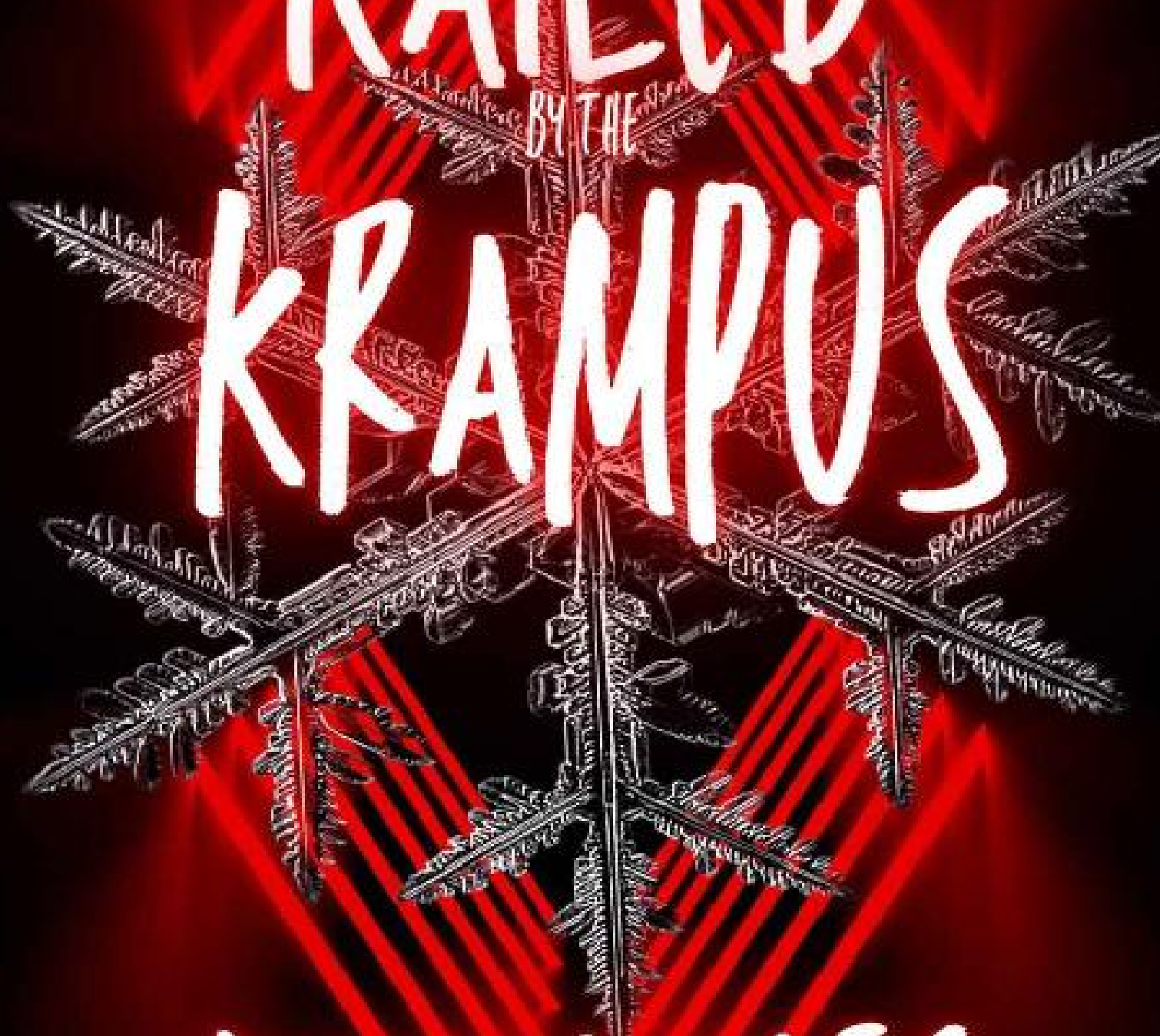


RAILED

BY THE

KRAMPU

DALIA DAVIES



*Railed by the Krampus*

*Railed by the Krampus*

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DALIA DAVIES

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Interior Illustration by Sophie Zuckerman (@[dextrose\\_png](https://twitter.com/dextrose_png) on Twitter)

*For anyone who needs a reason to like eggnog*

# Contents

[Content Warnings](#)

[Want to skip straight to the yummy stuff?](#)

≈

1. [One Cold Christmas Eve, Long, Long Ago...](#)
2. [Baubles & Bargains](#)
3. [On the First Day of Christmas....](#)
4. [A Partridge in a Pear Tree](#)
5. [On the Second Day of Christmas....](#)
6. [Two Turtle Doves](#)
7. [On the Third Day of Christmas....](#)
8. [Gift Exchange](#)
9. [On the Fourth Day of Christmas....](#)
10. [Four Crying Birds](#)
11. [On the Fifth Day of Christmas....](#)
12. [Five Gold Rings](#)
13. [On the Sixth Day of Christmas....](#)
14. [Six Geese A Laying](#)
15. [On the Seventh Day of Christmas....](#)
16. [Presents & Punishments](#)
17. [On the Eighth Day of Christmas....](#)
18. [On the Ninth Day of Christmas....](#)
19. [Twice as Nice](#)
20. [On the Tenth Day of Christmas....](#)
21. [Tinsel Talk](#)
22. [On the Eleventh Day of Christmas....](#)
23. [Naughty List](#)
24. [On the Twelfth Day of Christmas....](#)
25. [The End of Holiday Cheer](#)
26. [When your Goose is Cooked...](#)
27. [Between Two Gods](#)
28. [Give & Take](#)
29. [Special Delivery](#)

30. [From Now On Our Troubles Will Be Out of Sight](#)

31. [Epilogue](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About Dalia](#)

[Also by Dalia Davies](#)

[Books as Ava Lunaria](#)

[Books as Elise Jae](#)

[Books as Andi Simms](#)

[Detailed Content Warnings](#)

[Spice Menu](#)



# *Content Warnings*



SOME ELEMENTS OF THIS BOOK MAY BE TRIGGERING TO readers. Please see the following list of CWs to ensure that you are comfortable reading this book before you continue.

- Birching/Caning
- Breeding
- Death of a parent (prior to book, mentioned)
- Explicit human/non-human sex
- Fat shaming / Slut shaming
- Postpartum Depression (prior to book, mentioned)
- Suicide (prior to book, mentioned)
- Use of emergency contraceptives/Unconventional Family Planning

If you're concerned by these, you can find [a more detailed warning here](#).

*Want to skip straight to the yummy  
stuff?*



THERE IS A SECONDARY TABLE OF CONTENTS AT THE END OF the book that will get you to each of the spicy scenes. It's more like a menu, if I'm honest.

[Hop to that here.](#)

*Enjoy this book however you want.*

*THE WAY I'M DRINKIN' YOU DOWN  
LIKE I WANNA DROWN*

*- BILLIE EILISH*

*One Cold Christmas Eve, Long, Long  
Ago...*



SCREAMS ECHO OFF THE DARK RAFTERS AS FOUR TINY hellions chase around the table, trying to smear each other with mashed peas.

I watch John for a moment as the children pass him. He's a big man, and I trust that he's placed well enough in front of the blazing fire that none of them will end up bruised or burned.

Still... I have a hand on the lamp in the centre of the table—sparing a glance at the sloshing oil inside on their next lap.

My little sisters crash into each other and spoons go flying as those screams turn to giggles.

Two, far older, laughs join them, but I can only smile down at the pile of children struggling to untangle themselves.

“Do you ever remember being that carefree?” My best friend asks.

Susan holds out her hands and her son—the eldest of the group—hurries over to her. He delivers the spoons into her keeping and rejoins his sister and mine.

“I do not.”

I try to force a smile, attempting to soften the harshness in those words that is never meant for her.

But the wince she wears tells me I've failed again.

Susan knows... everything.

She's the only one who does.

She's the only one I know won't think differently of me for what happened.

The only one I know won't think differently of the girls.

It wasn't any of our fault, but the world always needs someone to blame. And the living bear the brunt despite their innocence.

Meg and May were a happy accident—or so I thought—five years ago.

My parents thanked the gods every day of the pregnancy.

Twins for a couple that had only been blessed once more than two decades before.

How wrong I was...

The darkness that came after their birth finally ate my mother from the inside out, the week before their second birthday

They don't even remember her.

Blame is such a sticky, tricky thing. It tries to latch onto her. But I don't let it.

Hers was a disease I'll never truly understand.

My father though....

Grief makes people do strange things. But *cowardice* is what got us where we are today.

Looking at the lamp flame and forcing myself to blink, I shove those dark memories away.

They sting and bite at the back of my mind... like a simmering pot.

It boils over too easily when left unattended.

"Do you want to come back tomorrow?" Susan asks, looking at the girls, not me.

She's always been better at pretending nothing's wrong for the twins than I have.

“I don’t want to leave Nan alone two days in a row.” The woman I’d once thought was a witch had taught me her trade and when I’d needed help the most, she’d come to me as though I was the one doing her the favour.

Susan knows the old woman’s knees can’t make the trek between our farms, especially in the snow.

“And I’ve got to get the birds ready for market.”

Her brows pinch, but before she can say whatever she means to say, her husband stands, leaving his post in front of the fire now that the kids have entrenched themselves beneath the table.

“Val asked about you again.” John says, taking wife’s hand as he stands beside her.

*He has no problem meeting my eyes.*

He doesn’t understand.

Blissfully unaware, he adds, “Asked me to mention his offer still stands.”

Because somehow, when my father walked into the woods with a gun and no intention of returning, the men of the Valley got it in their head that my best friend’s husband was somehow the one who could give permission to marry me.

*Utterly ridiculous.*

For his part, John never gave that permission he had no right to.

I think Susan might make him sleep in the barn with the sheep if he did.

He meant well, but again... John didn’t understand.

Husbands have expectations I have no intention of fulfilling.

“I’m not going to marry Val.”

I say it sharply enough that John flinches, but that’s not the movement that catches my eye. The mirror on the far wall

shifts as though a shadow lives inside it—as though a cruel wind has battered all the lights in the room.

The flames burning bright around the room haven't shifted, but that shadow is real, and it isn't.

That darkness is for me and me alone.

Susan has never seen it before—no one ever has—and telling her it's still there only makes her worry.

But I watch it a moment longer. It's not usually this... active.

“Val's not a bad option.” John's mouth twitches and I know it's concern for Susan more than it is for me.

She worries, which makes him worry, which makes her worry even more.

“I'm not going to marry any man who wants to send my sisters away.”

John's brow crumples. “I'm sure he was just joking about that.”

And I'm sure I won't take the risk.

Val looked at my sisters and, like most people who hadn't personally witnessed my mother's pregnancy, saw tiny copies of me. It had led to whispers, How easily they forgot our mother was the original pattern.

But even if he didn't question their true parentage, he was the sort of crofter who valued sons over daughters... and would likely run any of those he managed to have into an early grave.

Susan squeezes John's hand and nods toward the kid. “Make sure Tallulah doesn't set his hair on fire.”

He turns to them and his eyes go wide when he sees his daughter take hold of a candle.

Susan chuckles as he goes. “Always nice to be reminded of how quickly he can move.”

“Thank you for that distraction.”

“Thank Tallulah.” She says with a soft smile and a sigh. “John thinks he’s being helpful, but Val would be the worst possible man you could marry.”

He isn’t. But I don’t tell her that.

Neither of them hear or see the things I do.

They don’t have to listen to men make thinly veiled comments about my point and purpose. Most of them saw me as a pair of overly generous hips... and a plot of land worth just enough to be tempting.

They call me juicy and plump as their eyes trace covetously over me.

The size of my belly and hips are taken as proof of a “bountiful” future. Both from the crops that somehow always eek out enough to keep us fed... and the children they think are their eventual right.

“Hold out for the right one.” Susan says. “If you find him... even despite his flaws, it’s worth it.”

The way she’s looking at John....

I’ve known Susan since we were the same age as the twins are now. I delivered both her children.

I know that look.

“How soon will number three be here?”

She gives a contented little sigh and says, “June.”

The chill that races through me is one I can’t stop. So, I force all my muscles to tense, and when I’m sure my voice won’t waver, I say, “Congratulations.”

She reaches across the table and squeezes my hand.

“I want you to be there.” She waits until I meet her eyes. “There’s no one in the whole Valley—or beyond it—I trust more than you.”

That chill has suffused across my skin and turned to numbness.

Tallulah is the last child I helped bring into this world.



Midwives who've learned to hate infants aren't the sort you want at your bedside.

"It's okay to be scared." Her smile is soft when she tugs my hand and my attention both. "I'm scared too."

The fuzzy feeling builds behind my nose. "If I can. I will."

I have six months.

Six months to find a midwife Susan will let take my place.

The room has got too big.

The air spread too thin.

Squeezing her hand once before I stand, I excuse myself to the washroom.

The short walk takes ages, and I hold my breath until I lock the door. Until I lock the rest of the world out, and trap myself here where no one will see me if the thin veneer of composure I've painted over my cracks begins to crumble.

Shivering despite how hot my face is, I draw in long gulps of air and back into the corner, trying to make myself even smaller.

That hollow pain never leaves.

It only gets deeper and duller... more surprising when it crashes over me.

I don't know how much time passes as I watch the swirling darkness in the mirror, soothing myself with the symmetry, but eventually, I stand.

I splash freezing cold water from the basin on my face and it stops the warm tears from leaving my eyes.

Susan's going to be fine.

She'll have this babe just like she had the other two and life will move forward. One way or another.

But I won't be the one to deliver it.

I can't be.

And in a week... a month... maybe a year....

When the garden gives out and I have nothing left that I can sell, I'll have to give in and marry one of those odious men who want a mother and a maid.

But *not* until I have to.

I meet my own eyes in the mirror, watching the shadows coil.

It's better to starve and scrape alone than suffer at someone else's whims.

I reach up and touch that silver pane and frost slicks my fingers and the darkness swirls and shimmers.



“SHOES OFF!” I shout at Meg and May as they rush into the house.

It's no warmer here in the hall than it was out there. But the frosty mud on their shoes is going to ruin the hall runner, and cleaning that particular type of fibre isn't within my skill set.

They keep giggling as they kick off their shoes, flinging them under the bench just inside the door, and race to their room.

“What are you doing, you little monsters?” The weak words are said with a laugh, and I put my shoes beside the girls' before I follow.

The lamps are trimmed low, but the fire in the grate casts enough light to navigate by.

Nan has already started to get the girls wrangled and ready for bed. The room the three of them share is toasty warm. The fire isn't blazing, but we've insulated every tiny nook and cranny with scraps of the same burlap that covers the gardens.

“Did you enjoy yourself, sweet girl?” Nan offers me a warm smile as she gets Meg into one side of the bed and tickles her into submission.

“It was lovely.” It’s only a little lie.

“You should have come.” May says.

“I enjoyed the peace and quiet.” The look she gives me tells me she truly did.

Nan isn’t related to us by anything other than need.

She needed an apprentice when I needed work.

She needed a place to live when I needed someone living to remind me how.

She needed someone to take care of when we needed someone to pick up the pieces.

People like Val would tell me she’s another mouth to feed, but I wouldn’t have survived this long without her.

And the girls love her like a grandmother.

Snuggled down in the bed they share, the girls’ giggles have got quieter and they kick their feet under the covers to warm up their toes.

“Happy Christmas,” I whisper as I kiss them each on the forehead. “Sleep tight.”

“Happy Christmas, Holly!” Their singsong is sleepy, but in unison. I’m mostly certain they’ll fall asleep right away. They definitely worked out their energy.

“Good night, Nan. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Sleep well, dear.” She pats my hand as she sits on the slim bed shoved against the wall closest to the door.

My heart pains when I hear May whisper, “I hope Santa brings us something nice.”

*I do too.*

When I shut them in, a new shiver wracks through me. I want to go back in and curl up on the rug in front of their hearth, but then Nan would know that I’ve been lying to her.

Because when I snuff the hall candle and slip into my room, the tiny space is ice cold.

All the wood we gather goes to their fires.... Nan thinks I have the stove on in here, but... I ran out of coal last month.

The blankets on my bed are piled high... but I know I won't get warm until just before dawn.

I spare at the cold stove, not ready to undress yet.

Maybe I should have tried to be on the naughty list.

But coal is only for naughty children. Adults who fall on the bad side of the Christmas list get nothing at all... unless they're truly naughty, and then... they might just disappear.

No.... Misbehaving wouldn't have helped me.

"I would sell my soul for a lump of coal."

The room seems to get colder as soon as I say it, and I clutch my sweater tighter to myself.

And then nearly jump out of my skin when a sharp knock cracks on the front door. Cursing, I hurry out before Nan thinks she needs to get up, but when I open it... there's nothing but the chill night wind.

Darkness dotted by white flurries is all I can see beyond the front porch. There's no sign of anyone... not even children playing a prank.

I almost close the door, and then a flicker of glittering gold on the mat catches my eye.

The opulently wrapped present wasn't there a moment ago.

It looks like something out of a storybook tale.

And when I stoop to pick it up, it's heavy. As heavy as either of the girls, I'd guess.

My name is written in deep green ink on the tag.

Again, I look sharply into the darkness.

Again, there's no one.

Shivering, as the chill fingers of the night creep down my spine, I close and lock the door and slip back into my room, shutting myself in tight before I turn the wick of my lamp up.

The paper shines and the ribbon I tug free is such a deep red I almost worry it will stain my fingers. But the velvety fabric pulls loose, and the wrapping falls away like snow off a high peaked roof.

The box beneath it looks as though it's made of pure gold. And when I lift the lid with trembling fingers, it *feels* like gold as well.

A white card sits on top of a bag of the same red velvet as the ribbon and when I pull them both up, the rest of the box is *filled* with coal.

I should start the stove immediately, but the card and the bag....

Rubbing my fingers over the creamy paper, a sliver of dread slices down my spine. The curtains are closed, my door locked. But I feel someone watching.

The mirror above my dresser draws my eye. This time, the shadow there doesn't move.

Flipping the card open, I stare at the sharply written calligraphy. It takes my eyes a moment to focus.

*Come to me and you can have anything and  
everything your heart desires.*

*Wear the mask.*

The darkness behind my mirror still hasn't moved, and it feels like it's waiting.

Casting a sidelong glance at that shadow, I tug the bag's ties open and lift the mask free.

All black, it would only cover the top half of my face... I place it against my skin and look at myself in that dark mirror. Above my head, two horns branch out... leaf-like ears stand up against them.

It takes me a moment to remember the name of the creature from storybooks... a reindeer.

Reindeer, presents, lumps of coal on Christmas Eve....  
Even if I had no idea before, I know which of the old gods  
waits for me.

Klaus is the god little children call Santa.

A low grinding of stone on stone echoes to me, and I jerk  
around, skirt swirling. My cold fireplace shifts under some  
magic mechanism. The back wall opens away from me, and  
the grate pivots into the room. Beyond it, a hall lined with  
tubes of unearthly red light.

An offer.

A choice.

I imagine a wiser woman wouldn't be tempted.

But wisdom rarely outshines desperation.

A shiver wracks me and with a low breath, I put the mask  
back to my face, securing the ties.

And go to him

# *Baubles & Bargains*



THE HALLWAY BETWEEN MY ROOM AND WHEREVER KLAUS wants me to go is a cramped corridor. The rough hewn rock walls snag at my sweater and I have to squeeze my hips through sideways more than once.

The tubes of bright red light that line either side of the path throw strange shadows on the arched ceiling mere feet over my head. Each time I knock the mask's horns against a low part of the ceiling, I have to bite back a curse.

The path finally opens up, right before it's blocked by an enormous wall of flickering red and green flames.

But I can see beyond it to where a familiar figure from the stories waits.

Holding my skirt tight to me, I edge past those flames, slipping out beside them.

I only have a moment to spare a glance at the hearth that is bigger than my home.

The mantle hung with stockings is so high up, I couldn't even try to read the names.

I know Klaus is waiting for me, watching. But everything is a distraction. My stockinged feet sink into a carpet so plush I almost drop to my knees to feel it.

The walls are panelled in roughly hewn planks wide enough they might be the whole tree.

And the living tree in one corner is so large, I can only see the top because of the star twinkling there. Its boughs are

packed with baubles, and the space beneath its branches is stuffed full of wrapped presents in all colours, shapes, and sizes.

It's warm, the air is thick with spice, and everything *feels* too nice to be true.

At least, until my eyes land on the god who is waiting for me.

The carpet beneath my feet is one long red stripe that leads to his throne. Gilded, ornate framework and red tufted cushions. And Klaus....

He looks like a man... a giant of a man. Watching me with his bearded chin resting on one hand, the red hat on his head matches the pants he wears, stuffed into high boots with gold buckles.

If Susan was here, she would have already leaned over to ask me where I think his shirt went. I'm too focused on the shiny bauble in his other hand to laugh. Because in the reflection, I don't see his domain... I see my room and the still open fireplace there.

He sets it aside, his focus entirely on me.

It's unnerving.

I stop when I'm a few feet away from the wide and shallow steps that lead up to him.

His lips curve, and his white moustache twitches. "Do you know who I am, Holly?"

I nod. It's a slow movement of my head and it takes me a moment to realise he's not going to accept it as a response. "Yes. You're Klaus... Santa."

He chuckles when I say the last word. As if it's ridiculous. And maybe it is.

"Would you really sell your soul for that box of coal?"

"I—I don't know."

