It is the way I’m going to do it,” Spencer growled.

Coal stuck his tongue out at him. “Ooh la di da, just wait till I tell Angus what you tried to do to me, he’ll—“

“He’ll do a hell of a lot more to you when he finds out you were trying for a threesome that didn’t involve him.”

Winter rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Coal’s got the excuse that he’s only been alive for a year or so on his timeline, but you’re how old?” He leaned over, hand going to his belly. “Fuck! Would you please control yourself? If you carry on I’m going to look like a damn dalmatian.”

Winter indicated the waistband of his jeans. Just above it, two more white snowflakes darkened before Spencer's eyes.

He closed his eyes, drew on all the control he'd developed over centuries of witnessing trauma, took a deep breath, then another, and opened them again.

"Better?" Winter asked.

"Don't patronize me, Junior." As Winter remained bare-chested, Spencer pulled off his shirt and handed it to Coal.

"And what am I supposed to do with this? Get out the secret sewing kit I keep in my thong and make a pair of Ugg boots? I —"

"By Rudolph's balls," Winter growled, dipped, and picked Coal up over his shoulder before striding back toward the cabin.

Feeling a little like a scolded schoolboy, Spencer trailed after them.



The large globe had displayed both images Ariocho wanted the council to see, and those Nick put forward as evidence that his actions were justified.

"Seems like he's getting a varied healthy diet to me," Jorife said, "unlike any of these other djinn."

“He also keeps what they are from them, takes nearly all of their magic and—“

“You’ve already established those facts, Ariocho,” Avery ground out.

Silas, the tall sauve half-demon, half-vampire leaned in a little closer. “I’d button it if I were you. You wouldn’t want to spend a few decades in your own prison for contempt of caught, would you?”

“With you in charge again I take it?” Ariocho hissed.

“If you’ve quite finished, Councilmember Ariocho?” Avery enquired, his eyebrows politely raised.

Ariocho offered his fuckbuddy a saccharine smile. “I have, thank you for your magnificent forbearance, Council leader.”

“Jingle’s faking because he knows I’m watching,” Santa announced. “Just wait a little while, and he’ll show his true colors.”

Shuffling feet, huffs of impatience. Angus, Coal’s human and a long term friend of Jingle, sent Nick a death glare. He’d been warned to stay quiet unless he wanted Coal pulled out.

“Didn’t look fake to me,” the avian shifter delegate said.

“What are you, an eagle?” Nick asked.

The man with white feathers covering his head instead of hair looked down his impressive large hooked nose. “Bald eagle, name is—“

Santa snorted, and spoke before the delegate had time to finish. “Your sort mate for life. Of course you don’t understand what he’s doing, which is trying to have them both without Winter throwing his dummy out the pram. He’s simply trying to keep Winter happy while he seduces Coal. He’s always done it. It’s as ridiculous a notion as a sex demon respecting established relationship—“

“Before you say something that may prejudice your case, Mr. Claus, we do have other matters to deal with,” Avery said, tone hard.

So damn sexy. Ariocho was about to voice his thought when a glare from Avery made him zip it. Didn’t the incubus realize how much fun this was?

“Matters more important than the organization I’ve spent centuries building? My freedom?” White hairs began popping out all over Nick’s head and his shirt strained to contain the forty pounds he seemed to have gained in an instant.

Mistletoe moved a step away from her husband.

Life was damn good, but Ariocho hoped it was about to get even better.

CHAPTER 21



AS SOON AS WINTER set Coal back on his feet in the cabin, Jingle said, “Show me your wounds, all of them.”

“I’m cold, but I haven’t—”

“You can see just fine from where you are,” Winter said. Both men stared at each other as if Coal didn’t exist.

Jingle bent down, took his boots off, then stood straight, making the most of the inch of height he had on Winter. “Drop your jeans. This is not a request. I need to check your wounds.”

“No. I’m not putting on a show for him.”

Seconds ticked by, and despite no longer feeling cold because of the roaring fire, the comment about putting on a show hit home. Arioach had said this whole thing would probably be watched by the entire Supernatural council. Yes, he was an exhibitionist, but only for people who got a kick out of his performance.

“I’ll go get dressed then, shall I?” he asked, but neither man paid him any attention.

Ten minutes later, Coal sat in the single armchair opposite the pair as they sat on either end of the sofa. Now that the magic veil had lifted, and he recognized them, he had to admit that both were pretty angry. And hot. Winter kept shooting glances at Jingle, as if he warred with himself. Jingle’s arm lay along the back of the sofa, claiming the space, but his posture seemed a little false.

Only spending a lot of time around Angus and his Dominant friends let Coal see through the mask. Jingle was as worried as Winter, but trying not to show it so he didn’t add to his sub’s anxiety.

There was no doubt that these two had a sub/dom dynamic, but it was a far more subtle one than what he had with Angus, and maybe Winter needed that. He still wished Jingle had agreed to letting him watch them together.

To Coal’s way of thinking, despite being entirely committed to Angus, it didn’t hurt to look. He and Angus both did a great deal of looking when they went to their local BDSM club at home.

Jingle seemed... less intense than the last time they’d met. But a decade alone could do strange things to a person. The old Spencer would have never passed up the chance for a booty call with a willing, bratty submissive. His task had been to tempt Jingle to see if he’d changed and Santa had insisted that

his memory be altered so he wasn't influenced by their previous interaction.

While they'd been in the cabin, and Winter wasn't looking, Jingle's gaze hadn't left his doppelgänger for a second. Winter was the same about watching Jingle. If it hadn't been so painfully tragic, it would've been hilarious. Santa had fucked up when he created Coal, not that he minded now that he'd met his delicious human Angus. But he'd done the dirty on these two as well.

Jingle had a harder edge than his dear Angus—he would never dare tease Jingle the same way as he did Angus—but boy the fairy was sexy. In contrast, Coal just wanted to mother Winter, but decided he probably shouldn't mention that.

It felt odd not to have Angus's arm around him, but he knew he'd be watching back at the North Pole. It had been a condition of him accepting this one last mission. To be honest, he kind of missed it.

“Tell us why, and how, you are here. Winter explained that you are bound to Angus now?” Jingle asked and sipped his whiskey.

Unsurprisingly, Winter had opted for the same drink. Jingle handed Coal a cranberry and vodka, the drink he'd given him when they'd first met, when he'd caused so much delicious pain.

“He did. But all the other adult fairies are locked up in snowglobes too, and Santa refuses to let them out. But as he created the globes, only djinn he created can enter, so that

narrowed down the field a lot. Out of me and Garland?” He shrugged. “Not a huge surprise Ariocho contacted me On behalf of the Supernatural Council first.”