"Honesty is always preferred here." He lifts his face away from his hand and leans forward, resting his elbows on his



knees. “You’re on my nice list, Holly.”

Each time he says my name, it’s like the fire flares at my back.

“I’ll give you everything you want if you give me what I want by the end of twelfth night. Play my game and you’ll win everything you’ve ever dreamed of. No more shivering nights, no more scraping in the forest to make sure your family eats....”

It’s tempting. But if the stories are true, *every* bargain with the old gods is.

“What kind of game?” I ask.

“I think it’s my turn to get the presents, don’t you?”

He holds out his hand and blows on his empty palm.... A fluttering like snowflakes puff from him and when I catch them, they’ve transformed into a long and narrow piece of parchment.

A list with twelve lines... all of them blank.

“Twelve nights, twelve presents. Sounds fair.” He raises his brows, and I know he’s waiting for me to agree.

But, “I have nothing to buy gifts with.”

“Who said anything about buying them? You can trade, cheat, or steal for all I care.”

*All deals with the old gods come at a cost.*

“What gifts do you want? Or will you make me guess?”

“They’ll appear when you need them to. Not a moment before.”

There are rules whispered among the citizens of the Valley. Tales of the ways the old gods use mortals.

But Klaus isn’t a god whose name features in them.

I don’t know what his desires are. But he’s offering me *everything*. I’d be a fool not to try.

Still, it’s not *easy* to say, “I accept.”

“Good girl. Now come here.”

I don't trust that smile.

When I hesitate, his brows raise. “We will seal this bargain with a kiss... or you can go home to your cold solitude.”

I take those steps slowly. Each one requires three paces to reach the next, and my gaze falls on the bauble resting on the table beside his throne.

“Have you been watching me? Waiting for me to be desperate?”

His laugh falls over me like the deep echo of distant thunder, and he throws the bauble into the tree with hundreds of others before he lifts me up, off the carpet and into his lap.

“I've been watching you.” He says, voice low enough it could be a whisper. “Waiting for you to make a wish I could fulfil.”

He takes my chin in his hand and draws me into a kiss that sears through me.

His mouth is hot and his lips are soft, and his beard tickles at the hollow of my throat.

I kissed plenty of boys when I was a little girl. I've kissed my fair share of men, too.

Kissing a god....

I've never felt this level of need.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I arch into him, trying to soak up every little bit of his warmth.

And I'm a little ashamed of the fact that he is the one who pulls away.

How many times have I been told I'm greedy?

Klaus' hands trace over my body to grip my more than generous bum.

His face is still barely inches from mine and he meets my gaze with eyes the colour of that glittering gold paper. “I've wondered what you taste like... and I plan to taste every inch.”

I shiver, despite the warmth of his breath against my neck.  
“But there will be time for that.”



THE PATH IS WIDER on the way back to the mortal realm, and when the fireplace closes behind me, a blaze starts in the grate from nothing, warming the room through almost immediately.

The magic of the old gods isn't something I should question, but still....

Placing the empty list on top of my dresser, using the gold box—it's smaller now—to hold it down and keep the edges from curling, I pull the ribbon free and take off the mask.

I didn't expect to dislike the lightness that comes with its loss.

But putting it back on would be ridiculous. And I've done enough things worthy of ridicule for one night.

I set it on the dresser too, and glance at myself in the mirror... that shifting darkness has a face now, even though I can't see it.

He's been watching me for years. It's been so long, I don't even remember when I first noticed it.

How many times have I undressed in front of this mirror? How many times has he seen me...?

There are so many things I've done in rooms with mirrors.

The blush that fills my cheeks stings. But I remember the way his lips felt, the way the warmth of his hands seeped through my clothes.

He wants to taste me.

And I won't lie to myself... I want to be tasted.

I don't turn away from the mirror as I remove each of the layers of clothing I no longer need in this room. Peeling them off one by one, I watch the shadow. I watch myself, seeing

what he sees... ignoring the missing buttons on that shirt, the torn loop in my skirt where the belt puckers the fabric and the hole in my chemise.

*It's nothing he hasn't seen before.*

My nipples peak as I draw the chemise over my head, but not from the cold.

And that is what reminds me this whole thing is a game, and he's probably winning.

I snatch my nightgown from the drawer and pull it on, quickly climbing into my toasty bed.

Blowing out the candle, I snuggle down into the covers and can't help but wonder...

What if this bargain is worse than marrying some vaguely dreadful man come spring?

Twelve days has to be better than a lifetime.

*It has to be.*

## *On the First Day of Christmas....*



I BOLT UPRIGHT TO THE SOUND OF SMALL SCREAMS AND AM halfway out my door before I realise they're screams of joy.

Meg and May dance around a tree that wasn't there last night, and Nan blinks at the drawing room around her.

It has been transformed.

When her gaze turns to me, it's with a weak smile. "You were busy last night. How did you manage this?" She says, quietly, but not quietly enough.

May answers for me as I finally get my robe fully on and belted. "It was Santa! We've all been *so* good this year, he brought us presents."

I smile down at her, my jaw straining from the stretch. "Exactly."

Nan looks at me with narrowed eyes. I take her hand, squeezing it. "She's not wrong."

Turning, her brows pinched with concern, Nan drops her voice. "What did you do?"

I can't tell her the truth, so I pat her hand. "Everything's going to be fine."

With a deep breath, I turn back to the girls, rummaging under the tree.

"No opening presents until I come back. Do you understand?" The girls both nod vigorously, and Nan lets out a

long sigh. “I suppose I’ll go see if Santa stocked the icebox as well.”

Turning for my room, I can only hope that he did.

Klaus waits inside my room, sitting on my bed, and he watches me as I step inside and close the door. Leaning back on it.

“I thought you had to stay in the old gods’ realm.”

“Usually,” He says, crooking his finger and beckoning me forward. “But it’s Christmas Day, and I have a debt to collect.”

As I walk to him, I look at the dresser. The list is gone and there are no shadows in the glass.

“What do you want for your first Christmas gift?” I ask, trembling when his fingers smooth over my hips—his hands flattening the fabric against me and tracing that pear shape too many have chastised me for. “I’d rather the girls didn’t know you were here.”

“Of course not... they want a jolly old man. And I am not the one to smile and laugh as I bounce them on my knee.”

He holds up the list and the first line is now filled.

“A partridge in a pear tree.” I say it slowly. “How would a partridge get in a pear tree?”

They can’t fly.

And where am I going to find a pear tree with one in it? We have plenty of fowl in the barn, but partridges aren’t of any use to us.

His smile is concerning.

“Don’t worry. This is your first task. I’ve made it easy on you.” His palms ghost down my legs. “Go look out your window.”

His head turns, gaze travelling to the thick curtains.

They rattle on their rings and the bright light of the morning pours in.

The tree at the side of our house is dotted with pears.

It is unsettling to see them among the boughs of the nearly blue fir. They nestle in the needles and the snow that covers the branches.

And at the top of that eight foot tall evergreen is a partridge... but not a real bird. Something shinier.

“Bring me the partridge, and you will be one step closer to your reward.”

He stands, looking down at the bed. “I don’t like this.”

With a snap of his finger, the small cot that has been mine for more than two decades is gone. In its place, a canopy bed that is almost too big for the space it occupies.

He looks it over, running his hand down the curtains, and then he leans in and looks up. “Much better.”

I step forward and follow his gaze... to the mirror that covers the entirety of the canopy top.

*He sees you when you’re sleeping.*

“Is this... is that part of it?” I wave my hand toward the rest of the house.

“Consider it the first payment toward your happiness.”

“Thank you.”

He tsks his tongue, shaking his head at me. “Never thank a god, Holly. It will only get you in trouble.”

How much more trouble could I be in?

“You can come to me through any fireplace. Just push the back wall and it will open for you.” He goes to the hearth, and it opens for him as he nears. “Enjoy your Christmas, Holly. But come back to me before midnight or I will have to claim a forfeit.”

“What forfeit?”

His eyes grow dark, his scowl darker. “You may not wish to find out.”



THE ICE BOX HAD, indeed, been filled. But Nan hadn't needed to pull anything from it other than the pot of strawberry preserves she preferred.

Our table was set and cloches covered still hot food... a selection of items that each of us loved.

I should be more grateful, but worry has eclipsed the feeling.

It's too much, too soon.

And I have a feeling payment will come due when I bring him that bird.

But I force myself to forget about that, because the girls are happy, and Nan is beaming too as she scrapes her jam onto buns that are so soft they nearly crumple at the weight of the sticky spread.

And it's hard not to melt at the taste of lemon and cream as I take a bite of my own.

Meg winds up with powdered sugar over her cheeks and nose, like little white freckles, and May tries to draw a similar pattern on her face with a piece of chocolate. But Nan stops them, even as we both laugh.

"Take your plates to the sink and then we can open presents." They slide from their chairs so fast they tip and wobble, but neither of them clatters to the floor. And Nan watches them out of her periphery as she covers over what little is left of the food. I finish mine as I walk to the sink, watching the woman herd my sisters to the drawing room and its brightly decorated tree.

When I sit on the chair closest to the fire, the girls have already dug all the presents out and shaken each one. "This one's for you, Holly!" Meg runs over to me, dropping the box in my lap before hurrying back to sort through the rest.



I look at the tag, unsurprised to see “From Santa” scrawled in tight, dark script. It is one of three that the girls bring to me. They pile five at Nan’s feet and each of them jiggles with joy at the seven gifts in front of them.

“Do we have to wait any longer?” Meg asks as May says, “Please!”

“Go ahead.”

The plain brown wrapping never stood a chance. They tear through the paper and gleeful giggles echo off the walls as they pull out scarves and mittens and new shoes.

There’s a box of sweets among the gifts, and new dolls with scarves that match the ones they’ve received. The books filled with stories and pictures of princesses in castles and farm girls fighting dragons are their favourite, though, and their attention falls into the illustrations, comparing each and whispering about which of the dresses they would wear if they lived in that magical land.

Nan opens her gifts more slowly, folding each piece of wrapping carefully before setting it to the side. Klaus brought her new glasses, a new set of silver knitting needles. When she pulls the same scarf and mittens as the girls from her box, she rubs the fabric gently across her cheek and the fur inside the mittens between her fingers. She likes them all, I can tell as she works through the last of the boxes, but she’s wary.

I’m honestly afraid to open mine. The box that is the same size as the one Nan opened with her scarf and mittens holds the same for me... but the mittens are replaced with gloves and I shiver as I slip my fingers into the soft fur. I breathe a little sigh of relief when the next contains a simple, but sturdy, pair of boots.

The last box is small, and I stare at the necklace inside it for just a moment too long. My shock giving the girls a chance to see the intricate silver snowflake on its fine chain.

“Santa really *likes* you, Holly.” Meg says, bouncing to her feet and looking at the pendant with wide eyes. “Put it on.”

I don’t argue, because I know I won’t win.

But as soon as I fix the clasp, it disappears and I have to force another smile to stop the momentary panic from reaching my eyes.

There's no removing it now.

"It's beautiful! Just like you!" May jumps up and plants a wet kiss on my cheek. "Can we play outside?"

"Of course." It will give me the opportunity to collect the bird.

The girls run off to change into their warmest clothes and new things. But when I stand to do the same, Nan stops me.

"What is all of this, Holly?"

I squeeze her hand when she offers it to me. "Enjoy your Christmas. We've been blessed."

She nods, but her eyes still hold that worry.

By the time I've changed and grabbed the basket we use to collect apples in the summer and fall, the girls are waiting, jiggling with excitement on the bench.

Old Nan is there too, still watching me. "Sometimes it does an old woman good to watch the young ones play... even if the thought of joining them makes my bones ache."

"What's that for?" Meg asks as she hops off the bench and I open the door before I answer. "Santa left us another surprise."

The girls accept that answer and rush out into the snow that fell last night, scooping up handfuls of it to lob at each other.

Nan stops at the porch rail as I close the door behind us and while she's watching the girls, I know she's watching me too.

It's why I'm not surprised to hear her when I drop the basket into a small drift and start making my way around the tree, collecting the pears I can reach first.

"What strange magic have you wrought, girl?" She eyes the tree with a look of distaste. "Dealing with the old gods

only ever works in their favour....”

I look back at her when she stops and see that she’s pressed her lips shut. Her brow knit, she looks at the tree beyond me.

“You should have told me we need help.”

“I didn’t want to worry you.”

“You’ve failed in that. If I didn’t know how much you loved those girls, I’d think you’d done something you couldn’t find your way through.” She snugs her arms around herself and turns back to the house. “I’ll go check on the birds and the pigs. Maybe *they* wound up with presents too.”

She leaves me to my pears, and it takes nearly three hours to get them all. Up and down the tree, shimmying out onto branches and placing them in the basket.

The partridge is tied to the top most branch with another red velvet ribbon, and when I pull it down, the thing is so heavy, I nearly fall out of the tree.

I have no idea how it stayed upright on such a slender branch.

Nan has got the girls into a steamy bath when I come back in and she looks at the pears with a narrow gaze. “Are you sure those won’t taste like fir when we slice them up?”

“I am not. But if they do, we can always give them to the pigs. Waste not....”

*Want for quite a lot.*

I leave the basket on the kitchen floor and go back to the doorway of the cramped washroom. “I’ll be... out for a while. Will you make sure they don’t eat too much sugar?”

Both of the girls groan, but Nan says, “Of course.”

“Good.” Nodding, I walk back to the front hall, plucking the partridge from the bench, and slip into my room, locking myself in.

It’s late afternoon, well before Klaus’ deadline, but the shifting behind the mirror tells me he knows I have it. I

unwrap myself, placing each layer on the chair near my warm stove. I have what Klaus wants. He has what I want....

There's no point in delaying.

# *A Partridge in a Pear Tree*



WHEN I STEP OUT OF KLAUS' HEARTH, THE GOLDEN BIRD LETS out a shrill squawk. It flaps and flutters and the only reason it doesn't hit the ground is that red ribbon tied to its clawed feet.

A deep chuckle echoes from the centre of Klaus' domain, but he is not the god sitting on that throne.

Dark horns sprout from a head of shaggy black hair that falls to cover his shoulders like epaulettes. His face is long and sharp, his chin ending with a pointed goatee. And he stares at me with golden eyes over sharp, gleaming teeth.

The other half of the Christmas gods....

*The Krampus.*

"A beautiful little berry has brought us a gift." He says, his voice like molten caramel.

Sinews of muscles flicker under grey-black skin, and he lounges on that throne with one furred leg over the arm, sharp clawed foot dangling, the pose displaying red and black—

My eyes snap up to his face.

His cock lays against one leg and although a part of me wants to look again—to see if what I think I saw is correct—my cheeks flush with heat.

I shouldn't *want* to look.

The tales told to children who will soon lose the Tooth Fairy's protection—threatening them into being nice—paint him as a twisted, dark creature.

Twisted may well be true. My gaze starts to wander, but I force myself to stop.

There's a tremor in my voice when I speak and I'm willing to pretend it's fear. "Will you get Klaus?" I ask, and then shake myself, remembering. "Please."

He looks at me queerly, head twisting to one side as those golden eyes narrow. "I don't need to."

Of course not. Gods don't *need* to do anything.

Holding up the still squabbling partridge, I say, "I'm supposed to bring him this."

His eyes don't leave mine as he holds out a hand with too long fingers—too many knuckles.

I'm not going to hand it over without a promise. "Will you give it to him?"

His gaze sweeps down me, and he kicks his foot as if tempting me to look down him too. "Everything comes at a price."

Payment to the Krampus... I can't agree without knowing. "What do you need from me?"

"Need? Such an interesting choice of words. I need... a kiss." His tongue snakes out of his mouth. The tip is black, as if it's been burnt, and split in two, like a snake's. Impossibly long, it reaches for me. But it doesn't get to me before he draws back, licking his lips as he goes. "Would a little berry give me a kiss in exchange for delivering the bird?"

*A kiss.*

My gaze goes to those lips. Dark lines like slashes spread from them.

I could wait until Klaus comes back. There is still time. But he's provided me with an excuse to give in to this wicked tug.

He watches me, waiting. That smile taunting me as I make my decision.

But there's really no choice.

There's never a choice.

Once again, I walk up those shallow steps to an old god waiting for me. But this time, I have an offering—two.

This *payment* feels like a reward.

He turns in his seat, setting those clawed feet on the carpet, I force myself to keep my face turned up, to look at *his* face and nowhere else.

Handing over the still fluttering bird, I watch him move gently to take it. Instead of the sharp grasp I expect, those long fingers cage it as he gingerly turns the bird over, untying its feet.

He draws the bird to his face, whispering something I can't hear. I hold my breath as his too-sharp teeth seem to grow as he smiles, and then...

I gasp as he flings the bird at the tree and watches it flutter to roost on one of the highest branches.

"You said you'd give it to him." The words are measured, even though I want to scream them.

I don't want to climb another tree.

His fingers catch in the fabric of my skirt and he tows me forward, into the valley between his knees. "It's in Klaus' tree, it belongs to Klaus. And now, you owe us a kiss."

My gaze drops to his mouth, to the wicked smile there, and I wonder what other rules exist in this domain I should know.

Is this kiss truly all the payment he'll require?

Shivering when his hand trails down my arm, a more worrisome question pops into my mind. Do I want to owe him more?

"What thoughts race around that mind of yours, little berry?" He asks, drawing one finger over the brow of my mask. "What would it take to turn them off?"

"Maybe a kiss will do the trick?"

It's a challenge I shouldn't offer.

The chuckle it elicits is proof of that.

But when those long fingers wrap in my hair and he draws me even closer, his lips don't meet mine.

They go to my neck, and I shiver at the sensations that kiss courses through me.

That cock I won't look at presses against my belly and can't stop myself from leaning into him. I put my hands on his stomach, nails digging into his skin to keep them from dropping lower, and he chuckles as his mouth coasts over my throat.

When his tongue trails along the scooped neckline of my shirt and then down, I freeze. But his fingers pull it wide and slide it down my shoulders.

My next breath raises my breasts to his lips.

I should have known it would never be *just* a kiss....

I should have known I wouldn't want it to be.

His tongue traces over me and then his lips close and my nails dig into him harder.

I gasp as he leaves me, leaning into him, and reality floods back in. Muscles clenched, I step back and away from him, pulling my shirt back into place.

But my eyes stray to the cock I tried to look away from. Black and red, twisted round itself to a tip with two heads....

I stumble down a step.

"Run away, little berry." He flicks his hand to shoo me. "I'll take what I want when you're willing to give it. You'll warm to me, eventually."

I don't run.

I *force* myself to not run.

Because I wouldn't be fleeing him.

And there's no way to outrun my own wanton thoughts.

A flicker of movement by his ankle catches my eye and I have no idea why, but the sight of his tail, twitching like an



irritated cat calms some of the fluttering around my heart.

“That wasn’t a kiss.”

Brows raised, Krampus looks down at me and his smile widens.

“I pay my debts.”

“Do you, now?” He holds out his hand and I place mine in it—ignoring how small that makes me feel—letting him draw me back up that step.

Leaned forward, he watches me, and I know he’s still waiting for me to run.

I don’t want to run.

I want....

Hands speared into the dark hair on the sides of his head, I pull him down to me, and when I kiss him, it’s like the word stops.

He tastes like Christmas—like cinnamon and wood smoke.

Warmth floods over my skin where his fingers wrap around my hips and I want to step into him, but he doesn’t let me.

Pulling back, he looks down at me with the smallest of creases between his brows. “That’s enough for now, little berry.”

Licking my lips, I don’t tell him I want more.

He already knows.

He kisses me once more, a soft, simple thing that makes my head reel. “This won’t be the last time we meet.”

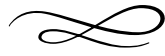
Turning me around, he nudges me gently back toward the hearth, and I go. Not because I want to, but because I know he’s right.

Whatever task Klaus sets for me tomorrow, I’m sure I’ll need the rest.

But it’s not Klaus I think of when I crawl into my bed. The shadows swirling over me as I sleep take my mind to darker

places.

## *On the Second Day of Christmas....*



A THOUGHT FLOATS ACROSS MY SLEEP-HAZED MIND AS I stretch beneath the covers.

*He knows when you're awake.*

My foot touches something solid and I jerk upright, holding the covers close to my chest.

Klaus watches me from the edge of the bed, like he's been there for hours, and would be content to wait for hours more.

“You brought me what I asked for yesterday.”

“I gave it to Krampus.” I say, hoping I haven't screwed this all up from the very beginning. “He promised he'd give it to you for me.”

His eyes narrow with something like amusement.

“*He* did... but that's not the only thing you gave him. Is it?”

I swallow back the sliver of fear that strikes through me. “No.”

“No.” It sounds like an agreement the way he says it. “If you give something to him, you give it to me as well.”

He crooks his finger and I swallow as I let go of my death grip on the warm covers.

His eyes devour me as I walk to him on my knees.

“This is not fitting.” He says, rubbing the thin cotton of my nightgown between his fingers. The fabric bleeds red as if his

touch stains it, and it quickly transforms. When he draws his hand away, there's nothing left of the nightgown I'd worn.

The deep burgundy fabric is soft as silk and it hugs my breasts tightly, the neck lower than before.

When I slide my hands down over my hips, it follows the line and flare.

I've never had anything fit my body this way.

"Much better," He says as his hand slips around my waist and he draws me to him. "Though I've always preferred to sleep naked."

"Do you sleep?"

Fingers trailing over the tops of my breasts, he nods. "When I wish to."

I draw a shaking breath and it pulls me away from his touch.

"Sweet, sweet Holly." He drags his fingers over my collarbone and pushes one strap over my shoulder. "Do you prefer the Krampus to me?"

"I don't know."

He hums and drags the other strap down. "I guess we'll just have to find out. Won't *we*?"

His breath is cold as it coasts over my skin, but he doesn't drag the nightgown down. That icy breath tightens my nipples to hard buds against the fabric.

His lips close over the silk, and he sucks through it.

The gasp that leaves me is too loud and I look sharply toward the door. I don't need Nan or the girls coming in to see this.

"Don't worry," he says, pulling back to blow on the wet fabric and send shivers through my body. "No one will hear any of the sounds you make in this room."

His mouth latches on to my other nipple, beard tickling, and I can't stop myself from arching against him this time.

I can't stop myself from wrapping my arms around his neck, spreading my hand against the back of his head to hold him closer to me.

But it's not enough.

I want more.

Even if I shouldn't.

Struggling to get out of his arms, I wrench the nightgown down so it pools at my waist, and Klaus looks at me like that was exactly what he wanted. He wanted me to be the one to bear myself to him—to choose it.

“Do you think this is *naughty*, Holly? Or is it *nice*?”

His palm brushes over my nipple and I let out a shuddering breath. “It's nice.” I swallow and meet his eyes. “It's *very* nice.”

When his tongue traces the same path, I flinch at the icy spike it drives through me.

But he pulls away from me, just as Krampus did.

On my knees in the middle of this bed he gave me, with the nightgown he made for me wrapped around my hips, I breathe in deep gulps of air. Because I want to ask him why he doesn't want more from me.

His gaze travels over me once more, an appreciative smile on his lips when his fingers fix the snowflake pendant, and then he turns to the list.

“I would suggest you visit Gren's temple today. Autumn may be well past, but they are also the god of change... and that is, at the heart of it, what you want. They'll have what you need to find today.”

He disappears through my fireplace and I drag the nightgown back up over my freezing breasts.

Warmth doesn't find me again until the fireplace is closed up tight, and I step down onto the rug that covers my splintering floor.

The list on my dresser has another line:

## *Two Turtle Doves.*



THE CITY that surrounds the tower is cramped and crowded, and I have always disliked venturing into its cobbled streets.

People here move faster. They're harsher and harder, living this closely beneath Casaran's rule. I've always disliked venturing this close to the tower.

I've never met the man who holds the power, and I don't want to.

He and this city both leave a foul taste in my mouth.

Snow is piled against the buildings, streaked with black and grey, and thankfully, the chill keeps most inside.

I make my way through, avoiding icy puddles and conversations with men who are too unfamiliar to be that familiar.

One of the men standing in the doorway of a little shop selling shoes calls out to me—not with the intention of selling his wares—and the fireplace behind him flares and begins belching smoke into the small storefront.

I can't help but wonder if that was divine intervention. Every time I catch my reflection in the windows, that dark shadow follows with me.

*He knows if you've been bad or good.*

I wonder how many of them would act differently if they knew how literal that was.

The next person who calls out to me—a cobbler who would know I don't need his wares with one glance at my feet—is a little nicer.

But what he says with his eyes....

A man in a striped red hat with jingling bells runs past, stealing the boots from his hands and the man forgets about

me entirely as he gives chase. Klaus' devotees—his elves—are said to wear striped hats and masks with pointed ears....

If I could have walked around the city, I would have, but I'm nearly on the opposite side. Cutting through shortened the journey by more than half. My destination is still another mile beyond the last of the houses packed too tightly together.

By the time I get to Gren's temple, I feel more at ease.

I can take full breaths here.

The weak sun is already too high in the sky and it filters pale light down on the immense dark green marble walls of Gren's temple.

It makes me feel small—insignificant—standing in its shadow.

Moss and lichen crawl over the stone edifice, as though the ground is trying to consume it. As if it's angry someone had the audacity to build it in the first place....

Unlike so many other buildings, the steps leading in lead down, not up. And grooves cut in them flow with the runoff of night's now-melting snowfall.

By the time I reach the bottom of those steps, the runoff has turned to steam and I have to loosen my scarf and stuff my gloves in my pocket.

The world outside might be steeped in winter, but here... My cheeks flush from the heat.

So many of the stories about Gren are steeped in contradictions. This simply feels like yet another one.

"Doves." I say with a sigh as I step further into the seemingly deserted temple and the air itself tries to distract me.

There are plenty of birds flitting around the vine draped ceiling. More than a dozen cats prowl the low walls that hold steamy pools of water. Those watch me intently, unblinking yellow eyes follow me as I make a slow circuit around the grotto placed at the very centre of the room.

All I feel when I look at it is dread. Like a voice in the back of my mind whispers, “stay away.” I have every intention of following that warning, unless I absolutely can’t.

The doves—of course—have made their nest, right on top of it.

They’re too high up, but I sit on the closest low wall and pull the collapsible cage from my bag, while I try to figure out *how* to get them.

I’ve used it a dozen times to collect random fowl that have wandered off from the barnyard and into the godswood. I could assemble it in my sleep.

But the cage doesn’t help me get to the birds.

“Did you think you were going to just walk in, scoop them up, and be on your way?” I ask myself.

The cats aren’t going to answer, but they are definitely laughing at me.

I need rope or a net or something to snatch them out of the air.

I toy with the scarf... maybe.

But I don’t get farther than considering—maybe—unravelling the finely woven threads.

A woman hops out of the entrance to the grotto.

I flinch back from the sight of her. She doesn’t make sense.

Not in the way she moves—too feline to be trustworthy.

Not in the way she smiles at me like we’ve been friends for years.

I don’t understand her clothes... if they are clothes. They don’t even look like the nightgown Klaus made for me.

“Sinful” is how I’d describe the black straps and chains she wears.

I have to blink myself back up to her face.

“It’s okay, snowflake. You can look all you want. He can’t see you in here.” She practically purrs as she hops onto the



wall beside me and looks at the cage. “But it looks like you’re in the market for a different kind of bird, aren’t you, love?”

“What do you mean, he can’t see me?”

“Your god, snowflake. The man in the red hat.” She knocks my shoulder with hers and she leans close to whisper. “He watches all of you silly mortals throughout the year, but he can’t see you here, can he? Our host is the only one who can spy on us here.”

“And Klaus wouldn’t like me looking at you?”

“I have no idea what he’d like, little lovey. He’s never shown any interest in a mortal woman before. All of his elves wear masks without horns. But here you are, making a bargain with him like it’s not the strangest thing I’ve heard of in years.”

“What my bargain is... isn’t here or there.”

“Of course not, but you need something... so what’s brought you here? I assume it was those pretty little doves making a nest for babes that will never come.”

I don’t think I’ve followed all of that....

“I need to bring him two turtle doves. He told me I would find them here, and those are the only doves I see.”

“Those are certainly the only doves here.”

She hums and curls her fingers at a cat that’s such a dark black it disappeared in the shadows. They hop to her and hit their face against her chin.

“Silly little Minx.” The woman beside me presses a kiss to the top of the cat’s head. “Get us a net, will you?”

With a chirping sound that might be a laugh, the cat jumps off the wall and runs straight into the grotto.

“That’s not actually a cat, is it?”

“Oh, she is most definitely a cat.” Looking toward the grotto, she says, “When she wants to be.”

And she—the cat—pops back out of the grotto a moment later with a bunch of string in her mouth, dragging half of it behind her as she hops up and drops it in the woman’s lap.

“Beautiful.” She holds it up and shakes it out.

The woman hands me a net that is made of the softest yarn I’ve ever touched.

“Who are you, and why are you helping me?”

“My name is Calico, and....” She looks from me to the cats watching us so studiously. “Let us just say... our mistress is very curious about what her brother is up to.” She smiles at me with pointy teeth, picks the black cat up, cradling it in her arms and skips back to the entrance of the grotto. She gives me one last smile as she puts a white mask over her face and disappears inside.

The doves coo in their perch and I can only *hope* Calico’s net is all I need.

It takes me two tries to get the net unfurled.

“This should be easy,” I tell myself. “I’ve had to net birds out of the barn rafters before...”

And it is.

Right until the net hits them.

They burst in a puff of feathers... and two turtles slide off the domed roof of the grotto.

Turtle.

Doves.

I would probably laugh if I didn’t have to go dig through hot, damp ferns and then go out into the freezing afternoon.

The leaves are wet and thick and I struggle through them, hating the way that sweat rolls down my back—knowing I’m going to be shivering later.

Wouldn’t it just be like the gods to give me a task that left me sick and sneezing?

The turtles burst back into doves as soon as I pull back the leaves that cover them, but they are tangled in the net and they flutter and flap ineffectually.

Somehow, they still have feathers, despite the fact they transform back and forth a half dozen times before I get them into the cage.

And once they're inside, they flutter around, but they don't change again.

A familiar black cat hops onto the wall and waits patiently as I ball the net back up. She snatches it from me like it's a mouse and runs back to the grotto.

“Thank you?”

But there's no one to hear my muttering. No cats. No birds. Not even a chirping insect.

With one last glance at the grotto, I hook the cage straps over my shoulders and start the long walk home.

## *Two Turtle Doves*



WHEN I STEP OUT OF THE NEON LIMNED CORRIDOR THAT serves as the connection between my world and his, I pause to draw in a warm breath of the spiced air in his domain.

The Krampus waits for me on that red and gold throne. This time, he has both feet on the carpet in front of him. Leaned forward, with his elbows on his knees, the long hair on his chest sweeps forward, covering over that black and red twisted cock I dreamed of last night.

“My little berry returns with more gifts for us.” His golden eyes fix on the cage. “And are you willing to pay for their delivery again?”

“I suppose that depends on what you want.”

“I suppose that depends on what you’re willing to give.” His words are almost mocking as he takes the cage from me. His long fingers—spindly like spiders’ legs—open the cage and again, the doves burst in a chaotic flurry of feathers.

But as he picks them up and lets the cage fall to the floor, collapsing on itself, they are not doves or turtles, but some amalgamation of the two animals in one. Hard shell, wings both grey and green, a blunt, wide beak on a bobbing head....

“Not a pretty thing, is it?” He asks, holding one up for me to see better before he sets them on the ground and lets them wander down the steps in a strange, toddling walk. “But you don’t have to worry about those anymore.”

“Why were they in Gren’s temple?”

He shrugs, gaze travelling over me. “Where else would they be?”

“I have no idea.”

He chuckles and crooks a finger at me.

I go to him, not bothering to pretend to hesitate. His smile shows those rows of jaggedly sharp teeth.

“I don’t enjoy how tightly you wrap yourself up.” He draws a claw down the front of my dress—I’d left my coat and the other two layers I’d worn out in my room—and it slices open.

With a hum and a “that’s better” he slides the sleeves down my arms, bearing me to him again.

“Such pretty, plump breasts.” His gaze lifts from them to my eyes. “How many others have seen these?”

I can’t think enough to count and I sway toward him as he brushes one soft, knobby knuckle over my nipple. “A few.”

“What if I told you, you weren’t to show them to anyone else, ever again?”

“I’d say that was an unrealistic expectation.”

His laugh is low, a chuckle that coasts over my skin and makes me shiver. “Two then.”

“Three.” I say, and his brows fly high.

“Did you have someone specific in mind?”

Shaking my head, I suck in a sharp breath when he pinches me. “I might decide to marry someone someday... They would think it was odd if I withheld this from them when I offered the rest of myself.”

His mouth screws tight with a scowl and I think, for a moment, that he’ll tell me I can’t share any part of me... but he doesn’t.

“I’ve decided what you will do for giving me the turtle doves.”

Swallowing, I take a step back and he stands. He's bigger than I thought. And on the step below him, I'm perfectly in line with—

His isn't a single cock, but two, twisted around each other, one red, one black.

“Would you touch me, little berry?”

I tip my head back to look up at him and I snake my arm free of my sleeve so I can reach up, hand trembling as I slide my fingers over it.

Warm and soft, it twitches against my touch.

I can't close my hand over him... not with them like this. I vaguely wonder if they untwine as I stroke once, twice....

His smile softens and that long tongue slides from his lips, all the way down to lick mine before he pulls it back and shivers.

“Such sweet and delicate hands. Not prickly or sharp like that name of yours would suggest.”

I swallow back the response that flits through my mind. It's never wise to tease a god. They may take you seriously.

“I've tasted your skin, little berry, and found it divine. Would you like to taste mine?”

“Is that what you want in payment?”

He laughs and his fingers wrap around my wrist, pulling my hand away from him. “I want you to want it. And if you don't... consider your task done for the day.”

I should pull my dress back together and go home.

But I don't want to.

He sits, lounging in such a way that his cock juts up... taunting me.

Because I do want to taste him. I want to know what it's like to take a god inside of me and hold that tiny amount of power over him.

That's why I step back up to the dais. That's why I move between his legs and drop to my knees in front of him.

Those golden eyes watch me, saying nothing as I brush my fingers over him again.

"I want to taste you." I breathe out a little of the trepidation I have at the idea of it. "But I don't want to wind up on the naughty list."

"I can assure you... tasting my cock is a mark in the nice column."

Licking my lips, I look up at him again. "Do you promise?"

"You have my word. And the word of a god is the strongest tender."

Even from a god whose stories paint them as wicked and cruel, I can trust that.

Again, I stroke him, and again his tongue reaches for me.

Mine isn't anywhere as near as long, but...

I draw it along the twisted length of him and shiver as the spice and warmth fills my mouth. His cock tastes like gingerbread.

His tongue finds my nipple, its forked tip pinching even as he licks.

Even though I can't take him deeply, my tongue revels in the oddity of the twisted space between his cocks. I run my fingers along it where I hold the base of him in place. I press my tongue between those tips, gently separating them as I pull back to breathe.

"Who knew a little mortal could take me so well?"

I almost pull back to tell him I'm not taking him well at all. But each press of my head makes it easier, and it feels like I've found a rhythm and depth that works when he stops me.

His hand wraps around my neck, drawing me back. "Careful, little berry. If you drink one drop, I'll make you drink it all."

I only hesitate for a moment before I wrap my lips around him again.

This is mine for the taking, and I don't plan on sacrificing it.

It feels like he comes instantly, even though I know it took multiple strokes of my mouth to get there.

And that warm cum splashes over my tongue.

Sweet and creamy, with a spice and brown sugar bite reminiscent of... Rum?

It feels like I could get drunk off him.

And I would love to try... but there's too much and I have to pull back before I drown.

The Krampus laughs at me as he pulls a fluted glass from nowhere and fills it, both tips pouring into it, finishing what I pulled away from.

"Now, now, little berry." He licks his lips as he squeezes the last of himself into it. Both tips releasing their final drops. "You must drink it all down."

He hands it to me and I breathe against the strange tightness I feel. The taste... I finally place it.

Eggnog.

His cum tastes like eggnog.

"Every last drop."

Looking at the custard coloured liquid dusted like cinnamon and nutmeg float in it, I have to pause to wonder why he says that like I might not want to finish what I started.

The glass is cool in my fingers and the creamy liquid is still sweet on my lips.

One of those long fingers hooks beneath the base, lifting it higher to tip out the last drops.

When he takes the glass back, his tongue reaching out to lick my lips, he lets out a low sigh.

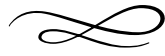
It feels like that was a test.



And I think I passed.



## *On the Third Day of Christmas....*



KLAUS ISN'T WAITING FOR ME WHEN I WAKE.

He isn't sitting at the foot of the bed. He isn't leaning against my mantle.

The room is empty, save for me and the lowly crackling fire.

But the darkness in the mirror above me shifts and for a moment, I lie back, watching myself and that darkness both as I hold on to the warmth of my blankets.

Nan knocks on my door, too soon, and I pull on my old, moth-eaten robe so she won't see the nightgown Klaus gave me.

"Are you up, dear?"

I crack the door and peek out at her. "Good morning, Nan."

She already has too many questions. Letting her see the bed isn't going to help with her suspicions.

"The girls are asking after you."

They'd been confused when I was away all day yesterday, and the way their faces had fallen when I'd told them I had to go to bed early....

"I'll be out for breakfast in a moment."

Nan's smile is soft, a paper thin thing. "I trust you know what you're doing."

I don't know how to reassure her without lying, so I offer her my own weak smile instead. "I'll be out in a minute."

The door closes between us with a click and I pause, listening for her to go. Her steps drag on the floorboards out in the hall, and as they get quiet, I hear the first squeals of the girls.

I *did* ignore them yesterday in favour of Klaus's ridiculous quest.

Now I have to see if I'll have to do the same again today.

The bottom of that dark parchment has curled up against the wooden box that holds it down, and I shiver a little as I smooth it back out.

The new line on the list is three tightly penned words. No instructions, no hints or clues, just:

### *Three Fat Hens.*

I doubt any of the ones in my barn will fulfil the 'fatness' Klaus requires...

Getting dressed, I run through the favours I might be able to call in, and the likely farms nearby that might have a hen fat enough to satisfy Klaus... or Krampus.

But, I don't have to trek all the way across the Valley and back.

With a long sigh, I let some of that guilt fade away and get dressed.

The girls throw themselves at me as soon as I step into the kitchen, and Nan gives me a long once over. Her smile is soft... wary.

"What do you have to get done today?" Nan asks.

Before I can answer, Meg shouts. "Can we go see Susan?"

Sometimes I wonder if the girls wouldn't rather she'd been the one to take care of them after our parents died.

If I didn't get all the items on this list... they might yet have the chance.

"No Susan today." I pat May on the head as I pass and they both pout, but I can't give in. I look out at the white fields between our house and the dark line of the trees. "I thought we'd build some snowmen."

"Really?" Meg bounces on her chair as May asks, "You're going to help?"

"I am."

They chatter about what sort of snowmen they will build, talking over each other... little soldiers, a momma snow woman, one *enormous* snowman to scare any animals in the godswood away from the barn.

Nan and I coo and encourage as we make our way through another breakfast that is more decadent than we've had in years.

And we get them bundled up so their toes don't freeze.

Nan stays inside today, and I don't blame her. It feels colder than it has the past several days.

So much so, that I only let the girls stay out a few hours.... And when I send them back to Nan and a bath, I feel guilty both for letting them stay so long and for sending them in so soon.

I long for the spring days when they can roam the fields and play in the stream from sunup to sundown.

Days when the weather doesn't make Nan's bones creak.

My nose has gone numb from the chill, and I rub it while I step into the barn.

The small space is full of our fowl, trapped for winter. The walls of the barn are lined with bales of hay—and I've no doubt a dozen or more mice have made their homes in that makeshift insulation.

The loft overhead is stacked as well, but that doesn't keep out the rest of the chill.

And I don't want to be out here any longer than I have to.

I check on my own chickens... they are scrawny little things as I knew they would be.

Except....

My head snaps to a stop as though it's on elastic,

Three of my chickens are plump and scratch at the dirt, picking and pecking at the straw.

It's beginning to feel less like these tasks are tests and more like they are simply meant to give me a reason to return to Klaus' realm. But if that was the case, why would it be the Krampus who has waited for me each time?

They're too big to fit in any of the cages I have... but not so big I'm willing to take them through one at a time. If I can manage it, I plan to get them in one trip.

And not come back outside again until I absolutely have to.

Catching them is fairly easy. Fat as they are, they don't move quickly.

I hold their feet all together in one hand and keep my grip as tight as I can without hurting them.

They flutter and scratch the whole way and I hold them at arm's length. The thick coat is the only thing saving my arm from being torn to shreds by one that gets a foot loose.

I don't even bother to take off my boots or coat. I stomp straight through to my room, and press open the fireplace.

The sooner I can let go of them, the better.

Again it's Krampus waiting for me.

"Back so soon." He turns in his seat, smiling at me as though I don't have a fluttering mess of feathers in my hand.

"Here are three fat hens, as requested."

They still as he snatches them from me and I understand their terror.

It's founded a moment later when his jaw seems to unhinge.

He swallows all three in one gulp and I stumble back, falling on my bum at the bottom of the stairs.

"What did you do that for?"

"They looked delicious." Chuckling down at me, the Krampus blows a feather away from his lips and then licks them, manoeuvring a bone through his teeth. He plucks it out and holds it toward me. "Make a wish?"

I look from him to the wishbone in his hand.

"I *needed* those."

"Don't worry, you've fulfilled your task for the day."

"I'm not paying you for eating them."

"She has a spine?" He tosses the bone away and stands. "How amusing."

Walking down the steps to me, he holds out his hand, raising it, and pulling me from the floor with magic that tastes like pine needles on my tongue.

"You have been a good little berry. So diligent in getting what you've been asked." He plucks a brightly wrapped gift from thin air and hands it to me.

Long, narrow, the paper feels like velvet beneath my hand, the ribbon like silk.

"What is it?"

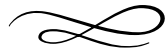
"It is a gift."

I look from the brightly sprigged ribbon up at him, brows raised.

But he doesn't give me any hint.

"Run home, little berry. Open your gift and do with it as you please."

# *Gift Exchange*



I DON'T OPEN IT RIGHT AWAY.

The girls need dinner—and so do I—and there's mending I've put off for too long.

I promise them a visit to Susan's in the morning, and it's the only thing that gets them to behave for the rest of the evening.

By the time I finally get the girls tucked in and the house falls quiet, the idea of what's in that box has shifted and turned in my mind.

Klaus gave me coal and warm clothes and a sinfully soft nightgown....

What would the Krampus give me?

Sliding open the dresser drawer I hid it away in, I glance at the shadow in the mirror once before I pull the ribbon apart.