The roaring fire popped, but no one turned to look at it.

“So that’s the how. Now the why,” Jingle said.

Coal frowned. “You don’t give a guy much of a chance to spin a yarn, do you?”

Jingle blinked at him. “I’m rather hoping your presence here means we don’t need to spread it over several years to eke out the entertainment factor. You are here to release one or both of us, correct?”

Jingle lounged in the corner of the sofa, whiskey glass balanced on the arm. He was doing a far better impression of ‘relaxed’ than Winter, whose hunched form at the other end screamed anxiety. He’d only known the younger fairy for a matter of weeks before he’d been sent to Angus, but this was nothing like the fun-loving, carefree Winter he’d laughed with.

“Not... exactly,” Coal hedged.

Winter’s eyes scrunched, and a quiet grunt of pain left his lips.

Jingle leaned over, rested his hand on Winter’s knee. “Sorry,” he said, before turning to Coal.

“Could you give me a heads up if you are going to say or do something that might upset me? One of our creator’s wonderful touches is that if I experience negative emotions, Winter feels them physically. Hence all the tattoos. We

assumed that he thinks seeing the reminders of the pain I cause to someone I care about deeply will teach me something.”

Winter stared at Jingle as if he'd grown two heads. “You... you care about me, not just because I'm stuck here with you?”

The smile that spread over Jingle's face as he leaned closer could only lead to one thing.

Coal rolled his eyes at the puke-worthy cute pair. “Would you two cut it out? Still here, you know.”

Winter turned an adorable shade of pink as Jingle scowled.

Coal gave the Dom a bright smile. “So, where was I? Oh, yes. So yesterday, Arioach popped into Angus's office, and we set this up. Right now, Santa is watching everything, along with members of the Council, Mistletoe, and Angus.” He blew a kiss into the air, “Hi, Boss, miss you,” he called out to the ceiling, then turned back to the pair he'd come to help.

“Gingersnap is minding the North Pole office.” He shivered. “Remind me never to piss that fairy off. She may look twelve, but she'd even have you on your knees if she wanted, Jingle. I think she invented the word ‘glare’.”

Jingle gestured between them. “And the purpose of this exercise is?”

“To show that our creator is a fucked up megalomaniac who created the issues he claims are reasons for your exile and this imprisonment. You—” he beamed “—thanks to Winter, are officially no longer a hopeless, utterly selfish, horndog.”

“Thanks, I think. You’re just as entertaining as the last time we met.”

Coal frowned. “I stripped for you the last time we met and you literally handed me over to Angus in the next heartbeat. Talk about an ego bashing.”

Jingle’s face morphed into the devastating smile that had made Coal hard every time the Dom delivered it. “That’s only because you were too much for me to handle.”

Coal couldn’t resist grinning. “Flatterer. But if I remember rightly, I did kick you hard enough in the balls to turn you into a soprano.”

Jingle inclined his head. “There is that.”

Winter blew out a breath. “Well, three cheers for the mutual appreciation society. Can we get on with this? I for one am fucking sick of this place.”

“Junior—” the warning tone in Jingle’s voice radiated loud and clear “—politeness costs nothing.”

“Bollocks,” Winter said at the same time as Coal. They grinned at each other. This time, Winter didn’t flinch, although Jingle’s frown remained fearsome.

“Knowing exactly when your Dom is really pissed rather than playing must be interesting,” Coal said.

“He’s not my—”

“It certainly is,” Jingle said.

Coal glanced between the two. When they were side by side, it was easy to tell the difference, even without the eye color variation.

“We’ll talk later, Junior, but now, back to the matter at hand. What happens now?”

Coal shrugged. “Not sure. I suppose the Council pulls at least me out of here while they consider their verdict.”



“Back to the council chamber, I think,” Avery said.

Blue-skinned air elementals popped up between the delegates, and in a blink of an eye, Ariocho stood alone in Santa’s office apart from Mistletoe.

“Coming?” he asked.

Mistletoe changed into her sexy Christmas elf form, and ran a finger over the wood of Santa’s desk where the other snowglobes containing Cedar, Snowflake, Candy and Tinsel stood.

“No, I do believe I’m going to stay here and start implementing the plan I had nearly five centuries ago, before Nick stole my memories.”

“And you’ve had them back for how long?”

She shrugged. “Around three hundred years, but it never seemed the right time to conduct a coup.”

Arioch perched his ass on the corner of the desk. “Why you naughty thing. So what are you planning?”

She snorted. “If you think I’m going to tell you a damn thing, you’re more deluded than Nick.”

He gave her a winning smile. “Don’t you want to know what happens with Nick?”

She frowned. “He’ll either be back, or he won’t. And if he gets convicted, you’ll be back to gloat.”

“Will I?”

She snorted. “You won’t be able to help it.”

His hand went to his chest. “I’m wounded. Just for that, I won’t come back, whatever the outcome. You’ll be living on tenterhooks, wondering when he’ll turn up again. Because unless the sentence is permanent magic removal...” He smacked his lips. “He’ll be back, and mad as hell. Are you sure you don’t want to see his big dramatic moment?”

He waggled his eyebrows. She rolled her eyes, he knew he had her.

He stood up, turned around, and extend his elbow. Her dainty hand slipped in, and he took them to the transport chamber in the Council complex.

CHAPTER 22



THE THREE ADULT DEPARTMENT fairies sat there, looking at each other, waiting for something to happen. Coal lasted for a count of five.

“Oi, you out there, I’ve got a boss to go back to! If you don’t pull us all back right now, I’ll—“

Spencer found himself standing in a broad village square, in an inch of snow, surrounded by log buildings and backed by a gigantic Christmas tree. People wearing similar festive attire to himself filled the space; the vast majority were children. Or people who appeared to be children.

The only non-festive individual present was Angus. The broad, red-haired, glasses-wearing man oofed as Coal jumped into his arms and peppered his face with kisses.

Winter stood twenty feet away, surrounded by beautiful men and women Spencer didn’t recognize. All were smiling and embracing him, some with happy tears rolling down their faces. The hubbub after being in almost complete silence and isolation for so long assaulted his senses.

He'd craved being around people for a decade, so why did he ache to be back at the cabin, alone with Winter?

As he watched, Winter stiffened and turned toward him. As if there was a physical elastic rope between them, Winter held his gaze, strode over, and enveloped him in his arms.

"I don't care what he does, if he comes back," Winter murmured against his ear. "If he sends you back alone, I'll look for you for eternity until we get our happy ever after here together permanently. It's where we belong."