The box beneath the paper is intricately carved, a long line of holly leaves and berries over a strange lattice pattern...

And when I open the lid—tiny hinges making no sound at all—I can only blink at what's inside.

A long and twisted glass tube glittering with fluttering snow and water inside.

It would be a beautifully odd snow globe... if I didn't know the shape intimately.

It's shaped like the Krampus' cock.



It balances on a dark wooden base when I set it on my dresser.

There's only one reason he would have given me this... to tease me.

I can tease him right back.

Looking from the glittering snow inside to the shifting shape in my mirror, I slowly undress.

I'd like to be the sort of woman who could do what I'm about to without pulling that silken nightgown over my skin, but I'm not.

Not yet.

So I wear it when I finally climb into the enormous bed.

Closing the curtains, it takes me a moment to rearrange the pillows and shift the sheets around, and then, lying on my back, gift in hand, I look up at the mirror and draw that mimicry of him over my nightgown.

I wonder which of them watches me in these reflections... wonder if it's both, or if the Krampus watches and Klaus doesn't know.

Whichever of them is on the other side of that mirror, it doesn't really matter.

I'm wicked enough to want them both.

It's cool against my skin, but warms when I slide it between my squeezed thighs.

The thought of his tongue on me again makes me close my eyes and I let my legs fall open, toying with myself... knowing they're watching.

I wish he hadn't sent me away. I wish it was his cock, not a mimicry of it that I drew along my wetness.

I wish it was his hand toying with my nipple.

A sound makes my eyes fly wide and I draw a sharp breath at the man—no, the god—standing over me.

*You'd better watch out...*

“Klaus.” His name is a breathless word on my tongue.

He wears that red and white cap and dark pants, and nothing else.

And when he places his knee on the bed, dipping the mattress as he joins me, his thick, calloused fingers draw up my legs, dragging the hem of my nightgown higher and higher, until he sets it to rest above my navel.

“You’re being naughty, Holly.” He says, gaze travelling down me to the glass cock, taking it from me. “I’m here to make sure you’re nice.”

His eyes meet mine and never leave as he sucks the wetness from the snow globe cock.

“I’m always nice.” I say, and it gets me a sceptical look, and so it’s not a lie, I add, “When I can be.”

He laughs, instead of telling me that’s not true either.

“It doesn’t really matter if you’re naughty or nice tonight, does it, *little berry?*”

The name the Krampus gave me sounds odd and a little threatening on Klaus’ lips.

“A gift is meant to be used.”

He fucks me with it like it’s his own cock, angling the hard implement as if it’s a magic wand and the spell he casts is meant only for my pleasure.

“Is this what you want, Holly? Do you want to writhe as we fill you? Do you want to have the Krampus’ cock inside you as he teases you with his tongue? Do you think mine would suffice?”

He kisses me, drawing his tongue along my bottom lip and when he pulls back, my gaze falls to his tongue. It’s forked too now....

“Tell me, Holly. Is that what you want?”

His thumb digs into my clit and I arch, moving the glass inside me. “Yes!”

He hums in approval and then his head dips down. His beard rasps against my skin, moustache tangling with my own thatch of hair.

And his tongue finds my clit.

Those two points are cold and hot all at once and they pinch and twist and....

I cry out as I come apart.

It feels like it's been years since I've come and that orgasm rockets through me so sharply, I have to slap my hand over my mouth to keep from waking the whole house.

Klaus laps at me, and I watch him down the length of my body as he toys with me, still working the glass cock into me in slow strokes.

He teases me until my breathing slows, and my skin begins to cool.

When he slides it from me, he licks it once again and moves over me, placing it in a small nook that's formed in one of the posts that holds the mirror and curtains up.

"You've been *very* nice, Holly." He pulls my nightgown back down and the covers up over my cooling skin. "Sleep well. Your tasks aren't over."

As my eyes drift closed, I hear the grating stone on stone.

## *On the Fourth Day of Christmas....*



I WAKE UP SHIVERING AND UNSETTLED FROM DREAMS IN WHICH the shadow from my mirror reached out to me, drew me up into the glass and never let me go.

That strange sense of dread flutters across my skin, even as I follow the girls, watching them run ahead, hopping like strange hares in their snowshoes.

Susan opens the door with a wide smile and catches both of her kids before they can bolt through the door in their socks.

“Good morning!” She calls out, spinning the kids around and shooing them back inside.

“Morning, Susan!” the girls call out as they barrel onto her porch.

They jiggle free from their snowshoes and boots and hurry in, out of the cold, unwrapping themselves and throwing their scarves and coats on the ground, as though they live here.

Susan just laughs and watches them go.

“I don’t know how we’re going to survive to the thaw.” She says, helping me pick up the trail of clothing that has followed them. “Even though I know we always do.”

I know she longs for the days when we can push them out the door and send them off to roam the fields and splash through the streams.

Susan looks at the coat she’s just picked up. “This is beautiful... where on earth did you find it?”

I hear the question she doesn't ask: *how did you afford it?*

Letting out a long breath, I look past her to where the kids are already playing some game with wooden dolls. "We should probably talk."

She makes tea and we sit at the dining table, watching the children play and my gaze goes back to the fireplace as I tell her of the deal I've made.

Most of it.

I leave out the Krampus and those smaller payments I've made each night.

"Okay, we can do this." She says, looking a little concerned, but also determined. "What's the next item on the list?"

"Four crying birds." I left the list safely tucked away on my dresser. "Though I have no idea what kind of bird that means."

Susan's eyes narrow and she turns to the wall with her great grandmother's clock on it. "Did your mother tell you the story about the cuckoos?"

I look at the clock as well. "She didn't like telling stories or talking about the old gods."

"No, I don't suppose she would have."

Before I can ask what Susan means by that, she says, "When my mother gave me that clock, she told me that it was an artefact of their realm. That the cuckoo clocks were made when someone's bargain trapped all of some old gods' cuckoos inside them and scattered them through the Valley."

The bird bursts out, and I flinch as its shrill cries marking the hour.

"Maybe that's what it means." She goes to it, hefting it off the wall and bringing it to me. "If you take him four clocks right now and it's wrong, you'll have time to get him something else... or at least get some clarification."

I take the clock she hands me and stare at the face as the hands tick in their circle.

“If it’s not this, I don’t know what it could be,” she says.

I don’t either. But this is the first of the tasks that seems like it might have a trick wound up in it.

Then again, maybe he assumed I would know the story about the clocks...

“I’ll need to find two more.” Hers and mine only make up half of the task.

“Go, do what needs to be done. I’ll watch the girls and bring them home in time for dinner, so Nan doesn’t worry.”

“Thank you.”

“Ask Wilbur. I know he has one, and he’s been trying to clean out his house ever since his wife left him.”

“And I’ll stop in at the McIntyre’s. They’re on my way home and close enough that carrying another one of these won’t be too ungainly.”

She’s quiet as I put my coat back on, but when I take hold of the door handle, she asks. “What happens if you don’t get him everything he wants?”

I freeze. Not because of the chill that rushes in from outside.

That is a question I should have asked... “I don’t know.”

# *Four Crying Birds*



NAN LOOKS AT ME ASKANCE WHEN I TRUNDLE THROUGH THE front door and put the clocks on the bench.

“Do I want to know?”

“Probably not.”

She nods and returns to her knitting. “As long as you didn’t give up the girls in trade...”

Laughing, I unwind my scarf. “They’re with Susan. She’s promised to bring them home in time for supper.”

She doesn’t ask any more questions. Even when I pull a chair over to pull our own cuckoo off the wall.

I’m glad she doesn’t ask me if I know what I’m doing again.

I can’t say yes anymore.

Stacking them in my arms, I take the cuckoo clocks through my room, into the fireplace, and down the red limned corridor.

The Krampus waits for me, chin resting in his hand, one leg slung over the arm of his throne, his cock obscenely on display.

I manage to not lick my lips as I walk to him.

“Welcome back, little berry. I see you deciphered the riddle of the fourth item.”

“Wasn’t I supposed to?” The clocks are awkward in my arms.

“Perhaps you were meant to struggle more. Aren’t mortals more appreciative of rewards if they’re forced to work harder for them?”

“Are gods?” I ask.

He turns his jagged smile on me and slides fluidly to his feet, folding up and out of the throne like he’s been moved by invisible hands.

“Possibly.”

Eyes on him, I stand frozen in place. Tipping my head back as he nears.

It’s why I don’t notice the time in my hands.

The cuckoos burst from their doors, but the shrill screeches come out strangled and stretched and I flinch at the sound. One falls, but the Krampus catches it before I have a chance to even gasp.

The birds, once nothing more than painted wood on springs, are all feathers and plumage now. Their beaks frozen open, their beady eyes bright with terror.

“Such silly little things.” The Krampus says turning the clock back and forth in his hand. “The result of a bad bargain we are still working to finish.”

He hauls back and throws the clock at the wall high above the mantle and, with a sickening thud, it crashes into it.

But it doesn’t break.

It sticks to the stone, as though it always meant to be there... in among a dozen others.

“You’re collecting them?”

“They should never have been sent to your realm in the first place.”

If I brought him four and he has.... I can see eighteen others...



“I see your mind working...” He places one finger to my chin and turns me back to face him. “Would you be jealous if I told you a different mortal made their way into my domain each year?”

Am I jealous? Why should I be jealous of anyone who came before me?

They aren't here now.

“No.” It's the truth and a lie all wrapped up in one. Because I'm not jealous... I'm covetous.

And I shouldn't want to be the last to play this game.

“My elves have collected the others.” He leans close, his whisper tickling my ear. “No one has played your game before, little berry.”

I don't like how pleased I feel at those words.

The Krampus takes the rest of the clocks from my hand and tosses them up to join the others.

And then he takes my hand, drawing me with him, back to his throne.

I don't let him tuck me onto his lap like a child. I move within his hold as he lifts me so that I can straddle his hips. My skirt rucked in such a way that—

I draw a sharp breath when the warm length of him presses against my mound.

Fingers trailing across my cheekbone, he watches me and asks, “Did you like your present?”

I can't stop the flush that stings at my cheeks. “Did you watch us last night?”

His brows quirk, as if it's the silliest question I've ever asked. “Of course.”

“Then you should know I liked it very much.”

The smile that twitches on his lips is.... Soft.

“Did you like it more than mortal men?”

I almost ask him it would be possible not to, but he is a god... and my thoughts might betray me if he could hear them, but I know not to give him everything he wants without getting something in return.

So I move my hips, rocking forward on him.

The way his cocks coil around each other make ridges that hit my clit in just the right way. The perfect pressure, and I'm already close to panting after the first ebb and flow of my hips.

"I think I'd like the real thing more."

There's a shift in the set of his jaw. One I should probably take as a warning.

"Give me your pussy and I may just keep it."

That makes me laugh, because how—

But he kisses me and as I move on him, wishing I'd slipped my underwear off before I came, all other thoughts leave my mind.

I want him.

But he stills me, shaking my head.

"You are poison, little berry..." He catches my lip between his teeth, his hand snaking up my chest and wrapping his long, dark fingers around my throat before he releases my mouth. "But I can't give up the taste of you."

"What do you mean, I'm poison?"

"You've seen the fly agaric... red capped mushrooms covered in white spots?"

I nod.

"And you know not to eat them." He tucks my hair behind my ear, gaze falling to my lips. "Some do... they eat them for the delirium they induce. *But* safety only comes with moderation. And I could too easily take too much of you."

He kisses me again, his mouth drowning the other questions I want to ask, and I rock against him, wishing he

would reach beneath my skirt and tear the now-soaked fabric away.

“I want you.” I say, not caring if I am poison.

“Not this time.” Forehead dropped to mine, his horns rub against the ones on my mask. “You should go. The sun is almost up.”

I draw back. “But I only just got here.”

“Time works on its own rules here. Heim holds it for the moment... and despite the fact I would love to keep you here and finish what you’ve started...” His tongue flickers at my ear. “Trapping you doesn’t do me any good.”

He sets me on my feet, spinning me around and gives me a tiny little shove. “Not yet, anyway.”

# *On the Fifth Day of Christmas....*



I MAY HAVE LOST THE REST OF THE DAY AND ALL OF LAST night, but I'm not tired as I go directly from Klaus' domain to my dresser and pluck the list from its place beneath the carved snow globe box.

## *Five Gold Rings*

The easiest option is in the hope chest behind me. But I don't even turn back to look at it. The family rings are mine... but they're meant to be Meg and May's as well.

Buying them is out of the—

The box.

The gold box the coal came in.

I could trade it or take it to have it turned into...

But the box is gone.

The remaining coal now sits in a bucket beside the stove.

I curse... which is, of course, the moment Meg chooses to open my door.

"That's a *bad* word, Holly."

She's not wrong, so I deflect. "And you aren't supposed to come in here without knocking."

"Whoa!" May says, following her in. "Your bed grew! Did Santa get that for you, too?"

I can't think of a convincing lie. "Yes."

I can't stop them before they barrel onto it and they jump on the mattress, giggling gleefully. "He must *really* like you."

I don't know how I manage to keep from blushing as memories flit through my mind. "Come on," I say, waving them off the bed. "Out."

They both pout, but do as they're told. "Mr Macadoodle is here, and he looks anxious."

"Mr *Macintyre*." I correct them for the hundredth time.

But Mr Macintyre *is* in my front hall. He's got a stranglehold on his hat and his eyes keep darting for the door.

"I hope you're not here for your clock, Robert. Because I don't have it anymore."

"It's Rhetta. The baby's coming and...." He goes a little wild around the eyes and I take a step back when I think he might reach for me. "I can't find anyone else."

Anyone else to deliver the baby.

My skin goes hot and cold all at once.

"I don't do that anymore."

"I *know*, but there's no one else."

There has to be.

"Gilly—"

"She's gone to the godswood with her grandchildren for the day. Rhetta won't see Dr Matthews."

I can't blame her for that.

And the other midwives are half way across the Valley.

The sick and ugly lump of dread has already started to coil in my stomach.

"I'll be there as quickly as I can."

"I have the sledge." He shifts... almost as if he's planting his feet, and I know he's not leaving this house without me.

In his shoes, I probably wouldn't either.

"Here," Nan says from behind me, holding out a bag that was supposed to have been long burned and its ashes buried.

A bag she gave me when she decided I was ready to do what I'm about to do without her help.

I can't ask her to go instead.

She meets my gaze with an unwavering one of her own as I take it and the girls grab my boots and coat.

Her unwavering faith in me has always felt misplaced. The ache in my chest is sharp.

I swallow the ugly sourness in my stomach and, still bundling up, follow Robert out into the snowy morning.

It's a good thing he has the sledge.

I can hear Rhetta outside the house. Her cries rattle their windows.

The bedroom is bright and loud when I step inside. And I know, immediately, Rhetta is not ready to have this baby.

The other woman in the room looks like she's trying to force the issue.

"Stop that, right now." I bark the words and her mother jumps back.

With the woman's hands off her stomach—she was pushing, of all things!—Rhetta eases and her husband rushes to her side.

"You," I say, looking at the two of them. "Will not do anything to her unless I tell you to. Is that understood?"

They nod furiously and Rhetta shifts, trying to get comfortable.

I wish it was only the four of us in this room. I know the others can't see the figures waiting in the shadowed corners.

Two gods waiting to see the outcome. Only one of them will go away if I do my job right.

I look Death in his empty eye sockets as I pull my scarf off and mutter the words “not today.”

He’s here for Rhetta, but his presence is rote. It’s a precaution. I won’t let him take her.

The other...

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen the Tooth Fairy—the fact that I can see her now is probably due to Klaus or the Krampus’ magic. But she looks the same as she did when I was a child. Her grotesquely sharp face is even less welcoming than Death’s.

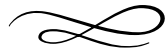
She’s here for the babe... and that is why I am not.

Because the babe will always survive. The deals she makes mean no child in the Valley has to die.

But the gods are never so kind to mothers.

Flipping open my bag and pulling out an antiseptic, I look over to Rhetta. “Let’s get this baby out of you so that you can get some rest, shall we?”

# *Five Gold Rings*



I FALL BACK AGAINST MY FRONT DOOR AS IT SNAPS CLOSED and let out a long breath... my nose prickling as it starts to thaw.

“Is she alright?” Nan asks and I don’t open my eyes as I nod.

“Good, come get warm.”

“I can’t.”

Death had left us shortly after midday, but it had taken past sunset for Rhetta’s baby boy to make his way into the world. I’d handed him off to the Tooth Fairy, made sure there was no chance Death would come back for her and raced home... but it took too long.

And now, I have no options.

“Should I get water on for a bath?”

When I open my eyes, she’s frowning at me and I know I should say yes. The clothes beneath my coat need to be washed. I need to scrub myself down, but what I’ve managed so far will have to suffice.

“Later.”

Nan looks cautiously at the door to my room. “Be careful, sweet girl. If something can be undone... now may be the time to undo it.”

I think we’re past that point.

“Everything’s going to be alright.”



*It has to be.*

I leave my bag with my boots on the bench and try to think of options as I unwind the scarf from my neck...

But there are none.

I should have known it would cost me more than I wanted to give.

I dig through the hope chest, setting dusty heirlooms to the side along with miniatures of long-dead relatives. And there, nestled at the bottom with the wedding gown three generations of my mothers have worn.... A plain cedar box wrapped in brown paper.

I pull the string free with trembling fingers and when I open the lid, my heart sinks to my stomach.

There are only four rings. Mother's, father's, and two that my grandmother had given me on her passing.... Four. Not five.

I can't ask Nan... She'd give me anything I needed, but she sold her jewellery long ago.

I dump the box out into the chest and a tangle of necklaces tumble out along with bracelets, a brooch, and my great aunt Irma's emerald bangle.

A long row of tiny green gems on a narrow golden cuff....

It's a circle of gold. That's all a ring is.

That has to be enough to count.

*Right?*

I snatch them up, a tremor in my hands as I turn them over in my fingers.

They're just rocks and metal.

I set them on the dresser as I pull off my sweater and the dress that needs washing.

I should take that bath, but there truly isn't any time.

Changed, with five circles of gold gripped in my fingers, I push through the back of the fireplace and return to Klaus'

domain.

“You’re cutting it close today, aren’t you, little berry?” The Krampus looks from the ornament he’d been studying, flicking it back into the tree. “But five minutes before midnight, five hours... makes no difference to me, so long as you’ve brought what’s on the list.

I hand over the rings, not trusting my voice to speak.

He studies them for a moment and then shakes his head, clucking his tongue.

“What a shame. You were told to bring me five rings.” He turns his palm toward me and lets them fall to the carpet at his feet. “Not two or three or four, but five. *Five* rings.”

“There are five there.” I say, swallowing when he turns a sharp glare on me. “A continuous circle of gold is a ring.”

“A ring is a piece of jewellery that goes on your finger.” He leans over and hooks his through the bangle, lifting it up to me. “Does this fit on your finger?”

I don’t want to say no.

“Come here and hold out your hand.”

I step closer and do as he says.

The bangle doesn’t sit easily on my finger—of course it doesn’t.

But he twists it and the bangle shrinks and shrinks until it does fit. It rests on my finger like the wedding band I’ll never wear.

He twists it and hums a strange little sound as the stones shift in shape and colour. Rubies and diamonds sprouting between the emeralds.

The facets look sharp enough to cut as they rise from new settings.

“*Now* it’s a ring,” he says.

Dropping my hand, he puts his finger beneath my chin and raises my face so I meet his eyes. “You will not take that off.”

“I won’t take it off.”

“Good. Now for your forfeit.”

“I brought you what was asked for.”

He shakes his head. “You didn’t bring me my *five* gold rings....”

He drags me across his lap and then throws my skirt up, over my back.

My underwear disappear with a shred and a tear.

“Are you ready for your punishment?”

My breath quickens and I look up at him over my shoulder.

“What—?”

The question dies in my throat as I hear the scratch... and then I see them.

Hand wrapped around a brush of birch sticks, the Krampus asks, “When was the last time my little berry felt the sting of a switch?”

“Never.”

Again, he clucks his tongue at me.

I flinch when his fingers touch me, and I clench when they draw over the top of my thighs. He’s so close....

“I suppose I’ll go easy on you then.

Before I have a chance to beg, or even ask him not to, the branches come down on my bared cheeks with a searing snap and the sharp heat spread over my skin like a lightning strike.

The breath I pull in is just as sharp—like a scream escaped inside of me instead of flying out.

“One strike for each of the rings you should have brought me, I think.”

A whistle is all the warning I get before that pain arced across my skin again. But that molten pain has a different sharpness... one I should never admit to enjoying, and yet....

The sound that leaves me isn’t a scream.

The Krampus chuckles over the sound of my moan and pauses, his free hand coasting over my skin, finger sliding along my...

“Who would have guessed my little berry would be so wet? And I thought you needed a gentle hand.”

“Why couldn’t I have both?” I gasp as he presses one of his long fingers into me.

“It’s supposed to be a punishment.” His hand pulls away, and a bare second later the sharp pain of the rods again.

This time, I do scream.

It’s so loud, the boughs of that enormous tree shudder and bells jingle.

*You better not cry...*

The final two come in quick succession and my vision flares black and white and red as a sharper pain blooms when my nerves start to ease.

The next sensation—his tongue laving my hot cheeks—makes me collapse. The last of my tension giving way.

“Poor, poor, little berry. Maybe that was a bit much.”

It wasn’t, but I haven’t the breath to tell him that.

His hand trails along the back of my neck, and then a sharp nail presses against my skin, drawing back and—

My spine straightens as he follows it, that sharp nail splitting the back of my dress like it has a zipper.

He hushes me before I can speak. “You’ll thank us for that later.”

*Will I?*

I don’t know how he manages it, but I wind up on my feet in front of him in the blink of an eye.

He holds my hand and watches me, carefully, like he thinks I’m going to fall over.

The only thing that falls is the tattered remains of my clothing... to the floor.

His eyes devour me and I know the smile he wears should terrify me, but that foolish little voice inside of me wants to tell him to do his worst.

“You,” he says, twisting the ring on my finger, “are more beautiful than any bauble on our tree.”

He pulls my hand to his face, but he stops a moment before he kisses my fingers. He sniffs, and his nose wrinkles. “You smell like life... and death.”

“Just life and the horrible pain required to bring it into the mortal realm.” I try to draw my hand back, but he doesn’t let me. “I would have bathed if I thought I could be here quickly enough.”

His golden gaze travels up my arm, as if he can see what I washed away—not thoroughly enough.

“We’ll take care of that now, shall we?” He draws himself to standing and, fingers entwined with mine, heads toward the hearth.

An enormous copper bath appears between blinks and he lifts me, arm wrapped low around my thighs as he steps into the water.

He doesn’t draw me down and in with him, he sets me on my feet.

I have to join him if I want to.

I do.

The water stings at my already overworked flesh, but I sink into it anyway, and he draws me back against his chest.

“You could have run away, little berry.” His words whisper across my ear as he cups water in his hand and pours it over my shoulder. “You brought your gift. You paid your price... and yet, you stayed.”

“Maybe I just want a bath.”

He laughs and as he does, the tub fills with bubbles.

“Minty,” I say, swishing my hand through the soap. “When this works its way through the water... am I going to cry when

it reaches my bottom?”

“If it hurts, I’ll make it better.”

“Promise?”

He gives me a look like a promise is the last thing I’m going to get from him.

“The Yule Cat has her devotees bathe in hot chocolate.” He says with a snorted scoff as he washes my hands and arms. “Be thankful you are not covered in that sticky stuff now.”

The movement of his hands makes me drowsy.

“Is that what I am?” I ask, eyes heavy as I melt against him. “One of your devotees?”

He chuckles, his nose nuzzling against my ear. “I don’t know what you are anymore.”

Continuing to wash me, he hums a Christmas song low against my ear, the melody almost mournful. I don’t fight the drowsiness that floods through me as those gentle motions and soothing sounds let me drift further and further toward slumber.

## *On the Sixth Day of Christmas....*



I START AWAKE THE NEXT MORNING, BUT IT'S THE SILENCE that grips my heart.

The world is still outside my curtained bed, and it feels too eerie to be real.

Glancing up at the shadowy mirror, I slip from my covers and out into the cool room beyond my curtains.

I don't remember coming back to this realm last night.

Falling asleep in the Krampus' bath was not my intention.

The idea of him bringing me home and laying me down in this bed without waking me....

I shiver at the thought. At how out of keeping it is with the stories I've always heard of him.

But who knows which of the stories apply... I think of the cuckoos... who knows which of the stories I haven't heard.

The clock on my wall—no bird in sight—ticks toward eight in the morning, and I know the girls will be up soon. If they aren't already.

But I go to the dresser first. I want to get my task done as quickly as possible.

“To save myself from a forfeit.” I mumble, because it certainly isn't out of a desire to go back to the Krampus as quickly as possible.

I slide the list from its place beneath the box, ignoring the golden one that has magically reappeared on the other side of

the dresser.

But when I read it, I crumple to the floor, ignoring the pain in my bottom—both sharp and dull all at once.

### *Six Geese a laying*

It's the dead of winter.

Geese lay their eggs in the spring.

I've still got nearly two months before I'll see the first of their eggs in the barn. It's part of the reason we sell the whole bird in the fall instead of bothering to deal in their eggs.

And I need *six*.

That dull throb in my skin makes me wonder... now that there is no turning back, is Klaus setting me up to fail?

Or does a winter god have no idea what goes on with egg cycles of fowl?

Honestly... that might be more likely.

I wrack my brain for any option I might have as I get dressed.

I have the requisite six geese.

But taking him six geese without the second half of the requirement... he might eat them and punish me, anyway.

The idea of those branches makes my cheeks heat and my pussy tighten, but I can't risk failing him... no matter how easy it would be to take that punishment.

But nothing springs to mind as I get the girls' breakfast and set them to their lessons. Nan takes over after a short while, and I head out to the barn. Ostensibly to do my normal chores. But once I'm out there, all I can do is stare at the geese. We have eleven of them—most were too young to sell at the Christmas market last week.

I could easily spare six for this ridiculous scheme.



“Why?” Susan says as she joins me from the side door to the barn. “Are you scowling at your birds?”

“Because they can’t help me.”

Susan blinks at me and then looks out at them and back. “I’ll bite. What does he need this time?”

She laughs when I tell her. “I thought you were supposed to be able to fulfil these requests.”

“To be fair, that wasn’t actually a part of the bargain.” I should have paid far more attention to my wording than I did.

But I’ll never admit that to her.

“You only have until midnight to figure it out?”

I nod. “And those geese aren’t going to suddenly start laying eggs on their own.”

Tapping her nails on the rail, she glares down at them. “I hear the McIntyres have a happy baby boy.”

“They do.”

“And that it’s thanks to you.”

“I’m not going back to midwifery, Susan. It was an emergency. I was there for Rhetta, not the baby. That’s not the sort of woman you want delivering your child.”

The face she gives me tells me we’ll be having this conversation again in the near future, but she doesn’t argue this time.

“Do you still see Death when you work?”

“The Tooth Fairy, too, this time around. But I have a feeling that’s because of Klaus and the bargain I have with him.”

She hums nodding and then drops her hands to her hips. “Well, that settles it. You’re already tangled up in the gods.”

I shoot her a look, but she didn’t mean it like that.

“What’s one more?” she asks, not skipping a beat.

“One more?”

Nodding, she looks at my geese. “You need it to be spring... maybe it’s time you talk to Ester.”

The god of spring would certainly be able to do what I need. Whether or not she will....



IT TAKES me half the day to get to the spire.

All the primary gods have their places in this world.

A way for mortals to access the divine.

I wouldn’t call Ester’s ostentatious.

But there’s no ignoring it.

An enormous white plinth that rises up into the heavens, seemingly without end.

The tower in the centre of the valley is a small, dark mirror of her spire.

But here, instead of a city surrounding it, there is a band of our world where it’s always spring.

I have to strip off my coat and my sweater when I step past that barrier.

It’s not hot, but the sudden change in temperature already has me sweating.

And the walk across the flower dotted meadow isn’t a short one.

At the spires base, there’s a gate made of ornate, gilded floral vines, a glowing pink light seeping down the stairs behind it.

That gate opens when I stop in front of it, and I take a deep breath.

There are no choices, no options, anymore.

I have to do what needs to be done... but passing out of this world and into theirs comes with risks I’ve been able to ignore before this.

There are no guarantees of safety in the old gods' realm.

I tie the mask around my face, not sure when I'll run into a god who might try to trick or trap me.

But when I climb those stairs, it's not Ester's domain I find. It's a place far stranger.

Brick spotted with floating lights I've never seen outside the godswood curves away from me, and groups of people in masks cluster with each other in intricately carved and woven furniture.

The air smells like sex and smoke and...

"Well, hello again, snowflake."

Even with the cat mask on, I recognise her as the woman from Gren's temple. The one who gave me the net.

"Hello, Calico."

She looks at the woman beside her. "She remembers my name!"

"She may have seen you just yesterday." The other woman says and I feel like I know her too.

"This is Minx," Calico says. "She doesn't know what to think of you yet."

The woman leans close to Calico, smiling at me with a shyness I don't trust.

"You look bigger without a net in your mouth."

They both laugh Minx whispers something to Calico... something I doubt I want to hear.

"What is a sweet snowflake like you doing outside your gods' domain?" Calico asks.

I would answer the question if I wasn't so confused by the glow and clatter around me.

"What is this place?"

Calico lifts my fingers to her face and inspects the ring. "Welcome to Babel. Last refuge for the mortal within the old gods' realm."

Minx looks at the space around us as well, her gaze travelling far above the ceiling. “You see what you’re prepared to see here.”

“I need Ester.”

“Of course you do.” Calico looks at Minx with a coy smile and makes a show of displaying my finger to her as well. “She’s been claimed.”

The other kitten hums in agreement. “But I wonder how long he’ll be able to hold that claim?”

“The ring is just another part of his game.”

“Oh, we know that... but we’re not sure you actually know the rules.” Calico’s gaze falls to the snowflake pendant and I have to force myself not to reach up and touch it.

“Which rules?”

They share a look, mouths pursing. “If we could tell you, we would. But our mistress only helps others when there’s something in it for her, so we’ve been informed our lips are sealed for you.”

“But!” Minx says. “That doesn’t mean we can’t help you in other ways. For instance, we can take you to Ester.”

“How does that amuse your god?”

“She still wants to see how this plays out.” Calico leans close and whispers. “And if you fail to bring your god his gifts, or if Ester can’t do what you hope... well, Lako always has a place for strays.”

They each take one of my hands and drag me through the long room, past any number of groups putting on blatantly sexual displays

“Ignore them.” Minx says, eyes straight ahead. “If they catch your eye, they might try to pull you in, and untangling yourself isn’t always as fun as it sounds.”

There’s little risk of that when they draw me to a halt in front of a wall of flowers.

Calico pets the wall, a coy smile showing sharp little fangs. “Your downfall awaits.”

They leave me there, staring at the flowers.

There is no handle, no sign of where to push or pull. But it’s a door... it must be.

Maybe it’s not as solid as it seems?

The moment my fingers touch the petals, though, a vine snaps out, wrapping around my waist and hauling me through.

I hit soft grass and a puff of pollen makes my nose itch. There’s no mistaking whose domain this is. When I lift my head, I’m surrounded by trees that drip with blooms.

A bee flutters past me on iridescent wings, its fuzzy little body a pale blue instead of the yellow it should be.

The only thing this strange little glen is missing is faint harp music coming from some unseen instrument.

“You should not be here,” a sultry voice says from beside me, and I look up to the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in my life.

The halo of her hair is dotted with flowers and her eyes are somehow pink and gold at the same time.

To know what she has seen....

I shiver at the thought.

“I need your help.”

Her chuckle is low and utterly unkind. “The gods do not give our help freely.”

Holding out her hand, she takes mine when I offer it to her. Her skin is so smooth, I don’t draw away when I’m on my feet.

“You smell like my son... you wear his mask.” Her pink gaze falls to my hand, but she says nothing about the ring as she releases me. “You’ve already made your bargain. What, I wonder, could you need from me?”

When she sits on her throne, hand resting on its arm, she twirls a deep grey feather between her dark fingers.

She knows.

Of course she knows. She's a god... one of the *oldest* old gods.

But she's asked me, and I have to tell her. The gods let you seal your own fate.

"I need my geese to lay their eggs this winter, instead of in spring."

"Is that so?" Brushing that feather along her chin, "And what will you give me in return?"

"Whatever I have to."

She freezes, gaze turned to me, mouth pursed in disapproval. "You're not very good at this, are you?"

"How am I supposed to be good at a game you've had centuries to play... one you created?"

She studies me for a long time. Long enough that I notice the dark freckles spread over her cheeks and nose before she takes a deep breath and says. "Bring me Klaus' hat by sunrise after Fifth Night."

It sounds so simple... and that's what scares me.

"What happens if I can't?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll want to avoid that."

She raises her fingers and snaps.

# *Six Geese A Laying*



BACK IN MY BARN, SURROUNDED BY AN ENORMOUS PILE OF goose down, I blink at the dark wood and listen to the sound of the birds clucking and cooing.

If Ester said my geese will fulfil Klaus' requirements, I have to believe her.

I don't even bother to put my coat back on.

With it slung over my arm, I herd six of my geese out of their pen, through the lightly falling snow, and into the house.

Susan's husband put a hearth in their barn last summer and I wish I had been able to do the same.

Wet goose prints slap across the floor, sullyng the rug I can't clean. I've bitten my tongue so hard by the time we get through to Klaus' domain....

And it is *Klaus* who waits for me.

Glaring into the shining ball ornament, his dark brows are still knit when he looks from me to the fat geese.

"What a lovely gift. Thank you." He waves his hand toward a little pen set up beside the tree and the geese waddle into its open gate.

"Why do you thank me as though I'm not simply gathering the items you've asked for? I'm not being thoughtful. I'm running errands."

"Is that what you're doing?" Head dropped to the side, the fuzzy white ball on the end of his hat dangling askew. "You

could always refuse or renegotiate.”

I don’t argue.

There’s no point.

But as my gaze travels from the geese up to the cuckoo clocks and the partridge roosting in his tree, I mutter, “This is getting a little ridiculous.”

“It’s not ridiculous. What I want...” he stops himself, chuckling as he comes to me, his thumb brushing along my cheek as he takes my face in his hands. “What *you* want requires a true commitment... one that is performed without question.

“But you’ve fulfilled your task, Holly.” He takes me to his throne and lifts me onto its seat. “It is time for me to take your reward.”

“Don’t you mean—” my question dies in my throat as he drags me forward, to the edge, my skirt drawing up to my hips as it goes.

Klaus’ hands are warm as they coast up my legs.

“I don’t get to pick my reward?” I ask, shivering as his lips ghost across the inside of my knee.

His chuckles send little puffs of cool breath across my skin. “You do not.”

“And if I don’t want the reward you plan to give me?”

His brows pinch and he looks up at me as he moves his hands away. When no part of him is touching any part of me, he says. “You can go home, Holly.... But I would like to taste you.”

His gaze dips to the crux of my legs and then back up again. “That is the gift you could give me if you think my list is ridiculous.”

“A gift I could give *you*?”

His brows raise. “The pleasure of feasting on you is a gift that anyone would crave.”



The feral look in his eyes makes me catch my breath.

I don't know why I hesitate when it's him... I'd already have the Krampus by the horns, his face buried against me.

I want them both... but it's easier to give in to my monstrous desires when the god on his knees is a monster as well.

So I tug my skirt even higher and kick my right leg up over the arm of the chair. "Then I guess it's time for you to enjoy your present."

With the smile of a man—a god—who's got exactly what he wants, Klaus wraps his hands under my legs and yanks me forward. He tears my underwear off, the shredded fabric falling to the floor as he drags his tongue over me.

A chill slicks through me and I roll my hips toward him without thinking.

That's not right. I am thinking... about how I could possibly get more of him as quickly as possible.

But he doesn't disappoint me. His tongue might be smaller, but he licks me with just as much enthusiasm.

"Oh gods."

He chuckles, the dark sound rumbling across my wet skin as he draws back. "No, Holly. Oh *god*. Only *one* god makes you feel this way."

I'm too dizzy with desire to argue.

I hook my hand around his neck and drag him down to me, aching with the need to have him back—the need to finish this thing that he started.

The ball on the end of his hat tickles my thigh as he buries his tongue deeper.

*His hat.*

My hand on the back of his head, all I'd need to do is draw it up...

Hand sliding under the edge of his hat, I know I should just ask him for it, but I couldn't speak right now if I wanted to.

Take it and ask for forgiveness later.

But the moment I try to lift it away, his hand clasps around my wrist, his grip brutal.

I gasp—a sharp sound that even I don't recognise.

His hand loosens immediately, but the red ring of his hold has already started to turn purple.

Just a little more pressure and it could have been so much worse.

The pain is gone in an instant as he curses and takes my hand in a gentle clasp, pressing his lip to the inside of my wrist.... But the memory of the colouring fades more slowly. And it takes a moment for my mind to catch back up to what happened.

“When you complete your tasks, you will have everything you want,” he says, gaze on the carpet, jaw twisted sharp. Klaus finally pushes to his feet, turning his back on me.

“Go home, Holly.”

He leaves me in his domain, a chill passing over me as he disappears.

Alone, with nothing but the sound of the crackling fire and the honking geese, I wrap my own hand around my wrist.

I could almost believe it didn't happen.

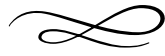
There's nothing wrong with me. No sign of the pain I felt... of the sound I heard.

But I remember them both. I remember the... terror in his eyes as he looked down at my hand.

The Krampus was always so careful with his claws....

I need to be more careful with myself.

# *On the Seventh Day of Christmas....*



A THIN DUSTING OF SNOW FELL IN THE NIGHT, AND I PULL ON an extra pair of socks as I read the day's task.

## *Seven Swans a Swimming*

*More birds.*

There's a note alongside the list this morning, and I'm grateful when I open the folded paper to find a map.

There are no swans in my barn.

I'm less thankful when I see where a neat little X has been drawn. It's deep in the godswood.

At this rate, I will have toured the whole of the Valley by the time I find my way to the end of this bargain.

"Hawleeeeeeee," Meg screams my name through the door and I bolt for it, dragging it open to find her perfectly fine, looking up at me with wide eyes and an expression of sheer delight.

"What happened?"

Grabbing my hand, she tugs me through to the drawing room.

"You didn't tell us Santa got you a horse!" She runs for the window, hopping up onto the seat beside May, who has her whole face pressed to the icy glass.

Nan's attention is fixed outside, too, but the expression she wears isn't wonder, it's worry.

"It's not a horse." She says, finally looking at me. "It's a reindeer. Already hooked up to a sledge."

I believe her, but I still have to see it for myself.

"Does that mean you have to be gone all day again?" Meg flops onto the sofa, her little lips pressed into a frown.

"Later," I tell her with a nod and hold out my hand—the sledge means I don't have to set off right away. "But not just yet. Have you eaten breakfast?"

Both girls shake their heads as they hop down and come to me.

"We started and then I saw the horse!" Meg says, right before May screeches, "It's a raindog!"

"Deer," Nan says over them as they race into the kitchen.

"Shouldn't it be a snow deer?" May asks.

They work through the dozens of little tasks to get breakfast on the table, practising saying reindeer over and over again and I can only chuckle as I work alongside them.

They are why I'm doing this.

I can't let my selfish desires get in the way of that.

I need to get Klaus his gifts, get his hat, and get back to reality.



THANKFULLY, driving a sledge with a reindeer is the same as driving one with a horse.

I might not have done that for years, but it comes back to me easily enough.

My coat has a large hood, and I make sure it leaves my face in shadow as I pass by the small clusters of farm houses.

Children run out to giggle at the reindeer's horns and their parents come out to scowl. It's not a creature that should be in our realm after Christmas. They know that, even when their children don't.

We reach the edge of the godswood just after midday, and the reindeer won't go any further.

I doubt the sledge would have made it very far up the rocky slope, anyway.

It's hard enough to keep my own footing as I climb through the snowy underbrush.

I've been fighting my way through those leaves for over an hour when a chill snaps through me.

It's so much colder here than it was one step back and fingers of clammy dread claw their way up my neck and slip into my hair. But the map tells me I have to keep going.

Being in Klaus' service means I'm also under his protection. I cling to that thought as I go.

My steps crunch and ice grows out of the tree bark... little shelves, like fungus climbing up their sides in spiralled steps.

I don't have to guess where I am when I finally reach the place that X marks.

A wide river curls around a dark cave entrance, the snowy bank on this side falls sharply away.

On *that* side....

This is Heim's domain.

She's here, and she's not alone.

One god, one woman... and seven swans.

They're pale blue, translucent, and very clearly not alive.

And they're enormous.

Flinching behind a tree so Heim won't see, I blow out a crystalline puff of air.

The stories about Klaus' father make no sense for the pair in front of me.

The god of winter smiles at the woman swimming in front of her as they splash water back and forth at each other.

I've never heard Heim described as... playful.

The woman—who looks so pale, I'm not sure she's real—swims in the ice-dotted river and Heim watches with a smile too warm for the season, hand moving in a way that makes it clear she's directing those swans to chase the mortal woman through the water.

They look... happy.

I shouldn't be here.

But I can't leave. Not without those swans.

Trying to work up the courage to interrupt a god and their lover, I breathe in the sharp air and blow it out again in long white streams.

I think I've found my mettle until I turn and peek back around the tree.

Heim's ice-white lock with mine. The tree slides ten feet to the left and reveals my hiding place.

"Come down, or leave," she says, offering me an option I don't actually have.

It takes me a good while to get down the icy slope. Each step feels like it will be the one where my boot tread betrays me and sends me flying onto the rocks below.

When I finally get to the water's edge—the shoreline dotted with opaline stones in pale and dark blues—the woman has pulled herself from the water and wrapped herself in a fur coat that looks like it was made from a single, silver fox.

She sits in Heim's lap, leaning against the god's chest and smiles at me, beatifically. "Hello, beautiful girl. What's your name?"

I don't know how the woman is colder than the god, but I shiver when she smiles at me. "Holly."

"Hello, Holly. I'm Ariadne. And I'm sure you've already guessed who my husband is." She waves over her shoulder,

but Heim doesn't look at me. Her smile is solely for her wife.

“Are you afraid of us?”

“Shouldn't I be?”

She chuckles, twining her fingers into Heims. “Oh, most definitely, but I promise you're safe.”

Heim's smile disappears when she looks at me. “For now.”

Ariadne makes a strange sound, swatting Heim, and when the sound continues and shifts... I realise it's the language of the old gods.

It's ridiculous that that should surprise me. She called herself Heim's wife.