Even though Spencer's heart was breaking, he couldn't do this. What would he do here? He didn't have the magic these fairies possessed. Becoming Winter's kept man, unable to contribute to this society except by being Winter's stress relief? From what he understood, Winter fulfilled sexual wishes. Could he wave him a cheerful goodbye knowing he was going to someone else? This would be a better prison than the last one, but it was still a prison.

Putting his hands on Winter's shoulders, he pushed gently and took a half step back. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done. He couldn't resist brushing a thumb over the cheek of the man he loved.

"This is your world, Junior, not mine. Those are your friends, not mine. I—"

Sleighbells jingled from far away, and although it was impossible, Spencer saw a tiny sleigh pulled by nine reindeer getting rapidly bigger. The crowd moved back, and the sleigh landed in a flurry of magical snow and reindeer snorts.

Arioch sat in the front seat, in his black business suit. The excited chatter vanished. The majority of the child fairies backed away. July Spicer, and a built blond man, who had to be Garland, sat in the back.

“What’s the matter, kiddies? Scared of Uncle Krampus?” He grinned, showing sharp white teeth. “You should be.”

Garland was out of the sleigh, towing July toward Coal and Angus before the snow stopped swirling around the sleigh’s runners.

The other adult fairies crowded around Garland. Spencer found himself sharing a glance with July. The diver seemed as awkward and out of place here as him.

Even though he’d once been one of these people, he now had far more in common with July and Angus. The humans didn’t belong here either, although Angus watched Coal reuniting with his family with an indulgent smile.

As Arioch climbed out of the sleigh, Spencer tightened his grip on Winter’s arm. The harnesses disappeared from the reindeer. To Spencer’s surprise, the adult fairies, plus Angus and Coal, clustered around him and Winter.

“I’ve always wanted to drive the sleigh, but now I have, eh, I don’t want to do it again.” He ran a hand over his close-cropped scalp. “It plays havoc with my hair.”

When nobody spoke, or moved toward him, Arioch frowned, then sniffed at his armpit. “What? Do I stink or something?”

All the adult djinn, including Winter and Garland moved to stand between the two humans, Coal, Spencer and Arioch. Coal tried to step forward too, but Angus held on to his arm. “Not you, brat.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got your back buddy,” a sandy-haired man said over his shoulder. “I don’t know why he’s sent this guy, but he’s mucked about with us all for too long.” The handsome man had his arm around a curvy brunette who seemed equally determined.

“I’m Tinsel, in case you don’t remember.”

Spencer recognized the name. This woman, like Mistletoe, was as close to a sister as he would ever get.

“That’s something else we’re going to have words with him about when he comes back,” Tinsel said firmly. “It’s not right what he did to you. Mistletoe was as up for it as you were back then, and his damn no-fraternization rule is—“ She stopped speaking.

The area where Arioch stood rose two feet in the air. “None of you remember me, but I was,” he wrinkled his nose, “still am probably, Nick’s brother. At least we were created by the same djinn at the same time. And that’s what you all are, specialist djinn. There are no such thing as fairies.”

Gasps and whispers ran through the ranks of child fairies as they clutched onto one another.

“Ugh, don’t get your festive panties in a knot. I’m not going to hurt any of you.” His head tilted to one side. “Might make you

a bit uncomfortable though. Simply put, your maker is a twenty-four-carat greedy, controlling asshole, which... I have to say, isn't too bad in the scheme of things, but see, he also messed with me, and that pissed me off.

“He tried to keep up with the human population by creating you lot so he could reap the benefits of all the magic you produce. The magic he steals from you while keeping you ignorant and enslaved.”

“But we love Santa,” a lone voice said, and a wave of nodding heads and shrill agreements rippled through the crowd.

“Grow some balls, shortie,” Ariocho growled. “Ok right, you can't because Santa stunted your growth. Truth to tell, and that doesn't happen that often, I loved him too, back when it was just Nick, me,” he pointed toward the far side of the square where two, almost white, ancient reindeer stood. “And Dunder and Blixem.” The assembled fairies all dipped their heads in respect for the two retired reindeer.

Ariocho held up a hand in greeting to the pair of reindeer. “You two still smell worse than camels, by the way, and they piss on themselves.”

Both animals shook their heads, making their impressive antlers sway from side to side. The child fairies gaped at him, struck dumb by the insult to the animals they thought of as sacred.

“Santa's megalomania is hurting people, and...”

“No, we make people happy!” another fairy called out, and many more shouted their agreement.

“You make kids who have parents to buy them gifts a little bit happier so Santa can tick a name in a book. What about the kids who need help every year?”

Silence met his question. They all knew Santa’s rule meant those kids didn’t get a second bite at the festive wish cherry.

“And granting wishes for kids who don’t need them, is making things impossible. Even these hard-working reindeer—“ he waved a hand at the group of nine ”—have trouble pulling the sleigh, and Nick has extended Christmas Eve to nearly eleven months a year to accommodate all the brats in the world.” He nodded in their direction. “No offense, Coal.”

“We’re fine, we can do it,” the three child fairies who called out were in the minority. Most of the others either nodded or focused on their feet.

Arioch’s gaze roamed over the assembled festive djinn.

“The sleigh became too much for Dunder and Blixem, despite using more magic every year. I told Nick we needed to slow things down, but he insisted we could do it. He was wrong, and he isn’t coming back, nor is Mistletoe. She wanted to exploit you in exactly the same way.”

A small blond fairy took a step nearer. “Are... Are you going to be our new Santa?”

Arioch scoffed. “Me? Fuck, no.”

A gasp rushed across the crowd at his use of profanity. “And that’s why. If I can’t say bollocks, cock, fanny, cunt, or ram my hole till it hurts big boy, it won’t work.”

Spencer found himself grinning at the horrified faces of the assembled child djinn.

“Those are rude words, and totally inappropriate for young ears,” Gingersnap announced as she strode through the crowd from the Admin building.

“Young ears? How old are you, sweetheart?” Ariocho asked. “A century? Two?”

“Five.” Tinsel piped up. “Gingersnap was one of the first fairies Santa created when he made this place.” Her jaw clenched. “Using the magic he took from his four initial creations without asking.”

Ariocho pressed his lips together. “Yeah, he’s a bit of a shit for that. He did it to me too, that’s why I left.”

“My age doesn’t concern you, Demon, and yes, I know what you are.” Gingersnap ground out, fists on her hips.

Ariocho rolled his eyes as the word ‘demon’ cascaded through the crowd. “I’m so fucking glad I’m not staying.”

Spencer had to admit to the same thing. Being around this lot would drive him crazy pretty damn quick, but losing Winter? That—

The head of the man he’d grown to love, swivelled toward him. “You ok?” he mouthed.

Spencer gave him a smile, hoping like hell it was ordinary concern that had drawn Winter's attention rather than the snowglobe magic continuing.

"Who's going to be in charge then?" Snowflake, the ditzy blonde adult fairy said. When everyone turned to look at her, she held up her hands. "What? We're going to need someone to run things, right?"

"How about we let the stinky hearthrugs decide?" Arioch asked.

Cedar nudged Jingle. "It should be you. You understand the modern world better than any of us. Just think how much you could speed things up with modern technology."

"I can't. I don't know a thing about what you do h—" between one heartbeat and the next, memories hit. Images, sounds, scents, and emotions grabbed the forefront of his mind for a split second before being wrenched away and replaced by the next and the next.

"Give him room," Angus's voice boomed.

"No way am I leaving him," Winter shot back. The world swam back into focus, and his world consisted of his own face with jade green eyes.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Jingle." His chest warmed as Winter's face lit with a smile.

"I know. It's nice that you know again too."

Angus's face appeared over Winter's shoulder. "Spencer, wait... I guess I should call you Jingle now. Are you ok?" The

red-haired man frowned, then added, “This is confusing.”

Jingle had to smile. “You’re right, my friend, and yep, I’m good,” he said although his head still felt full of snow.

Winter and Angus each grabbed an arm and pulled him to his feet. Jingle’s gaze landed on Cedar and Garland who stood with Tinsel, Snowflake, and Candy. He knew them almost as well as he knew himself, or at least he had done several centuries ago.

Turning to Garland and Tinsel, he held up his hands. “Amigos, guess who’s back?”

Tinsel’s mouth hung open for a second before she crashed into Jingle, closely followed by Garland, who wrapped his arms around them both.

“Never going to let anyone pull us apart again. I’m so sorry we didn’t do anything sooner, we never should have let—“

Jingle gave both his old friends, his family, a squeeze. “I’m back, that’s all that counts. I can’t wait to—“

The punch to his arm broke through his euphoria. Coal scowled up at him.

“Have you regressed back to being a complete asshole now you’ve got your memories back?”

“Hey, give him a break, Coal. Jingle’s only just—“ Garland started.

“Yeah, well, gold star for him. The selfish sod has just confirmed what Winter has always thought, that he was

nothing but a replacement. And now that you're back, he's no longer required, not as a fairy, not as a person.”

Jingle followed Coal's pointed gaze. Winter had almost made it to the adult department. Once inside, he could use the snowglobe to home in on a wisher and leave.

Jingle ran.

CHAPTER 23



WINTER PUT A FOOT on the porch of the Adult Department when a hand landed on his shoulder.

“And where do you think you’re going, Junior?”

He didn’t reply. Sneaking away, not causing a fuss, not experiencing the irritating, well-meaning sympathy of all the child fairies had been his aim. Jingle wasn’t even going to allow him that.

With the hand on his shoulder, Jingle turned him around. “I asked you a question, Junior.”

The familiar dominance, something he probably wouldn’t experience again, washed over him. Lead settled in his limbs. He didn’t want to leave, but he couldn’t stay. Jingle deserved his honesty. Pulling courage up from his boots, he looked into those icy blue, knowing eyes.

“You have a life here. They’re going to make you the next Santa; we both know it. Can you watch me go back to work in the Adult Department?” He hastily added, “Not that I want to, in the same way anyway. Or do I become the new Mrs.

Christmas?” His lips twisted in a sarcastic smile. “I know the world is changing, but I’m not sure humanity is ready for Mr. and Mr. Christmas, even if you are.”

Arioch’s voice rang out over the crowd. “Right, you lot, the Supernatural Council wants at least half of you to be human.” Most of the childlike djinn whimpered and clutched each other.

“What, you don’t want to grow up, don’t want to be a real kid with a real family at Christmas? Have people give *you* presents?”

“Yeah, I thought you’d like that idea. Only clause is that you’ll start as babies to get the full experience. Those that like that idea, go stand with Dunder and Blixem. They’ll be playing storks.”

Half of the childlike djinn headed toward the white reindeer and the pair led them away. Winter wondered if he’d ever see any of them again. Yes, they’d annoyed the hell out of him, and he couldn’t tell many of them apart, but they’d been part of his life. Would they all end up in happy homes? How much of their personalities would stay?

Jingle gave him a squeeze.

“The rest of you, spread out, let the other reindeer get a good look at you. Each reindeer will approach and then bow to his or her selection.”

The nine reindeer split up, walking among the festive djinn. Rather than moving to the front, Jingle stayed beside Winter.

“Go on,” Winter urged. “This is what you want, to be in charge, isn’t it?”

A sharp squeeze on his butt, had Winter’s eyes bulging as he tried to hold in an unmanly squeak of surprise.

“There’s only one thing I want to be in charge of, Junior, and that’s you.”

Winter turned to him, eyes wide. “But you, you—“

Jingle’s mouth quirked up in a smile. “Speechless?” His hand cupped Winter’s face, willing him to believe. “Don’t you realize? I’ve waited many lifetimes to find someone to love for eternity. No job, no other person, is ever going to be more important than you.”

Winter thought nothing could stop their lips from touching.

Hot, warm breath hit the front of his jeans. Liquid dark eyes stared up at him. Dancer snorted again.

“No, not me, pick someone else,” Jingle hissed, but Dancer wasn’t looking at Jingle.

The reindeer snorted, shook her head, and to Winter’s amazement, bowed to him.

“Not him either,” Jingle growled. “He’s mine, not—“

Prancer appeared beside his mate, the pair were never far from each other and they both loved to run and show off. Jingle put his arm out, trying to push Winter behind him.

“I said, no,” Jingle growled, but Prancer’s eyes were on him, not Winter, as the reindeer folded a front leg and bowed to

Jingle.

“Look you silly creatures, we’re not the same person, we—“

Winter put a hand on Jingle’s shoulder to distract him from the pair of reindeer. “Look.”

Cupid and Comet, another mated pair, were bowing in front of Tinsel and Garland. Donner and Blitzen bowed to two child djinn, one who worked in the sorting office, the other in toy manufacturing. Vixen knelt to Twinkle, who worked alongside Gingersnap in the Fairy Resources Department in the Admin building, and Dasher knelt to the male djinn in charge of looking after the reindeer.

All the remaining festive djinn glanced at each other, not sure what was going on.

“We’re doing Christmas by committee now?” Coal’s voice boomed in the silence. “How the fuck’s that going to work? We can have heads of departments, but every business or organization needs a leader to make the final decisions.”

“Do you always have to be a brat?” Ariocho growled.

“Hey, you’re not the boss of me, I—“

Coal squeaked as he jerked forward a few inches due to the hand that had spanked his backside.