But the stories don't say anything about that.

“Why have you ventured so far from home, little one?” Ariadne turns to me fully, and I shiver at the intensity of her gaze.

“I need those.” I point vaguely in the direction of the swans.

Ariadne's gaze follows my finger, her head tipping to the side. “Why?”

“I made a bargain with Klaus—”

Ariadne's smile sours and Heim's brows pinch.

“—and he has asked for the seven swans here.”

Heim looks as though she's just tasted something foul. “My son should know better than to ask for things he has no right to and you have no hope of retrieving.”

I don't know what to say.

I don't know how to convince them to help me.

“Give them to her.” Ariadne says, reaching up to draw her small hand down the god's face.

With an even deeper scowl, Heim looks at me for far longer than necessary, and then she reaches out toward the swans.

The icy creatures cluster together, bobbing along the river toward me. They shrink and glitter and an icy sphere forms around them, lifting from the water and floating to me.

I have to wrap both arms around the frozen sphere, and when I look back across the river, Ariadne has taken her god's hand and leads them into the cave.

They don't even give me the chance to thank them....

But I don't have time to worry about that as I carefully make my way back out of the woods.

The reindeer waits where I left it, chewing on small tufts of grass. It looks at me over its shoulder when I set the sphere in the back, wrapping a nest of blankets beneath it.

"We're not going far."

I don't know if I'm reassuring it, or myself.

And I'm not lying.

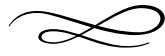
Pulling the sledge to a halt in front of the burnt out husk of a farmhouse the Pertwees abandoned last summer, I hop down and shove the door open, making sure there's a clear path before I return for the sphere.

As promised, the fireplace here opens beneath my touch as easily as my own does.

Collecting the sphere, I take a deep breath, and return to Klaus' domain.



## *Presents & Punishments*



I'M NOT SURPRISED IT'S THE KRAMPUS WHO WAITS FOR ME, instead of Klaus.

His dark expression isn't a surprise either, but I don't let that stop me as I carry the swans forward.

"Yesterday was... unpleasant." He says, holding out his hand.

The swans in their icy sphere lift from my arms, floating toward him, but they don't make it to his clawed fingers.

With a twist of his hand, the sphere is wrapped in an ornate silver cage. And he flings it into the tree with all the other baubles.

"We're not pleased with you." The Krampus watches me, slowly tapping his claws on the arm of his chair. "Why did you try to steal the hat?"

"Because I have to give it to Ester."

He straightens, his jaw tensing, and I can't read the expression on his face. I don't think he's mad....

"Geese don't lay eggs in the winter. I had to make a deal to fulfil the sixth line on that list."

"And you chose to go to her instead of coming here to ask us to change it."

"Would you have done that?"

He licks his lips, watching me. "For you... there is quite a lot we would do."

He says it lowly enough, I'm not certain I was meant to hear it.

“Stealing isn't nice, Holly. We can't reward you.”

My gaze trails to those birch rods.

“But knowing *why*... We can't punish you either.”

“Where do we stand, then?”

His golden gaze slides from me to the tree. “There are gifts.”

I look, too, at the piles of neatly wrapped presents.

“Take one,” he says.

It feels like a trick. “Which one?”

“Whichever feels right to you.”

The closer I get to the tree, the larger it gets.

Those presents are all different sizes. Some are taller than me, others are small enough they might hold one of those pieces of coal I asked for to start this whole farce.

But it's not meant to be a reward, so I take one of the smaller ones toward the front, and when I turn back, the Krampus smiles at me with all of his teeth.

“Open it.”

I pull the ribbon free and with one more glance at him, I lift the box lid.

Inside, nestled on a tiny velvet pillow.... A crinkly green bow attached to the flared base of a dark, metal plug.

The Krampus' arm wraps around me as he steps behind me and bends close to kiss the spot behind my ear.

“Just imagine,” He says, his whisper tickling at my ear. “If you had chosen one of the larger ones.”

His chuckle sends a warm tremor through me.

“You're getting off easy, little berry.” Hand on my waist, he pulls me back against him and turns me to face the throne. “On your hands and knees.”

When my hand goes to the clasp at the side of my skirt, he clucks his tongue and I feel him shake his head. “Not this time.”

He plucks the plug from my hand and sucks it like a lollipop, brow raised as he nudges me forward.

I climb up onto the throne and press my forehead to the velvety back of the seat, waiting.

“Such an obedient little berry.” He flips my skirt up over my back and his claws slice my underwear to shreds.

They fall at my knees.

At this rate, I’m not going to have any undergarments left.

He hums, finger tracing up me, “This pussy is a gift.”

I don’t have a chance to respond before that finger moves higher. Drawing in a deep breath, I shiver as the cold metal presses against me instead.

Biting my tongue, I lean a little further into the seat back.

“You’re not ready for this yet, are you, little berry?”

That chill disappears, replaced by something hot....

His tongue.

My eyes fly wide as he presses into me.

Saliva so slick... each stroke in and out is easier than the next. I don’t know if choosing one of the larger gifts would have been a problem.

He works his way into me, filling me a little more each time.

Between one heartbeat and the next, his tongue slithers out and that cold metal replaces it so quickly, I’m left blinking, trying to find my breath.

And then, his hands leave me and I almost topple forward into the velvet.

He flips my skirt back down over my trembling thighs.

“You’ll leave that in until you return to us.” He lifts me back onto my feet and holds my hands as he walks me to the hearth. “Do you understand, Holly?”

When I don’t respond quickly enough, he tilts my face up to him.

“It’s not a reward.” I say.

He nods. “It’s not a punishment.”

And yet, it’s very definitely both.

“Any complaints?” He asks, thumb brushing my lower lip.

*You better not pout, I’m telling you why*

I shake my head.

“Good girl. Now, go home and get your rest.”

The neon red corridor from Klaus’ domain leads me out to my own room, and I vaguely hope the reindeer made it back to wherever it was supposed to be. But I’m *very* distracted.

Each step brings a new and strange sensation.

He was right, of course. It’s not a punishment... or a reward. It’s some devious torture in between.

The clock on the wall ticks across to midnight.

Beyond my door, the rest of the house is silent, and I shiver a moment before the fire bursts to life behind me.

I am tired, but when I climb into bed and look up at the shifting shadows in the mirror over me, I reach for the snow globe anyway.

I can pretend it’s a penance. But there’s no denying it’s for my own relief and pleasure.

That doesn’t stop me.

I make myself come while wishing it was the Krampus inside me, watching the shadow and wishing he would crawl out of the fireplace and take the place between my thighs. I don’t cry out his name when I come, but I want to.

## *On the Eighth Day of Christmas....*



“AND WHO IS THIS HANDSOME FELLOW?” SUSAN ASKS, reaching up to pet the reindeer’s nose, her eyes wide.

“She did not come with a name tag.” I throw a pile of blankets into the back of the sledge. “I didn’t expect to see you this morning.”

“I had the chance to get away and thought I’d check on how you’re faring.” Susan glares at me with narrowed eyes, gaze travelling over me like she expects to find a gash or some other visible mar on my person. Her scrutiny stops on my hips and I know I’m not walking... quite right.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes.” I know I’ve said it too quickly, but I really don’t want to have to come up with anything specific. “I’m just a little... tired from all the extra exertion. I had to walk halfway into the godswood yesterday.”

Thankfully, she leaves it at that.

“What’s on your list for today?”

“Eight cocks a crowing.” I say, flexing my hands in my gloves. “Shouldn’t be hard. Put that many roosters together and they’ll crow up a storm.”

“Are you sure that means birds or is it...” Susan waggles her eyebrows at me.

“Gods, I hope it means the birds. I don’t want to know what it would take otherwise.”

I'd misread the line first as "eight cocks a growing" and the immediate option was... not appealing.

Susan snorts. "It would be just like the gods to make you get a bunch of guys hard in some perverse power display. *What degrading thing can we make the mortal do?*"

I don't love the mocking tone in her voice.

"Oh!" She says, eyes wide. "Has he made you do anything with the elves yet?"

I don't like the sound of that. "No, there's never been anyone else in his domain."

No one but Klaus or Krampus.

"Well, then you're probably right about the cockerels."

"I've already delivered too many birds. It would honestly flabbergast me if it *wasn't* the bird."

I'm glad the reindeer is back today. I don't want to have to explain to the girls why I'm fighting cages of cockerels into my room... or why they aren't going to come back out.

So once I've collected them, I'll be headed back to that abandoned farmhouse.

"Well, you've got yours. My mother-in-law has more table birds in her yard than I can count, so I'll see if we can't get John to sweet talk her.... And then, I don't know, there has to be a few down at the day market you could barter for."

Agreeing with herself, Susan turns and heads for home without another word and I watch her go.... Wondering how I got so lucky.

She could have married anyone in the Valley, and she chose John... my nearest neighbour.

I'm mostly sure that was happenstance, and not the determining factor. But still....

Caging up my own rooster, I haul it into the back of the sledge and cover it with a blanket, wincing at the way it flutters and screeches.

And then I haul myself up, sitting carefully and ignoring the funny feeling of that crinkly bow.

It's more of a punishment than I realised.

Susan is waiting for me when I get to her home, their rooster in a cage and a winced smile on her face.

“John has run over to his mother's. I don't know what story he's going to tell her, but I think he'll be able to get you four more. I did ask for all six.”

I hop down, glad I'm faced away from Susan... there's no way to explain the face I just made.

Every step has me a little more self conscious than the last, and I know Susan is watching me, but she keeps her thoughts to herself.

“You could stop in at the McIntyres. They still owe you. A bird isn't too much to ask.”

“And they have a brand new baby. I'm not going to take potential food off their table.”

In the end, I don't have to figure out where to find the final two.

“She gave me all six,” John says over the sound of the birds, smiling down at Susan as he holds up the cage that he has to carry with both hands. “But you should know I had to promise to name the baby after her if it's a girl.”

Susan snorts, shaking her head, and looks at me. “We were already naming it after her.”

John shoves the cage into the back with the others, and turns to me, dusting off his hands. “Where the hell did you get a reindeer, and why are you walking funny?”

“None of your business.”

John recoils, brow pinched.

“Sorry.” I say it and already know it's not enough of an apology, but Susan steps in to soothe his feelings.

“She’s making deals with gods, love. We should be glad she hasn’t broken a leg or worse!” Chuckling, she steers him away from the back of the cart. “Why else would she need that many cockerels?”

“Alright,” He says, nodding, even though his words aren’t sure. “I guess I should know better than to ask you questions, anyway. I don’t usually like the answers.”

Susan catches my arm and walks me back to the seat of the sledge. “Go hand these over quick, just in case he sends you back for the *other* kind.”

And the sooner I go back, the sooner I can beg for relief.

I don’t waste time with goodbyes.

Between that strange discomfort and the number of people who come out to watch my noisy procession and point at the reindeer, I wish I would have taken any other route.

But I soon leave the town behind and the gawkers with it, and that lets me relax a little, which helps with that plug.

It’s still the first thing on my mind when I jump down and lug those roosters off the sledge.

Dragging them into the farmhouse, one cage at a time, I shove them through and into Klaus’ domain ahead of me. Letting them crow and kick at each other.

The further we get through that connection between the realms, the easier they are to move, until, when I push them through into his domain, they seem to roll across the floor as though on wheels they very certainly do not possess.

Krampus waits for me half way down that long carpet, clawed hands clasped behind his back.

“You’ve brought your gifts early today. I wonder what could have spurred you on?”

“Not there spurs, thankfully.”

Krampus looks down at the cocks in question, glaring at them as though the potential offence irritates him.



“I am very tired of collecting birds.” I say, letting a sigh drive out a little more of my frustration.

“There have been a few, haven’t there?”

“A ridiculous *few*.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” He picks up one of the cages and shakes it. Feathers fly as the thing screeches. “Maybe that’s enough birds.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to truly feel the dread at those words. If not birds....

With a sweep of his hand, those cages disappear into the dark edges of his domain.

“So many cocks, so little time.” He chuckles and then turns those gilded eyes on me. “How many do *you* need?”

I could pretend I think he means the birds. But there’s no point prevaricating.

“I only need one.”

“Would you be willing to take two?”

I almost say no outright, but that is a knee jerk reaction that might have been a lie. Because there are two I want....

“Maybe.”

That jagged smile widens, teeth glittering as his tongue slithers out to trace my lips. I lean toward him, and I can’t even pretend it’s his magic that makes me do so.

“Come,” he says, holding out his hand and waiting for me to take it before he goes to his throne, drawing me up and over his lap. “Let’s see if you’ve been naughty or if you made it through your day being nice.”

He flips my skirt up and the chill breeze wafts over me.

“No undergarments? Now that is naughty. But in the nicest way.”

Laid over his lap, I can’t help but squirm when his claws draw soft lines down my thighs.

“I do love when presents are a surprise.”

“You knew it was there.”

“I didn’t know if you’d keep it all day, little berry. I thought, perhaps, you’d grow tired of this game and remove it all on your own. Instead, here you are, a gift that keeps returning.”

Propped up on my arms, I twist and look back over my shoulder at him. “How much longer?”

His tongue flits out like a snake as his gaze travels down me. “Do you want me to unwrap you? Give you that little relief?”

“It’s not up to the gift giver to dictate when the gift is opened.”

“True, but you have been a very good girl. I won’t make you suffer any longer.”

His claws grip my hips and his tongue slithers from those lined lips.

It slips along the line of my pussy before drawing back up and wrapping around that bow covered base.

He pulls on it with a teasing tug and I drop my head to the deep red velvet of the seat, breathing through each sensation.

But he doesn’t toy with me for long, thanking the gods.

I gasp and shiver when he slides it from me.

“I want to fill you with something warm and real, instead of these cold imitations I’ve given you so far.” He brushes my hair through his fingers and the strands turn red and green, shining like tinsel. “You gave us eight cocks, Holly. May we give you two?”

“Yes.” I say the words into the velvet, wanting, more than anything, to say them against his lips instead. “Please.”

He manoeuvres me around so I’m seated astride his lap, and then he begins to fully unwrap me.

The care with which he slips buttons free makes me tense over him. And my thigh muscles burn with each piece of clothing that winds up on the floor in a pile beside me.

I would have torn them by now.

If not for the erection pressed tight against me, I could think he didn't care as he slowly bared me.

His claws finally go to the clasp at my waist that holds my skirt in place.

I want him to rip it off of me. I want him to fling it over my head and into his fire and do everything his tongue has promised.

But like the rest of my clothes, he draws it slowly over my head, wool scraping over my skin.

And when it hits the floor beside us, he leans back, studying me with hooded eyes.

He catches my hands when I would have reached for him. "Now, now. You're my present. I want to enjoy you."

He kisses my knuckles one by one, lips lingering on the ring, and then draws my hands back, placing them behind my neck, elbows out. "Leave those there, beautiful."

I do as he says, but chew on my lip as I do.

"Good girl. You keep those there until I tell you otherwise."

I swallow the urge to beg and watch his hands instead.

I watch as they trace over me, like he's learning me.

"Has anyone ever told you how perfect you are?" He asks, hands smoothing back over the expanse of my bum.

"Not in those words?"

"Which words did they use?" His smile is wicked, and I don't feel particularly nice.

"If they wanted to fuck me? They called me plump or thick." I grip my hands in my hair to keep from reaching for him. "When I wouldn't fuck them? They called me fat. As if it was a dirty word."

"But you knew what they meant."

I nod. "Even when they didn't."

“Tell me their names. I will strip the meat from their skeletons and decorate my tree with a garland stung of their bones.”

“No.” I lean forward and he lets me kiss him. “They don’t matter. What they thought doesn’t matter.”

It doesn’t look like it doesn’t matter to him.

“Their vocabulary was severely lacking.” He flicks my nipple with his tongue and mutters something else under his breath that includes “Perfection,” and then, “I want to bury myself in every part of you.”

“Then why haven’t you?”

His eyes move, even as his head remains at the level of my breast. There’s a warning in that glance.

“Telling a god what to do can get you into trouble, little berry. Is that what you want?”

“I’ve been in trouble since I opened that box of coal.”

“Regrets?”

“None.”

“And do you think you deserve my cock?”

“Yes.”

He smiles and I watch him, waiting for him to tell me I’m wrong, but he doesn’t. So I say, “Don’t you want to sink your cock into perfection?”

“I’ve wanted that for so long—”

He stops himself short, and the look on his face is almost... shy? That’s not right. *Sheepish*.

“How long have you been watching me through those mirrors?” I ask.

“I watch everyone in your world.”

“But you watch me more.”

He doesn’t argue, which tells me I’m right.

“How long?”

His lids flutter closed, and he sighs as he says, “Far longer than I should ever say.”

And then he scoops his arm beneath my bum, pulling me forward and up, so I’m pressed against his chest. “You can drop your hands, Holly.”

When his finger draws along me, I do, but only so I can steady myself with his horns.

His teeth rasp against my breasts and his tongue traces beneath them.

“You are mine, Holly. Do you understand that?”

“Until our bargain’s over.”

I see him consider arguing with me. And then his cock replaces his fingers.

But he doesn’t let me sink down on him. “You are *mine*.”

Not an argument, a correction.

One I can’t accept. “Until another bargain is struck.”

His arms cage around me, holding me up. Glaring at me like he is, I think, for a moment that maybe he’ll leave me like this—wet and wanting—unless I agree.

And then, he draws me down and all my breath leaves me in an exhale. Driven out of me by his cock as he impales me on it.

I drop my head back and try to breathe. My heartbeat and the crackling fire are all I hear.

And then his fingers draw down my throat. And the shiver that wracks through me makes me clench on him.

His hand continues to trace over me. “My little berry. Who knew you’d feel even sweeter than you taste?”

I laugh and wiggle my hips, trying to take more of him. “Is this the part where I’m supposed to make some impassioned plea, wondering how you managed to fit?”

“You shouldn’t be surprised.” His clawed fingers tighten on my thighs. “I would tear myself apart and remake every

inch of me to fit within you if I needed to.”

“But you don’t need to.”

“Like I said: perfection.”

His tongue slithers down between us and I jerk against him as the black forked ends pinch at my clit.

I lean back to watch, rocking against him as his cock disappears inside of me and his tongue toys with me.

When he sucks his tongue back up into his mouth, licking his lips as it goes, those golden eyes lock on mine. “Show me how you’d worship me, little berry.”

“We don’t have time for that.” I say, because no length of time would be enough.

“A sample then?” A wicked smile twists his lips and he drags me down to kiss him.

He’s too still as he kisses me, and I know without asking, it’s because he wants me to be the one who fucks him this first time.

And I want it too.

Hands twined in his thick hair, I move on him. The word *worship* echoes in my head each time I raise myself up and drop back onto the length of him.

But even that drowns in the static need as I take him.

I don’t know what I thought it would be like to ride a god.

I don’t know anyone who ever thought they’d get the chance.

I don’t know how any fantasy could compare.

His hands seem to be everywhere all at once, coaxing my skin as he helps angle my hips and helps pull me down even more tightly on him.

“I want to fill you up,” he says, teeth dragging along the skin of my arm. “I want to come so deeply inside of you that you can never get me out again.”

“Yes.” I want that. I want him as deep as he can go. I want him to flood me and fill me. I want to drip with him.

“I want you to milk me of every last drop.” His hands tighten their grip on my shoulders and he slams me down onto him. “I want you to know you are mine... even if you can’t say it yet.”

But I already do know.

I *am* his.

And I always will be.

My orgasm bursts across my nerves like the spiralling explosions of a firecracker and I cry out, sending random birds fluttering and flying away.

I feel him buck up into me as my tremors start to weaken. And I look down at the tortured pleasure on his face.

He jerks beneath me and I bear down, keeping him as deep inside me as I can.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say he came so hard I could taste it at the back of my tongue.

My skin sticks to him as I rock back, our cum mixing and cooling.

“We’ve made a mess, haven’t we?” He says, amusement lacing those languid words.

I nod, because I don’t think I can speak, and then I lift myself, just enough that I can slide off of him. And move back, going to my knees in front of him.

But he snatches my hand before I can take hold of him, and I look up at him, licking my lips, wanting to taste.

He makes a sound deep in his throat that sounds like pleasure. “One day, I will let you clean me up with your mouth while I lick what’s left of me out of you. But we don’t have time for that.”

Time is starting to feel like my worst enemy.

Lifting me into his arms, he carries me back to the enormous copper tub and draws me in with him again. But this time, he doesn't let me go as he lowers us into the water.

This time, there are no bubbles. The water is hot and clear, and I watch the tendrils of him drift out of me.

I ignore the possessive way his hands trail over my stomach and let him think whatever he wants to think.

I'm too sated, too comfortable to even consider setting that expectation to rights. I can take care of that in the morning.

I shiver closer to him, trying to soak up every bit of warmth I can, and he holds me tight.

He mutters something in the old gods' tongue, and then, "I would keep you here forever, if not for that damned bargain."

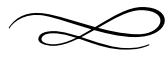
"If not for that damned bargain," and all the reasons I made it in the first place, "I might stay."

And even though I know I shouldn't, I let myself fall asleep in his arms. Drifting through dreams of a future that will never be.

The sharp cry of a rooster jerks me upright and I hold my quilts close to my chest, back in my own bed, alone.



## *On the Ninth Day of Christmas....*



THE TASK ON MY LIST THIS MORNING FELT SO EASY... I CAN'T help but wonder what the catch is as I stand in the kitchen, drinking the potion I brewed up for myself.

Nan looks at the cup when she comes in to start her tea.