“No, he’s not, but I am. Let the man, demon, whatever, talk,” Angus said.

Ariocho’s chuckle rang around the square, but his gaze focused on the final reindeer who still stood alone, near the front of the

sleigh.

“Well, what are you waiting for, Rudolf? Make your choice before my balls freeze off. Actually, as he’s head of the herd, why don’t you let him pick the new Santa? Saves me doing it.”

A positive murmur went through the crowd.

Does it have to be one of those already chosen?” Tinsel asked.

Arioch frowned. “How the hell should I know? Vengeance demon remember? Although getting dumped with sorting you lot out feels like someone is getting revenge on me. I have got to be the least festive—“

All eyes turned to Rudolph as the large beast snorted and shook his head.

“I guess that answers that,” Coal muttered. “I can’t believe the fate of the North Pole is being decided by a dumb animal.”

“I’d hardly call Rudolph a dumb animal,” Angus chided.

Coal rolled his eyes. “Please, I’m not being rude. But you’ve got to admit he can’t talk.”

Jingle’s arm went around Winter as they watched Dom and sub argue while Rudolph bowed to Angus.

“Makes sense in a way. Angus has run a transport company for years. Logistics is in his blood,” Jingle said.

Winter, along with the rest of the assembled fairies, watched with amusement as Rudolph pushed Angus with his nose.

“Seriously, Coal as Mr. Christmas?” Candy exclaimed. “How is that going to work? He makes kids cry.”

Coal turned to her. “Don’t be daft, I’m not... oh.”

For once, Coal fell quiet as the Master Snowglobe appeared in Ariocho’s hands, and he advanced on the stunned couple.

Winter leaned into Jingle and whispered, “I think we dodged a bullet.”

He held out the globe to Angus, who looked at it as if it would bite him.

“This is your choice. Do you want another forty years or so, maybe less, with Coal, and maybe risk him getting bound to a whole line of evil fuckers in the future—“

“Not going to happen,” Angus said firmly. “I’m going to free him and—“

”—and risk him saying the binding words to someone else in the future?”

Coal puffed his chest out, eyebrows drawn down. “I wouldn’t. I—“

“Did it for me with only a little prompting. You sure you couldn’t be influenced into doing it again, when good old Angus is in his grave?”

Coal’s lips pressed together and Angus pulled him into his side.

“There’s no need to frighten him,” Angus ground out.

“Oh, I think there is. The sickening sweet alternative is having thousands of years of perfect health together, if you take this.”

Ariocho proffered the globe again.

A tingle passed through Winter the moment Angus touched the globe. The ‘ooh’ from the combined child-sized festive djinn told him that he hadn’t been the only one to feel it.

Before their eyes, Angus’s business suit developed spots of red, and it expanded along with his waistline.

“What, by all the baubles, is—“ fell from his lips.

“No, not acceptable,” Coal growled as he too aged and put on several hundred pounds.

Angus glanced at him. “Oh.” Then a broad smile broke over his now white-whiskered face. “Aho, aho, ho, ho, ho.” He blinked, and his mouth snapped shut.

The rest of the crowd laughed at his surprise.

“Thank fuck for that,” Arioach announced. “Festive fuckers, one and all, I give you, Angus and Coal Christmas.”

Winter found himself clapping as enthusiastically as any of the child djinn. Jingle, on the other hand, clapped at a slower rate, but he was the one who caught Angus’s eye. The two nodded to each other. Winter wasn’t certain what passed between the two former frenemies, but to him, it seemed like a silent vow of respect and support.

“Well, I’m off. I would say be happy, but that’d be a lie.”

“Wait,” Jingle called out.

Arioach’s shoulders slumped like a sulking toddler. “What now? All this festive shit is giving me gas, and you do not want to be around a farting vengeance demon.”

“What happened to Nick?”

Arioch gave them a toothy smile. “I have a new desk ornament. D’you want more details?”

Jingle’s expression was devoid of emotion. “Do we have to worry about him turning up again?”

“I might think about removing his immortality in a century or so.”

“And Mistletoe?”

“Discovering how much fun the sixteenth century is for amnesiacs.”

Jingle frowned. “That’s harsh, she—“

“Knew where you were the whole time and never said a damn thing,” Arioch replied. “The sentences were given by the Council, and I got one hell of a boost from both. The revenge was justified, so don’t bother arguing.”

Jingle held the demon’s gaze for several long seconds. “I owe you one.”

That devilish smile came again. “Nah, you don’t. I could have pushed the issue with Nick centuries ago, but you suffered so damn stoically.” Arioch lifted his hand, wiggled his fingers. “See you around, kiddies.”

They were left looking at swirling snow.

Angus rubbed his hands together. “Now, shall we all get to work? It’s only three months until the big day.”

Tinsel put her hand tentatively into the air. “Um, Santa? Does this mean the no fraternization rule no longer applies?”

White eyebrows drew down. “The what?”

“Take that as a hell yes,” Coal replied.

Cedar grabbed Tinsel, picked her up and swung her around before kissing her most thoroughly. Beside them, Candy and Snowflake were locked together in a similar passionate kiss.

“As much as I’m happy for everyone,” Coal said, “including me, how does this fix the issues? Even if the various departments become more autonomous, we now have half the staff and you’re still one person. I don’t want you wearing yourself out and becoming a workaholic grinch like you were before we met. How are you going to make all those deliveries?”

Winter had been thinking the same thing.

“If I may?” Jingle said from beside him.

Angus inclined his head at his former rival.

“The boss doesn’t drive the delivery van. He delegates.”

Tinsel shook her head, her jingle-bell earrings ringing in the silence as everyone focused on their conversation. “Even with the magic, with modern technology, people will notice if different Santas appear around the world, we’d need totally identical... oh.”

Everyone turned to Jingle and Winter.

Jingle clapped him on the back. “Junior, I think we just got a job. Fancy a sleigh ride?”

Epilogue



THE SLEIGH CAME TO a halt and Winter's four reindeer, Cupid, Comet, Dancer, and Prancer hung their heads. But they'd done it. Presents were in place for children who wouldn't have otherwise received one, and Christmas Day could proceed.

The new streamlined process meant that it had only taken them three weeks to deliver the gifts, rather than the eleven months it had taken the year before.

Angus had, as promised, taken a hands-off approach to running the North Pole. Each department had its own hierarchy, with most djinn having a specific area of responsibility. Prizes and awards were given out regularly, and everyone could apply for jobs that interested them.

The two festive djinn responsible for the reindeer pulling Winter's sleigh hustled out of the stable calling greetings and congratulations to Winter and their charges. The groan Comet let out as his groom lifted the harness from his back mirrored Winter's as he transitioned back into his normal form.

Being ‘fat and jolly’ took a lot of effort, but he bet Jingle found it more difficult. He smiled. ‘Jolly’ wasn’t an adjective he’d ever considered in relation to his lover. Strong. Considerate. Dominant. And now they’d finally have time to spend together.

The small cluster of cabins for couples had grown up around Santa’s old house. They lived on one side of Angus and Coal, Tinsel and Cedar lived on the other, and Garland and July had the house beside theirs. Garland transported July to and from the human realm to train, but Winter didn’t think it would be long before the couple approached Angus and asked for July to be given magic too.

Judging by some the moon eyes some of the newly ‘teenaged’ djinn gave each other, there might be more couples to house soon. Half of the general festive population had opted to start the aging process, especially as Angus said he’d halt their age at any point they wanted. Winter hoped Angus knew what he’d let himself in for. Although he handled Coal without a problem, who knew what trouble forty hormonal teenage djinn could get up to?

A golden ticket fluttered down from the rafters.

He wants you in the dungeon.

Naked, kneeling, arms in front of you.

Don’t move.

*And if he ever makes me send a message like this again, he’s
fired.*

P.S. When (and if) you're able, there's a party at my place tonight to celebrate our first successful Christmas.

There will be underage staff attending.

BEHAVE, BOTH OF YOU.

BRB

Winter grinned, belly fluttering in anticipation. It seemed as if the Big Red Boss, as he'd named himself, had also fallen for Jingle's charm. Winter couldn't blame him. His love had a knack for bending people to his will whether they liked it or not.

Winter could have walked home. It would only have taken ten minutes, but even that felt too long. Besides, he didn't want to suffer the inevitable, 'Is that a candy cane in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me' comments from the small group of teenage djinn who hung around the reindeer sheds.

Tinsel was Angus's right-hand in overseeing the entire operation, and Garland had taken over organizing the Adult Department. The laid-back surfer look-a-like might have to look into recruiting some of the teenage djinn into the Adult Department when they got a little older as none of the original Adult Department staff took on intimate wishes these days.

Coal had put himself in charge of 'fairy relations and decorations' and thoroughly enjoyed airing the grievances and suggestions of those too shy or too overawed to speak up themselves.

He also instigated the playing of some non-festive music and rescinded the non-existent rule about greeting each other. 'Rights for Grumps' had been his campaign slogan. The majority of the residents of the North Pole were still painfully bubbly and cheerful, but they no longer minded when the adult djinn, particularly Coal, didn't squeal and bounce up and down with excitement every five minutes.

Winter zapped himself into the kitchen of the little cabin he shared with Jingle, body and mind alive with anticipation. Their cabin from the snowglobe had been transplanted to the North Pole, except Winter's old room had become a luxury ensuite bathroom. The only door in the kitchen now led down to Jingle's dungeon which still lay in his mansion in southern England. By mutual choice, the interior of the cabin lacked festive decorations.

Winter removed his clothes with another thought and trotted down the concrete stairs. Down in the warm dungeon, head down, ass up, he waited, knowing he looked good.

The snowflakes, in blue and white, decorated both sides of his body from shoulder to feet. Only his face, neck and hands had been spared from the physical marks of Jingle's displeasure. He could have removed them, could have returned his skin to its 'pre-Jingle' condition with a thought now that his magic worked again, but he refused. The marks were Jingle's; they made Winter feel that his lover was always with him, even when they were on different sides of the globe.

Jingle knew he found waiting difficult, knew he found submitting, unless he was out of his mind horny, challenging. Probably the reason why he made him wait. His knees and back ached a little. Carrying all that extra weight while hauling the sack of presents around put pressure on his joints, although he only put on the magical 'fat suit' while on deliveries in case a wakeful child spotted him.

Still, patience was a virtue a good submissive should cultivate. *But is that what I want; what he wants?* He pondered and stretched his aching back. He didn't think either of them wanted 'easy'. Actually, the stretch with his arms out in front of him eased the kink in his spine caused by sitting in the same position in the sled for hours. A wry smile quirked his lips. Jingle knew him better than he knew himself.

Right now, Jingle would be watching him in a snowglobe, perhaps sitting on the sofa above him, sipping a whiskey. He pictured what Jingle could see, hard lines, white skin, blue and white snowflakes. A beautiful supplicant, waiting for his touch in the flickering light from the candles burning in the gothic wrought-iron holders set around the atmospheric space.

They hadn't played with needles yet, let alone explored wax play. What sort of Dom didn't like wax play? How did you start a conversation like that? They'd had so little time to talk, let alone play since they'd returned to the North Pole. Winter's body and opinion shifted again. He didn't feel beautiful and wanted any more. Now he felt like a bored, pissed off, tired, about-to-throw-in-the-towel idiot.

The door at the top of the stairs creaked open. The urge to turn and look itched up his spine but he stayed still. In his heart, he knew damn well it was Jingle, but not being able to see, of having that slight doubt, added a fizz of excitement. Boots trod down the stairs and then slowly made their way into his eye-line.

Every adult male at the North Pole wore the same style boots. This could be Angus, or even Cedar, playing one of his damn tricks. The itch to move, to look up and check, was damn near impossible to resist. But he did.

Long seconds passed. Winter so nearly looked, moved, or spoke, as the tension increased. The single finger that ran down his side, tracing the flurry of snowflakes, barely touching him, almost made him gasp. Jingle's touches were usually firm, uncompromising.

Not Jingle!

He jerked, began to kneel up. The slap to his ass echoed around the concrete room. The lack of soft furnishing produced wonderful acoustics; Jingle certainly knew how to set a stage.

Heat behind him. Jingle, or at least he damn well hoped it was Jingle, leaned over him, draping Winter's naked body with his clothed one. Despite the padded rubber mat under his knees, the extra weight ground Winter into the concrete.

Not Cedar. He's smaller than me. The man's scent didn't provide a clue. He was newly showered; Winter could only pick up woodsmoke and spiced apple, not Jingle's normal

bodywash. This had to be Jingle playing one of his games. The slight possibility that it wasn't his love added tension, a thrill.

The man's hand slid under his chest, then without hesitation, slid down his belly and grasped his bobbing cock. Whoever it was let Winter feel his weight, his power, as he ground his hard cock against his ass. Winter couldn't move, but the desire to do so vanished as a thumb pressed against the slit of his cock.

When the hand released his dick, he let out a groan of disappointment. The body lying on him silently shook with amusement before hands went to his head. A soft sleep mask slid over his eyes. Chills ran over his back as the man got off him. Exposed and vulnerable, he remained on the floor, knowing he was being watched, appreciated. His cock got harder.