She knows.

Nan always knows.

After all, she's the one who taught me how to make this particular draught.

"I'm not sure that will stop a god," she says under her breath, and I know it's so the girls don't hear.

And I nod as I look down at the dark liquid. "Maybe not, but it's never failed me before."

Her eyes narrow and she takes another step toward me, her voice getting even lower. "Promise me you wanted everything that made that necessary, or so help me—"

I place my hand on her arm to stop her. The shadow shifting in the glass doesn't worry me, but I'd rather she not wind up on either of their bad sides.

"I did. And I enjoyed it with every fibre of my being."

And I'm tickled by the idea that Nan would probably claw her way into the old gods' realm to stab the Krampus if I said otherwise.

"Honestly, I'm only drinking this out of habit. We both know nothing will come of it."

Nan doesn't look like she believes me as she touches the red and green tinsel still tied up in my hair, but the girls crowd close, so I don't remind her there are very few ways to have a godchild and I do not fit the requirements for any of them.

"Your boots are wet!" Meg calls out, rushing back in from the front hall. "Did you go out already?"

"I did. I set some traps out in the woods."

"For us?" May asks, eyeing me with the suspicion of an old crone. "Or to sell."

"To sell. We have enough in the larder for now."

She pouts until Nan offers her a cup of tea—it will be mostly milk—and then she runs off to ask for extra sugar.

By the time I'm ready to head out again, the girls are well into their lessons and Nan has completed a half dozen more squares for her newest blanket.

I leave them, knowing they'll be safe and warm.

The woods are cold and I clutch my coat tighter to me as I lug the apple basket into the underbrush.

Hooked over my arms, like a backpack, it's big enough to hold nine rabbits, and now that I've fashioned a lid I don't have to hold them all squirming in my arms.

And squirm, they would.

My first snare has a very pissed off fox in it and I cut them free, glad they don't try to take a bite out of me for the offence.

The second is empty, but as they say, third time's the charm.

White and brown, the fluffy creature twists, trying to slip free of the snare, but today is not its lucky day.

"Sorry little guy." I say as I catch the snare and slowly work to still it without hurting the rabbit or myself.

It kicks and fights and squeaks and tries to get away, but I catch it before it can do itself any more harm than it already

might have. “Calm down, little one. I’m mostly certain he isn’t going to eat you.”

It watches me with its beady black eyes and I put it in the basket, securing the ties so I don’t have to look at its sweet little face anymore.

There are twenty snares out in this part of the godswood.

No one owns the godswood, of course, but the general rule is: if your land runs up against the wood, that border continues on into it.

No one else should be out here to snatch my rabbits. And I’ve never felt the need to take my snares in when they were unarmed.

It made this morning a very easy trek.

And now, as I work my way through the snares and nab my rabbits, I’m grateful there are so many.

When I get the ninth rabbit, I head for the ruined husk of a cottage built decades before I was born.

It’s another abandoned fireplace that will save me time and questions.

I make sure the basket is closed tight and set it inside the stone ruins before hurrying into the woods to let any other unlucky rabbits go free.

And when I return, I focus on the basket and the broken hearth, instead of the unmarked grave that I know lies a hundred paces to the east.

If my father hadn’t chosen this place to kill himself, maybe I wouldn’t know it existed at all.

But I won’t thank him for that.

I can see light through the bricks of this fireplace, but when I push on the back wall, it opens like the others have, and I step out of the dim light of the godswood and into the brightly dark hallway to Klaus’s domain.

Krampus waits for me again, this time, as soon as I cross over the stones of his hearth.

“Did you bring us some rabbits?” He bounces a little on his toes, like he can’t contain his excitement.

“I did.” I heft the basket around and set it on the ground between us. “They’ll definitely be running if you let them out.”

He chuckles as he takes the basket from me, pulling free one of the ties.

“Please don’t eat them.”

He looks from the tiny opening he’s made to peek inside, back to me, and says, “We’re not going to eat your rabbits.... Especially since there aren’t any in here.”

“What?”

“These are hares. Snowshoe, to be exact.”

It’s my turn to glance away—at the birch sticks leaned in the corner—and back. “I can try again. There’s still time.”

“You’ll never make it.”

He’s right. “Is there enough difference between a hare and a rabbit?”

“No.” He catches my hand, pulling it up so he can pluck my glove off, one finger at a time. “And we promise you we won’t eat them either.”

His eyes flare with mischief. “We have something much more fun planned.”

But he takes the time to take off my coat, and instructs me to leave my boots beside the fire.

He isn’t happy until I’ve shed my scarf and sweater, and even then, he looks me over with a displeased twist of his mouth.

“That will have to do for now.” He catches my hand in one of his and hefts the basket with the other. “Come with us.”

He draws me past the throne and into the darker part of this domain. Past an enormous bed with a canopy made of

mistletoe and a corral with reindeer... that look like a ghostly approximation of the one he'd sent to help me.

The rest of it is too vast for my eyes to explore before he spins me to a whirling stop and pulls me against him for a kiss that lifts me off the ground.

“Ready?”

“I don't know.”

He smiles as though that was the answer he wanted and looks at the dark space in front of us.

A pair of crossed candy canes holds open the entrance to Klaus' domain from that too familiar space the women dressed as cats called Babel.

“Where are we going?” I ask when he draws me out of the relative safety and into the old gods' realm proper.

“You'll see.” Is the only answer he gives me.

It's not a far walk through that crowded space, and for a moment, I think I see the Calico, but it's not the same woman in a cat mask it's not even a cat mask, and the woman she has her teeth literally sunken into....

“Some people like the torture of sharp little teeth.” Krampus uses his tail to turn my face back to him. “Is that what you want?”

“I shake my head. I like impossibly long tongues.”

“Good.” Hand still clasped in mine, he tugs me further around, and when we stop, it's at a darkly veiled doorway. There's no clue in that emptiness to tell me whose domain it is.

He drops my hand and takes only as long as required to press his own finger to his lips. “Be very quiet. We don't want to spoil the surprise.”

Without waiting for me to agree or give any sign I've understood, he slashes the lacings holding the basket closed and upends it through the veil.

His smile is so wide, I'm certain something fantastic is about to happen, but nothing comes out of that door.

Quite the opposite.

Krampus grabs me around the waist, pulling my back flush against him and holds his hand over my mouth, walking me forward until I can see beyond that ledge and his palm catches my laugh.

The hares hop wildly around an all-but empty domain, multiplying exponentially and flooding the space with more and more of them.

The god in the centre of the room looks up from his throne, his own rabbit ears pulled back in irritation as he glares up at us.

A few booming words in that old tongue exchange between them, and then Krampus twirls me back out of the Easter Bunny's domain.

“He didn't seem too happy about that.”

“Fuck him if he can't take a joke.” Krampus shrugs. “My boring half-brother needs a bit of upheaval in his life.”

He kisses me and the next words are whispered across my lips. “It's done wonders for mine.”

Picking me up, he holds me tight to him, eyes never leaving mine as he carries me back to Klaus' domain.

## *Twice as Nice*



THE KRAMPUS HAD DETAILED EVERY REASON HE DISLIKED each of the pieces of clothing he took off of me until he'd stripped me bare and wrapped me in the softest blanket I'd ever felt.

He pokes at the heavy pan of chestnuts roasting on the fire in front of us, and I snuggle closer to him. I could stay like this forever and be quite content.

When his fingers slip beneath the blanket to stroke my hip, I decide I could be quite content to move as well.

And so I do.

All it takes is a little nudge, and he falls into the pile of pillows behind him. He knows my plan before I've even moved myself over him.

“Did you like riding my cock, little berry?”

“I like everything you've done to me.”

“Everything?”

I nod, even though I'm not sure it's the best admission to make.

“Is there anything you'd like that I haven't done?”

I blush at the sheer number of things that flit through my mind.

“Does someone need to give *us* a wishlist?” He rolls us over so I'm the one on my back. “We want to know what made your cheeks so perfectly pink?”

This time.... When I look at the birch sticks in the corner, my pussy tenses. “Next time you punish me... I want you to fuck me while—”

“Not much of a punishment.”

“I know.”

He chuckles. “What else?”

“I want your tail.”

“Do you? Where do you want it, little berry?”

“Everywhere.”

“And....”

I hesitate, because I don’t think I *should* want it.... “I want both of you.”

His brows pinch. “Both of us?”

“At the same time.”

His brows pinch and he draws his fingers through my hair, more tinsel flickering in the firelight.

“If it’s within our power, it’s yours.”

I can pretend I believe him. I push up onto my elbows and kiss him as deeply as I dare.

The horns of my mask knock against his and he reaches down, taking hold of my face, keeping it securely in place.

“That doesn’t get to come off yet.”

*Ever.*

I wait as he reties my mask more snugly around my face.

“Perfect. Now....”

I can’t follow how we got from me on my back on the floor, to him on his back on an enormous green velvet cushion.

But my knees aren’t mad about it.

That ultra soft blanket is strewn over one side, but I’m not chilled by the loss.



“You won’t say you’re mine, little berry, but you’ll give yourself to us freely.” He nips at my chin. “We’ll never be satisfied with a loan.”

“You have a few days left to convince me.”

He growls, low in his chest and with a push and a shove, he moves me all the way up his body and crushes my pussy down to his mouth. His tongue invades me so suddenly I can’t even make a noise against the shock.

He fucks me with his tongue, holding me down in a way that makes me scared he’d asphyxiate if he wasn’t a god.

The forked tip twists and tweaks at my clit and the concentrated effort of his mouth makes me scream out against him, his hands grip my thighs, fighting the tension that would have made me crush his head as I come so hard I’m no longer worried about suffocating him. Now, I’m rather concerned he might drown.

But he draws me back down him, laughing the entire time.

Licking his lips, his eyes meet mine as he pulls me right onto his cock. It’s easier than last time.

I’d almost accuse him of not playing fairly, but I enjoyed that far too much to complain.

When he kisses me, I taste myself on him.

“I love giving you gifts,” I say as I lever myself up onto my hands. “I think it’s time for another.”

I rock my hips, taking him further into me, and he smiles at me with a long and lazy blink.

“And we love receiving. But we think it’s time for a joint gift.”

“What kind of—”

Pressure behind me kills the question in my throat and I freeze on him and my eyes go wide as I try to turn back to see who’s cock has just pressed against me.

But the Krampus catches my chin in his hand and makes me meet his eyes again. “You don’t get to turn around. Can

you do that, little berry? Can you accept a gift without knowing exactly what it will be?"

That's enough to tell me I won't see Klaus if I turn around right now.

I should cry off.

Or at least tell him we need to negotiate this, but... "I trust you."

*Even if I shouldn't.*

He smiles at me and then his tongue snakes down me, sliding between our bodies until it curls up and saliva pours across me.

That rush threatens to drag me under.

And then his tongue drags up my body and his hands take my hips, tipping me back....

Onto that other cock.

"If you could see your face, sweet little berry." Krampus sighs and brushes his thumb over my cheekbone. "You are all lust, aren't you?"

It suddenly no longer matters who is behind me. I *am* nothing but lust.

For him.

I can't be his, but for the moment, I can pretend.

I can pretend that I don't have to go back to the mortal world when this is all over.

That I could let go of everything tethering me to that place and be the pet he wants.

It would be so easy...

I work that fantasy into myself with each rise and fall of my hips.

And somehow, I want more.

My mouth falls open wanting... needing.

"I—"

“You can’t have three.” He says reaching up to draw his thumb across my lips, but he doesn’t let me catch it between them. “But maybe I can give you something else to suck?”

His tail draws along the line of my lips and I don’t pause to think about it. I open my mouth and let him in.

I lose myself in the way he fills me.

Every fibre of my being is focused on the points where he and I meet. To where we combine.

I’ve never wanted to be *possessed* by someone, but that’s how this feels.

And I know I’m going to crave it for the rest of my life.

I feel him on every inch of me, *in* every inch of me, when I come, and for a moment, it feels like all I am is points of light and pleasure.

His tail pulls free of my mouth and I draw in a long breath, finally able to think again.

I’ve certainly never come apart like that before.

*Sloppy.*

That thought makes my rhythm hitch, and I slow my hips, relishing the aftershocks.

“You’ve made a mess,” he says, drawing his hand through the wetness that has soaked us both.

“*We* made a mess. I am not taking any of the blame for this.”

I swipe up some of that eggnog cum and lick it from my finger.

“Yes. That was definitely *us*.”

Dragging me down, he licks the last of it from my lips and tilts me forward until both cocks slide out of me with a gush.

I slump to the cushion beside him and Krampus pulls that blanket back over me, but it’s for the warmth, not modesty. There’s no one else with us.

I might have thought they'd vanished, but then I see his cock—his *cocks*—twist back together.

“It was just you?”

“It's never ‘just me’.” He traces his tongue over my lips. “But yes. This was well within our power and we happily gave it to you.”

## *On the Tenth Day of Christmas....*



I REALLY SHOULD KNOW MORE ABOUT SHEEP.

Standing in Susan and John's barn with their flock jostling against me, all I know is that they're dirty, they smell, and they definitely poop way too much.

"What has you over to us so early this morning?" John asks as he shoves one of the bigger sheep out of his way. "Were the girls screaming to see my boy?"

I don't remind him that the kids are all far too young to even be thinking about that. And I don't tell him that the last time they mentioned his son all on his own was to tell Nan how much they didn't like him.

"Actually, I need your help again."

He chuckles and wades through the sheep to get to me. "I don't have any more children's names to barter with."

"I need ten lambs. I know they're usually born in the spring, but... is a ten-month-old sheep still a lamb?"

"Technically, they're still lambs until they're a year old."

"Oh, thank the gods." I say it under my breath, but it's not quiet enough.

"I can't just give you ten lambs, Holly."

"Of course," I shake my head, because no, that's not what I was asking. "I know that ten lambs is way too many. I will return them, or pay you for them if I can't. I just have to have ten lambs. Today."

John studies me for a long moment, the line between his brows deepening. “Eight cockerels, ten lambs... what have you got into?”

I almost tell him we all make mistakes... but I’m not ready to call it that yet.

“Just give her the sheep, John.”

His gaze travels over my head and his expression softens.

He’ll give me the sheep.

If I’d gone to Susan first, he would have given me the whole flock if she’d asked him to. No matter his faults, I can’t dislike the man. The way he loves my best friend can forgive any number of sins.

“Okay. Ten lambs...” He looks around us and I can see him counting. “How do you want to get them out of here? I didn’t see your fancy new sledge.”

“That was borrowed, and...” I look at the enormous hearth he had installed. “How I get them out of here is going to be a little startling. Just... don’t freak out.”

He grabs a rope and starts gathering up those young sheep as I make my way over to the fence that keeps the flock from catching their coats on fire.

The little gate in the side is big enough the lambs will be able to fit through one by one, and I ignore the curse from behind me when the fire picks itself up and slides to the side, giving me space to push on the warm stone behind it.

John leads that line of lambs to me and hands me the rope, his eyes on the red-lit path into the old gods realm.

“I am going to want an explanation.”

Herding the sheep through, I nod and then look back at Susan on the other side of the barn. “You can tell him everything I’ve told you so far.”

“I would have eventually.”

“I know.” I look back at John. “Thank you. I promise I will pay you for them as soon as I can.”

“Good luck!” Susan calls out and I hope it follows me inside.

I hurry the bleating lambs down that corridor and don't look back when the fireplace closes behind me.

The sheep go willingly, and I'm grateful I only have to nudge them once to get them from my realm to his.

Klaus waits at the end of that path this time, a stern gaze fixed on me. “You're here early today. Is that because you wish this bargain to be over with? Or because you missed the feel of the Krampus inside you?”

“Why can't it be both?”

The way he looks away from me makes me think it was the wrong thing to say.

“I've brought you your lambs. What would you like me to do with them?”

He raises one hand and snaps his fingers.

Ten men appear out of nowhere. They melt from the walls, spring up from the floor, and drop from the ceiling. Their striped hats jingle as they run to the sheep and I flinch away from them.

They wear masks similar to mine, but theirs have no antlers. And no eye holes, either.

But their inability to see doesn't hamper them in the least.

They snatch up the rope, cutting it to pieces and then, they each trot their own sheep into the dark edges of the domain.

I can only blink after them.

“Ignore the elves,” Klaus says, gaze fixed on me. “They only see, hear, and do what I tell them to in this realm.”

That makes me breathe a little easier. The idea of being watched isn't completely unappealing, but not knowing I'm being watched....

I don't like that at all.

“You smell like a sheep farm.”

I blink at him, trying to understand his irritation. “You made me collect lambs.”

“Take off your clothes.”

I do as he asks, but my eyes stray to the darkness where the elves disappeared.

“They can’t see you.” He says as he sits on his throne. “I won’t let them unless you ask for it... or you make me.”

“Is that your punishment? Krampus has his birch sticks, you’ll let other men drool over me.”

“*Other* men?” He leans forward, his gaze tracing over my skin. “I’m not a man, Holly. I’m a god. Different rules apply. Now, come here.”

I do as he says.

“Other men.” He mutters the words under his breath and they are laced with disgust. “Just for that, I’m going to let them watch.”

“Watch what?”

“I told you, days ago, that I get everything you give the Krampus.”

Last night flits through my head and the possibilities of what Klaus wants today....

*Santa Claus is coming—*

“I know.”

“And you’ve given him plenty, haven’t you?”

I nod as he trails his fingers over me. Green ribbons follow the lines he draws, wrapping me up like a present.

Looking down, I say, “This is the opposite of what I expected.”

“They can watch... but they don’t get to *see* you.”

He tips my chin up and kisses me, his tongue tracing my lips, and I reach for that heavy gold buckle, but he catches my hand.



“Are you that eager to give yourself to me as well?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t. But I want you both.”

“What if you can’t have us both? Which would you choose?”

“It doesn’t matter.” I say, looking up to meet his eyes. “I can’t have either of you. Not really.”

“Answer the question, Holly.”

Maybe I’m a fool for telling him the truth. “If I *had* to choose.... I would choose him. You leave me to him enough, that shouldn’t surprise you.

“What I want... what you can give me...” I shake my head, fingers going to the hard front of my mask when I want to pinch the bridge of my nose. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“In two more days, I’ve either fulfilled our bargain or I haven’t. That’s the end of this.”

Pushing to his feet, he hooks a hand in those ribbons he’s wrapped me in, dragging me forward and spinning me around.

Those fingers tangle in my hair and tip my head back so he can kiss me.

I’m stretched tight and wound taught.

Klaus’ grip is tight in my hair when he pulls away from me. “It matters.”

“Did you want me to choose you?”

“No.” He releases my hair, shoving me to the ground and opening me to ram his cock inside me in a single brutal thrust that makes me cry out.

The shock of it leaves me reeling.

The only reason I don’t fall forward down the stairs is his grip on my hips.

Three of his elves kneel on the floor in front of the fire. Unblinking eyes on me.

One licks his lips.

But Klaus' grip on me tightens, the angle the stairs put me at drag his cock against that sharp point of pleasure inside of me and want to weep at the fullness.

His hand comes down on my bum with a sharp and frozen slap.

“I *want* you to be unable to choose. I want you to want both of us so badly you don't even think about returning to the mortal realm when this bargain is through.”

He fucks me like he wants to punish me for every mortal sin ever committed.

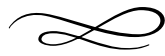
“We want to fill you up with our cum and tie you to us in every unbreakable way, Holly.”

My knees and palms sting from rug burn, but that pain doesn't detract from the pleasure that sears through me.

I come sharply, my breath catching in my throat like I'll choke on it if I'm not careful. And Klaus yanks me up so I'm kneeling, my back to him as the last tremors of my orgasm pulse through me.

“You are mine, Holly. You have been mine since the day I first saw you in that bauble. And you will be mine until eternity ends.” He holds me tight to him, his hand a cold vice around my throat. “I would breed you and bind you if you gave me even half a chance. Don't think for one moment that I'm going to let you go.”

# *Tinsel Talk*



THE CUCKOO CLOCKS SCREECHING IN A DISCORDANT HARMONY wake me and I bat away a fir bough that tickles my skin.

Klaus deposited me on a cushion beneath the tree, tying a bow in my hair before he left me there, like I'm a present.

I don't know why I'm surprised that Krampus is the one waiting, watching me sleep as he toys with a different bauble.

"What do you see in them?" I ask, still drowsy.

Instead of answering, he holds out his hand, and I take it, wiggling out from under the tree and sitting in his lap when he draws me into it.

I rest my head on his shoulder and watch the crowded day market in the mirror-like surface of the bauble. I recognise some of the people milling about, but...

"What are those red and green lights?"

Dozens of them bounce around the tables, the shade brighter in some, muddier in others.

"Those are children. Red are naughty, green are nice."

"You can't see children?"

He shakes his head. "You of all people know how literal the Tooth Fairy's protection is."

And the Tooth Fairy keeps all children safe from harm until their wisdom teeth come in.

It's why I attend births for the mother, not the child.

“I’ve never seen a child under the age of seventeen.” He leans close to whisper, “I’m not sure they exist.”

But when he laughs, I know it’s a joke. But it makes one thing clear.

“You didn’t see me until I was twenty-three.”

“I did not.” He tosses the bauble back up into the tree and stands, holding me as he walks to the throne. “But I haven’t stopped looking for you since.”

He sets me down on that overstuffed seat and spins it around.

“Eat. I imagine you worked up an appetite.”