Strong fingers fastened in his hair and pulled him to his feet. Hands held his biceps and spun him around several times. The grip on his arm led him forward a few paces. The dungeon wasn't huge enough for Winter not to know his general location, but he could be in front of the cross, the spanking bench, or even the cage. His heart sped up.

Winter had never been in the cage. He wasn't sure he ever wanted to try it. That it was still here, pointed to the fact that Jingle might want to put him in it one day. Then again, there were plenty of medieval torture implements on the walls which Jingle assured him he'd never, and would never, use.

His wrists were pulled forward and shaken a little. Winter understood his partner wanted him to keep them where they'd been put, out in front of him. Wide, padded cuffs buckled around them.

Another step forward and his wrists began to rise until he stretched to keep his feet on the ground without going up on his toes. An audible click of his back as the vertebrae realigned caused a warm hand to run slowly down his spine, checking each one. His ninety percent certainty that this was Jingle solidified to one hundred percent positive.

Apparently satisfied, Jingle moved to his legs, running a hand down his thigh to his ankle then buckled a cuff around it. He did the same to the other. A tap on his inner thigh had Winter spreading his legs. A chain rattled and he tried to bring his legs together and couldn't. Not being able to see heightened his other senses. Jingle's soft footsteps as he moved around him sounded so loud; even his own breathing was audible.

Lust poured through him as a hand gripped his balls and tugged. The pressure increased, he moaned. He loved his balls being tortured. He arched back, increasing the pull.

The retort of skin-on-skin echoed in the room as Jingle slapped his ass. Hopefully he'd left a handprint.

"I think I've created a pain slut," Jingle murmured.

"Yes, sir," Winter replied. He jerked as the hand came down again.

"Did I say you could speak?"

Winter shook his head but didn't bother hiding his grin. It faded as he heard Jingle walk across the room and a cupboard opened. Winter had never looked in either of the wooden cupboards in the dungeon, even though he could have easily done so. It was all about surprise and anticipation. Cloth rustling ramped him up higher. Jingle was undressing.

He jerked a little as Jingle's palm touched his lower back then rubbed slowly; he hadn't heard him cross the room again.

"I'm going to have you tonight, but I need to know if you've had enough of flying for one day or if you'd like me to take you soaring again.

Winter froze. They hadn't indulged in anything approaching flying since coming to the North Pole. Yes, they'd fucked on the few occasions when they'd both been able to keep their eyes open after eating, but they hadn't come down here.

Could he do it again? He almost didn't want to try, just in case it had been a one-off fluke, an effect of the snowglobe. He didn't want his failure to blight a momentous celebration for the New North Pole.

"Junior, let me in. I can hear the wheels turning in your head."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "What if I can't... get there? What if—"

This time the smack on his ass was anything but friendly. Winter sucked in a breath as the sting continued to burn afterward.

“Are you doubting me?” Jingle’s low voice threatened all sorts of delicious retribution.

“No, no, sir, I just don’t want to muck up such a wonderful day.”

Seconds passed, and Winter began to cringe. *Oh fuck, I’ve ruined it already. If only I’d—*

Warm breath tickled his ear. “This is how I want you. Tied and at my mercy. I will do with you whatever I like, as hard, and as brutal as I want. This is not your decision. Anything that goes on down here will never be your decision. All you have to do to avoid punishment is obey; nothing else is required of you. You can’t fail if you obey, understand?”

He relaxed in the cuffs. “Yes, sir.”

Jingle touched his ass, stroking around the curve. He tensed for a blow, then realized that whatever he did wouldn’t change anything. Bracing himself wouldn’t make it hurt any less; it wouldn’t stop Jingle from doing what he wanted. He relaxed.

“Well done.”

Warmth filled his chest at Jingle’s pleasure. He twitched as Jingle pried his cheeks apart even more. A hot wet tongue licked his entrance, once, twice.

“I’m going to try something new; I want to see a little decoration in this pretty hole.”

The scent of coconut oil tickled his nose, his cock lurched. Something hard and slick pressed against his hole. Winter twitched, curling his butt under a little.

“Don’t move. Take what I give you.”

A slap on his butt told him Jingle was utterly serious. Hanging his head, he relaxed as much as possible, blew out a breath pushing out as he did so. He felt himself stretching open. The barrier between odd and uncomfortable moved into stinging pain before the thing popped home. He wanted to push it out; it was like an itch he couldn’t scratch. If his hands had been free, he would have reached for it.

Jingle patted his ass. “Does it hurt?”

Winter wiggled. “I don’t like it. It’s—“

Jingle’s voice didn’t hold an ounce of sympathy. “I didn’t ask if you liked it. I asked if it hurt. Does it?”

“Not really. It stung a bit before it went in, but it’s damn uncomfortable. I can’t think about anything except pushing it out.”

“Then I’d better think of something to distract you, hadn’t I?”

The amusement in Jingle’s voice sent a shiver shooting up Winter’s spine.

Strands of soft leather dragged over his ass, but they only seemed to be a few inches long. As he’d done when they’d been in the snowglobe, Jingle struck him with a figure eight, hitting each butt cheek in turn. It stung, but it hardly hurt.

The flogger curled around his hip, only an inch away from his cock.

“Hey, watch where you’re hitting. That nearly got my dick,” he called out.

“Only nearly? I’ll have to do better.”

Before Winter could even process what he’d said, Jingle stepped around him, and the flogger flicked against his cock. Winter pulled in a breath as he twisted, trying to defend his most vulnerable area.

The mask was pulled away.

“Do you trust me?” Jingle’s eyes bored into his from two inches away.

Winter swallowed. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

“Then trust that you can take this, that I can give you everything you need.”

They held each other’s gaze for a moment before Jingle stepped back.

Instead of hitting his cock or balls again, Jingle flicked the small flogger at his nipples, hitting each precisely again and again. Winter looked down; his nipples stood out, red against the pale flesh surrounding them. He jerked as the one-two rhythm became a one-two-three as Jingle included a few soft flicks to his cock.

Winter gasped as the sting of the first truly hard strike to his cock reached his brain, but he held still, his dick throbbing and hard.

Swish, swish, thwack, pain.

Swish, swish, thwack, pain.

Thwack, pain. Thwack, pain.

Winter bit his lip, trying not to cry out. Jingle smashed his lips against Winter's, then pulled back. "You're fucking gorgeous. Get ready to fly."

Jingle sped up, catching not only his less sensitive shaft but his balls and tender cockhead. Winter cried out, attempting to twist away. Jingle followed his movements, never letting the pace drop.

"Absorb it; use it," Jingle ordered.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Winter tried to comply, tried to let the pain flow over him, and then between one moment and the next, he began to float. The individual strikes blended as the world slipped away. He slumped in his cuffs, muscles turned to brandy butter. He soared in his inner world even higher than he'd done with the reindeer earlier.

Pure wet heaven enveloped his burning cock, a tug at his hole gave him a cavernous empty feeling for a mere moment until something pushed inside and he lit up with pleasure. Time vanished as he slipped into an endless orgasm.

Vaguely, he became aware of the mouth being gone from his cock and being held tightly against a hard body as it thrust into him from behind. He wanted to move, to do anything he could to make it better for the man who had given him that incredible high, but he felt as together as a snowball in spring.

Jingle's breath found his ear as he held him, one arm around his chest, the other holding his hips.

“I wanted to wait until you came down, wanted to see your expression as I filled you, but I couldn’t wait. You’re so damn hot, so perfect. Feeling you come is like coming myself. I’ve never, I can’t—“

Jingle’s arms clenched tightly as he cried out and seized against him.

Magic was the only explanation for how Winter found himself in bed, clean, bonelessly satisfied, and on the verge of unconsciousness in the next breath.

Jingle lay facing him, eyes looking as droopy as Winter felt.

He tried to move, to say thank you, I love you, I never want to be anywhere else for the rest of my life. He managed a slow blink and a half-smile.

Jingle managed an equally drunken satisfied smile. “I know, Junior, I know. It’s a wish come true.”



A finger tracing the snowflakes on his shoulder woke Winter, and he smiled without opening his eyes.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Winter cracked his eyes open. A soft smile played on Jingle’s lips as he lay a foot away.

His own lips tipped up in response. “We missed the party.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Junior. We missed Angus’s party, but I preferred the one we had downstairs.”

“Me too.” Winter shuffled over, resting his head on Jingle’s biceps and breathing in his cinnamon scent.

A hand stroked through his hair, tender, caring. Last night had been fantastic, but the feeling of just lying with Jingle, without any urgency to move, filled his soul.

A kiss pressed against his forehead. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

Winter sighed. “Sometimes I wish we were back there. Just us, knowing what we know now. We wasted so much time.”

Jingle rolled away, leaned over the side of the bed, then turned back to him. He held a four-inch square, red-wrapped cube with a gold ribbon.

“For me?”

Jingle’s lips quirked. “Well, it’s not for Coal. Actually, it’s a bit of a joint present for both of us, something I’ve been thinking about for a while, if you accept it.”

Winter’s eyes shot to Jingle’s, and those bright blue eyes twinkled.

“Are you going to open it?”

Winter sat up, shuffled back until he pressed against the carved wooden headboard.

Butterflies fluttered in Winter’s chest. He’d organized proposals for wishers many times, and some had unique ways

of presenting engagement rings.

Neither of them were human, but Jingle had spent centuries living as one. If he needed a ring to feel secure, hell yes Winter would wear one.

Curious about what Jingle had chosen for him, he pulled the ribbon and lifted the lid. The smooth glass dome he revealed had his gaze shooting up to Jingle's.

His love took the box from his frozen hands and pulled out the snowglobe that sat on a fancy brass stand. A ring of tiny evergreen trees surrounded a cute log cabin with a wisp of smoke coming from the chimney.

“Angus set it to an hour here being twenty-four in there. We can come and go whenever we like and recharge our batteries even during Christmas Eve madness. All you have to do is tap it three times and say—“

“If you say ‘There’s no place like home’ I’m going to throw it at you.”

“And say—“ Jingle’s lips quirked, but he carried on, ”—it’s our time.”

Winter pressed his lips together, fighting down the swell of emotion.

A thumb brushed over his cheek, then lips touched his forehead.

“What do you want to do, Junior?”

Winter looked him in the eyes. “I want to run.”



Paired footfalls in the snow broke the silence. The movement, the chill against his exercise-heated face, the companionship. They didn't need to talk as they basked in simply being together with no other concern but putting one foot in front of another.

As the trees eventually petered out, and they were faced with the cabin in the vast clearing, Winter slowed and stopped.

The man who had given him everything, who had made his life complete, halted to and walked back to him. "We don't have to go back until both of us want to, Junior."

Human marriage vows could and were broken. But they weren't human.

Winter closed the distance between them, and took his hand out of his glove, needing the skin-to-skin contact.

Jingle waited, patient as always, while Winter cupped his face. He saw understanding, acceptance, in those icy blue eyes.

"I'm going to say something, but that doesn't mean you have to say it back. I just need you to know."

Jingle's lips tilted in a slow smile. "I love you too, Junior," he said and leaned forward for a kiss.

Before their lips touched, Winter whispered, “Your wish is my command.”

Jingle froze, gaze searching Winter’s face.

Winter’s lips quirked in a smile. “It’s all right, you don’t have to—“

“Junior, shut up.” Jingle cupped Winter’s face, brushed their lips together. “As always, you’ve figured things out way before me. Your wish is my command too. Merry Christmas, Junior.”



I hope you had fun with Winter and Jingle, and enjoyed seeing Coal again.

Want to know why Ariocho decided it was time to wrap up his revenge on Santa? Why he hates the human phrase ‘Revenge is a dish served cold?’

Meet Alastor, a revenge demon in training who can’t break the curse that ties him to a stately home. Add in an unexpected heir, and Ariocho finds himself the subject of revenge.

read IMPrisoned today, free in KU!



Want to start at the beginning of the DeMMonica Universe?
Read [Incubus Seduction, Free in KU!](#)

About Emma

Emma was destined to be a little quirky after being born as an unexpected twin in Hungry Bottom (Yes, it's a real place).

Known as the Queen of Angst because she loves putting damaged, often sweet and funny characters through hell before letting them have a HFN or HEA ending.

She blames her rebellious muse (who looks like Chris from the Paint Series) for the erotic aspects tickling the angst and the humor climbing into bed with the erotic.

When not writing or reading in leafy Sussex, England, she herds birman cats and sons; both groups argue that there are too many of the other sort.

Emma's book range from paranormal, (Festive Djinn, DeMMonica, Incubus) contemporary (Lies and Paint), and sci-fi (Malthusia). To grab your next angst-filled MM read, free in KU, Click or snap the QR code.



Acknowledgments

Thanks to my wonderful alpha reader, cover designer, and best author buddy, the multi-talented Nero Seal, who never fails to steer me in the right direction.

To my team of beta readers and manic typo hunters, Lucy, Ζωή, Valentina, Melissa (who suggested the longer epilogue—with added awww—), Kelly, Alexis, and Aethena, I couldn't do this without you. You each bring something different to the process, and I love every single question and comment!