An enormous table sits in front of me now, but there is only one place setting. And despite the fact I’m certain this is Krampus’ place, he doesn’t seem to care that I’m the one in his throne.

He sits beside me and pulls the cloche away with a flourish.

A lamb shank sits on that plate, quite possibly the fanciest dish I’ve ever seen. I don’t ask if it’s from one of the ones I brought to him. I don’t want to know.

And he’s right.

I am hungry.

But when I put the first mouthwatering bite in my mouth, Krampus asks, “Why did you take our bargain?”

I’m very glad that chewing gives me time to decide what to tell him.

“You said you’ve watched me for years.”

He nods.

“Then you know what happened to my parents.”

“I do.”

“Supporting my family gets harder each year. I don’t want to get married—husbands expect children and I won’t ever give a man a child.”

“Because you know how horrific it can be?”

“Because I know that there is a god that cares whether or not the child survives, but there is no god to guarantee the mother will. No god cares when that woman cannot find her way back from the darkness of that birth.”

“We won’t let you die, Holly.” He laces his fingers in mine, “Even if the child was not ours.”

“Doesn’t change what I do and do not want.”

He nods, and then he says, “We don’t think we’d like children.... Even if we knew what they were like.”

That makes me snort. “Klaus isn’t the only one who implied he’d like to *breed* me.”

“That is different.” He touches a glass, and it fills with a deep red wine. “You are mortal. That draught you drink takes care of anything we might leave behind.”

“Good.”

“You are our fantasy, little berry. Having a part of us in you forever is a dream we can only pretend we could grasp.”

He lets me finish eating and then sweeps both the plate and table away.

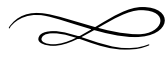
Silently, he snips the ribbons with his claws and dresses me in new, warm clothes, his hands tracing over me like he can’t get give up my touch.

And so, when my hands are free, I draw his face to mine. “A part of you will always be with me... even after this ends.”

I kiss him, and he holds me so tightly, I don’t know how I’m still able to breathe. And then he sends me back to the mortal world.

There is a bag of coins on my dresser beside the list. The bag sewn with the image of a sheep.

## *On the Eleventh Day of Christmas....*



I STARE AT THE ELEVENTH LINE ON KLAUS'S LIST FOR FAR TOO long.

### *Eleven Bears a Snoring*

Maybe this is yet another punishment for choosing Krampus over him.

Because there's no way I can collect them.

But I get dressed, because I have to.

I get the girls breakfast... because I have to.

I keep moving forward....

Nan comes to us, wiping her hands and looking at me with a suspicious glare. "There's a man at the door asking for you."

If it's Val, I'm going to take him with me and let him distract those bears.

But when I open the door, it's not Val. It's a man I've never seen before in a green and white striped hat with a mask hanging from his hip.

"Morning mum," He says and then pauses when he turns to face me. I don't enjoy the path his eyes travel down me. "His ugly horned highness sent us to help you with today's *gift*."

I like that moniker even less. "Do you think it's smart to talk about him like that?"

The elf just shrugs and turns back to the sledge that holds four other elves, waiting for me.

I don't like the way they look at me either.

And I definitely don't enjoy wondering if any of them were the three who witnessed last night's claiming.

I go back to the kitchen and drain the rest of this morning's potion. They were rude, so I feel no guilt over letting them sit out in the frozen morning.

"I don't know when I'll be back," I tell Nan as I lace up my boots and stuff my hands in my pockets. "But this will all be over after tomorrow."

One way or another.

I check to make sure my mask is tucked away in my hip bag and head for the door.

When I climb up beside the elf holding the reins, I pull my hood over my head and settle in for the ride.

"Where are we going?"

The driver keeps his face pointed straight ahead. "There's a cave."

And that's all he gives me, but I'm not surprised when he turns us toward the godswood.

The other four chat in the back of the sledge and I ignore them until one speaks a little louder, his words clearly meant for my ears.

"I'd like to taste her sugar plum."

I look sharply over my shoulder and know exactly which of them said it. He stares at me openly, a smile showing all of his teeth. Zero shame in his eyes.

The others titter at his words and I turn back to look straight ahead.

Maybe the bears will eat him.

But just him. I need the others to get this done.

I block out most of the ribald suggestions until we get to the cave.

But they get bolder as we go, and when I hop down from my seat, I'm more than ready to head into a cave full of bears, rather than listen to them anymore.

Except, heading for the cave only draws them closer to me.

I don't know which of them pinches me first, but more than one does, and I shove the "sugar plum" elf back. "Stop it, all of you."

Leaned back against a tree, the one I shoved, rolls his eyes. "We all know you've spread those legs for the Krampus and let Klaus clap that fat ass. You don't get to pretend you're sweet and innocent with us."

I hear one of them call me a slut, but I don't turn around. I've been dealing with men like *Sugar Plum* for so long, I don't have the patience to gently correct him.

"Maybe you should consider what fucking them means. Consider where it places me in the hierarchy of their devotees. The Krampus has already offered to skin a man and string his tree with a garland of his bones for calling me fat. Do you think he wouldn't do the same to you if I asked?"

That, at least, wipes the smile off his face.

"You're going to trap those bears for me. You're going to take them back to Klaus's domain, and when I tell him how you've treated me, you had better pray to *all* the gods that you survive whatever he chooses to do to you."

A few of them actually look scared.

And it gets the moving, even if Sugar Plum tries to win a staring match against me before he goes.

I'm the last one in the cave and as my eyes adjust, all I can see is a glowing gold net strung between four of them, and then the lumpy shapes of bears.

They are, indeed, snoring.



Walking carefully around them, the elves manage to drop that net over them without a single one waking and swiping a chunk out of them.

Pity.

The bears don't even wake when the net lands on them.

But I chalk that up to Christmas magic.

This net looks far sturdier than the one I borrowed from the kittens.

I watch as the elves climb on top of each other and place hooks in the cave ceiling to pluck the netting up and hold it high, like a tent or a tunnel.

I almost ask "What now?" But I'm not going to say another word to these assholes if I don't have to.

And I don't.

Sugar Plum pulls a piece of chalk out of his pocket and draws a rough square on the wall, adding a rectangle above it and... a fire in the centre.

His drawn fireplace is a poor imitation of the real thing, but it's big enough for bears to pass through, and the back of it opens when he pushes.

Two others quickly hook the net to the corners of that white-line mantle and then, the remaining two poke the bears with long sticks.

They grumble and roar and swipe now, but that net holds them in. They clearly aren't happy about it, but they let themselves be herded through the cave wall.

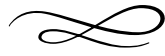
Each of them shrinks as soon as they pass through that veil, and by three steps in, they've turned into tiny carved versions of the bears they once were.

They litter the floor, and the net vanishes as the last one drops to the ground.

With an irritated glance at me, Sugar Plum puts on his mask—they all do—and steps through into Klaus' domain.

I have no choice but to follow... and wonder what comes next.

# *Naughty List*



THE ELVES VANISH DOWN THE TUNNEL BEFORE I MANAGE TO scoop up the carved bears. I bunch them in my skirt instead of fighting with them.

But neither the Krampus nor Klaus are waiting when I finally join the elves.

I hear them whispering about their expected reward, and I suppose Sugar Plum thinks he's safe because his master isn't in sight. "Maybe he'll let us fuck her until she squeals."

I turn to him, but the sharp reply I would have delivered dies in my throat as the Krampus grows out of the shadows behind him.

"Or maybe," He leans down between Sugar Plum and the driver and all five of them are frozen stiff. Eyes wide. "He'll let her fuck you with a branch from her namesake bush? How quickly would *you* squeal then?"

He looks up at me. "Would you like that?"

"I don't want to touch them." I don't want to see them ever again.

"Fair enough." With a sweep of his hand, Sugar Plum flies into the fireplace, strung up like a marionette, and although I can't hear his screams, I can see them as the flames burn off his shoes and crawl up his pant legs.

But Death doesn't appear, so he hasn't begged for it yet.

"Which of you touched her without her permission?" He asks, but the frozen elves stay silent until he says, "Answer

me.”

Three of the others jerk forward, hands raised.

They, too, are left to dangle above the fire and roast.

Only the sledge driver is left. He looks straight ahead, calm.

“You didn’t touch her?” Krampus asks, and he shakes his head. “You didn’t join in as they wove their lewd wishlist?”

Again, he shakes his head.

Krampus stalks around to stand in front of the driver and asks, “You didn’t stop them?”

All ease leaves him and his eyes widen as he shakes his head one last time, the move seemingly forced by some invisible hand.

And then he, too, is dragged across the room and hung above the fire.

Krampus takes my face in his hands and draws his fingers over my cheeks. “If anyone ever treats you like that in the mortal world, ever again, write their name on a piece of paper and toss it into a fire. They will be dealt with.

“Even after our bargain is through?” I ask, and then, to remind us both, I add, “Tomorrow.”

He scowls, and so I hold up one of the bears, still gathered in my bunched skirt. “I would *bear* much like to not think about that right now.”

He fights the smile that eventually makes its way to his lips and takes the bear from me.

Somehow, he manages to hold them all in his hand and like a dice thrower, he tosses them up into the tree. They fall on their feet, scattered among the boughs.

“There’s just one more task, and everything you want will be yours.”

*Almost everything.*

But I don’t voice that new disappointment.

I have two more nights. I don't want to waste them. So I pull him down to me and jump up into his arms when he lifts me.

Legs wrapped around his waist, I shiver when his cocks brush against me.

"You promised you'd birch me, while you're inside of me."

"As a punishment." He slips one of my boots off, and then the other. "Have you done something to deserve it?"

"I'm leaving you after tomorrow. Don't you want to punish me for that?" He should punish me for wanting to stay.

"I thought mortals liked bribes?"

"*This* mortal likes you. And everything that entails."

He holds me up while I struggle to get my coat and shirt off, but by the time I'm down to that thin chemise and the skirt that I can't get over my head until he sets me down, I've rocked myself against him enough....

But the flickering fire draws my eyes back to the elves. "Cover their eyes?"

"They can't see anything but their own pain? They won't hear anything other than their screams."

Still, he looks at them and then carries me away.

That enormous bed, with its mistletoe canopy looms, and he sets me on the pillowy sheets.

But when I tip my head back, it's more than mistletoe twining around the cloudy mirror.

Red berries sit among white. Dark, spiked leaves nestle in with the longer thin ones I expected.

"Yes," He says as he puts his knee on the bed between my legs and crawls over me. "Those have been there since before you came to us. A little reminder of the woman we've wanted in our bed for too long."

"You like your poison."

His smile seems to lengthen those lines on his lips. “It may not be what you want to hear, and you may not believe us, but we love you, Holly.”

The L word makes my lungs seize. It’s been rattling around at the back of my mind for too many days. And he’s right. I don’t believe him.

Why would a god love a mortal?

Why would he love me?

I don’t have answers for those questions. I’m not sure I want them,

So I kiss him again, trying to drive those concerns away.

But he doesn’t let me drift away.

He draws back and his hand goes to my throat, thumb tracing my jaw. “We would leave the mortal realm to its own devices. Let them be naughty or nice, we don’t care. If we could have you, forever, we’d leave both realms to someone else’s watch.”

“But that’s not the bargain.”

“No.” He says, lifting the last of my clothing up over my head. “That’s not the bargain.”

He pulls his birch sticks apart and tosses a handful of them aside. “Choose one.” He says, holding up the remaining ones.

“What was wrong with those?”

“They’re too small. We may break skin with these, but with those, it was guaranteed. We want you to come... not come apart at your seams.”

I pluck one from the middle of the bunch. Not too big, not too small. And he sets it on the bed beside me.

His hands go to my neck, his thumbs beneath my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “What will you say if it is too much?”

I blink at him, because I don’t think there could be too much.

“You need a magic word, Holly. That thing bound between us that places you in control.” His brows pinch. “I will hurt you if you want me to... but I will not let you let me harm you. Tell me what you will say to make me stop.”

Dozens of words race through my head, all of them wrong, until one of them isn't. “Elf.”

“Elf?”

I nod. “There's no chance I'm enjoying myself if that word crosses my lips.”

“Very well.” He kisses me and then releases me. “On your knees, little berry. You'll come from my tongue before you do anything else.”

I turn for him, wanting everything he's willing to give me.

“Down to your elbows.” He says, hands moving over my skin, too softly.

When I do as he says, he sighs. “Such an obedient woman. But only in this, we think.”

It feels like a question, but I don't know how to answer it.

“You only obey when it gets you what you want.” His next chuckle is a breath against my skin. “Don't worry, we'll always give you what you want. Even if you were to fight us all the way down.

His fingers are sharp against my skin as he spreads me open to his mouth and I drop my face to the bed, letting the soft down of the comforter swallow my first moan.

And my second and third.

That tongue is more than a fantasy.

He licks me like he truly is addicted to the taste of me, like he wants to drink as much of me down as he can. Like he wants to consume me.

Maybe I want to be consumed.

“Turn your head, little berry. I want to *hear* every little sound you make.”

I consider proving him wrong by disobeying. I'd still get what I want if I deny him that.

But he's right. I'll do whatever he asks if it leads to my own desires.

I fix my mask as I turn. It had ridden up my face and I won't let even *this* trap me here.

Krampus doesn't wait. His tongue pushes into me, filling me so deep and then....

The sound I make as the two ends of his tongue pinch at my clit is sharp and deep.

He has to curl up into me and come back out again. That's the only way to explain how full I am while his tongue also toys with my clit.

Not that I want to ask questions right now.

Answering them would mean he has to remove it and I don't want him to stop for anything.

It's why I try so hard *not* to come.

I struggle against that building orgasm, wanting, so badly, to stay right on the edge, but it's too good.

He doesn't even give me false hope. He takes my orgasm like it belongs to him.

He works my body like it's his to do with as he pleases.

And I'm helpless to even pretend he's wrong.

I cry out as my orgasm washes over me, and then the sound dies in my throat as a sharp heat slices through it and across my skin.

Eyes flying wide, I feel the sting of that birch branch and draw in a breath so quick, it makes no sound at all.

That is when the Krampus decides to enter me.

He pushes his cocks into my dripping pussy as my mind searches for the correct response to that pain.

All it finds is pleasure.



And yet, he stills. “Do you need to use your magic word, little berry?”

I shake my head no.

“Then you’re going to need to breathe.”

I am breathing... but I take a deep breath, just to reassure him.

Somehow, that seems to make me even more full of him. It makes the lingering bite of the branch brighter.

Krampus waits a bare moment more before he starts his strokes inside of me. Each time his hips connect with my bum, I pulse around him.

It’s divine.

I hear the whistle of the branch before it connects this time, and still my eyes fly wide. Still, a sharp cry flies from my lips. But I clench down so tightly, a grunt falls from his and he stills within me.

Another sharp slice of pain, another squeeze on his cocks. He chuckles and I need more.

When the next strike falls, I’m the one who’s fucking him. Backing up on his cocks in hard thrusts as I rock back and forth on my hands and knees until he grabs hold of my hips with both hands and draws me back.

He pounds into me so hard, I lose focus and my arms give way. My legs do next, and Krampus fucks me into the bed like he wants to break bones.

Mine or his, I don’t know.

My mind can’t grasp onto anything other than this delirious pleasure and the single word he keeps repeating.

*Mine.*

I can only respond with a single word of my own. *Yes.*

That’s what pushes me back over the edge again.

Knowing that I am his... even though I can’t let myself be.

He drops onto me as his body stiffens and shakes as he comes inside of me, filling me up.

“You’re mine, Holly.” He says the words against my shoulder blade and I press my lips together as hard as I can. Because I can’t tell him he’s right.

When he finally pulls back, his cum gushes out of me and I let out a shaky laugh, wondering if he’s going to hand me another glass, but he doesn’t.

Hand smoothing up my spine, he passes his other over the spilled cum and it disappears.

My thighs tremble and my skin stings.

“Lie on your stomach, little berry. I’ll take care of you.”

The sharp smell of mint hits me a moment before the cold touch of his fingers does. Whatever he’s spreading over and into my skin, it stings at first, minty smooth. And then, the pain is gone... and the salve as well.

There are no marks or memories of those sticks.

I shouldn’t be so sad about that.

He bundles me close, stroking my hair, but I move on him until he’s inside me again. Because he wants that—and I do too—and there’s only so much longer that I can give it to him.

“I know I shouldn’t... but I feel safe with you.”

“No. You most certainly shouldn’t.” He falls back against the pillows, stroking my spine as I lay, splayed across him.

But we don’t stay still for long.

He rocks his hips against me. Slow, gentle bucks that make my eyes flutter closed.

“I want to fill you so full you’re slick with me when you return tomorrow and I can slide right into you.”

I drop my head to his shoulder, breathing heavily. “I’m yours.” I say, telling him what I know he wants to hear, and having to continue with what I know he doesn’t. “For tonight. I’m yours until I have to go back to the mortal realm.”

Looking up and meeting his golden gaze I trace my fingers over his lips. “So why don’t you make the most of it?”

I’m fitted so tightly to him, he can’t pull me down any tighter, but when that scowl turns to a smile, I know I should be worried.

But I wasn’t expecting—

I gasp when his cocks untwist inside of me, opening like a lock.

“You’re mine.” He says. “No matter where you are or how long you’re gone. You will always be mine, little berry.”

## *On the Twelfth Day of Christmas....*



I DON'T ENJOY THE ODD MIX OF JOY AND SADNESS AS I PUSH through my fireplace for what may be the last time.

Twelve bells jingle as I follow the red-lit corridor and come back to the old gods' realm.

They jingle harder as I stutter to a stop.

Klaus waits for me, on his throne in nothing but his hat and a long red robe, lined with white fur.

"Not happy to see me?"

"Just surprised."

"My elves behaved badly. I intend to make it up to you."

I look immediately at his hat and he shakes his head. "You still don't get that."

"If I don't take it to Ester...."

He cuts me off sharply. "I don't care."

His expression is dark as he watches me.

It is strange how the one who looks like a monster seems to be the kind one, and the one who looks like he should be kind is able to be so cruel.

"Place the bells on that table." He points to a low one beside the hearth. "And then open the box."

He nods toward the tree, and the enormous box set in front of it.

I do as he says.

When I pull the ribbon, the box falls apart and five familiar elves look up at me from their knees. They are tied up in the most uncomfortable looking positions I've ever seen. But I can't find it in me to feel pity.

"You get to decide," Klaus says, "how long they stay like this."

More ropes jerk them upright, holding them upside down among the ornaments floating overhead, and I watch as their faces turn purple.

I've always felt the punishment should reflect the crime, and this certainly feels extreme. Especially after what the Krampus did to them.

But I'm not that forgiving.

"They should stay there until they've learned their lesson."

One of them immediately drops to the floor. He hits with a sickening crunch, but with his ropes vanished, he staggers to his feet and stumbles away into the darkness.

"I suppose that's only fair," Klaus says, flicking his hand and sending the others up into the unfathomable darkness. "Though, at least one of them will be up there forever—or until he begs for Death."

"I can live with that."

He chuckles as I walk the long red path to him.

"Perhaps letting you spend so much time in the company of the Krampus was a bad idea."

"He seemed to enjoy it."

"Yes, *he* did."

I stop in front of him and my gaze rises involuntarily.

"I cannot give you my hat, Holly."

"Can't? Or won't?"

"Both."

I don't know exactly what will happen if I don't give Ester that hat, but I'm sure it will be worse than anything I can

imagine. Worse than any task he would set for me.

“If you give me your hat, I will come back. I will be one of your elves as long as it takes to pay back that debt.”

“No.” He looks even madder at my offer. “That is unacceptable.”

“Please.”

“Do you want to know what it would be like to be one of my elves, Holly? For you, specifically?” He waves his hand over my mask and the eyeholes fill, making it impossible to see him. “You would exist only for me to fuck you. You would not see another person for so long as your new bargain lasted. You would be mine in a way neither of us truly wants.”

His hand goes around my throat and I feel the heavy weight of his cock on my cheek. “Do you want to use your magic word?”

I shake my head, my mouth falling open, hands going to his hips to hold myself steady.

“You may hate me if I take your mouth right now.” His thumb brushes over my cheek. “But maybe you need to hate me.”

He angles my face and I have to open my mouth even wider to take him. My tongue traces forward and... the familiar shape and taste make my mind stutter, because it's not the Krampus' legs beneath my hands.

And yet... it is.

The twisted pair of gingerbread flavoured cocks in my mouth are too familiar to deny.

This whole time they'd both danced around a truth I'd been too distracted to consider. They let me believe a lie and confuse myself.

I suck that cock I'd begun to think belonged to a god I could love—that I *did* love—and remember all the times Krampus said “we”, all the times Klaus chuckled at the implication they were two separate beings.

I know I should stop.

I should pull away from him, use my magic word and leave. Our bargain's done. I have every right to not be here.

But where would I go to escape this strange emptiness in my chest?

Krampus—Klaus was right. I was a fool to think I was safe with him.

Perhaps he'd only felt better because I'd assumed from the beginning that he was worse.

If I'd known they were one and the same, I might have done some things differently, but... more fool me... I would have wound up here in the end. On my knees for a god who won our bargain because I didn't know the game I was playing.

But he's lied to me again, hasn't he? He told me this was how he'd use me as an elf, but he's not using me at all.

I take him as far as I can and then I push harder. As if the tears that trail down my cheeks will be better if they're mixed with the pain as I choke myself on him.

But he only lets me do it once.

He pulls me back, my mask back to the way it was when I came to him.

“Don't you dare hurt yourself, Holly.”

I look at him, jaw set, and another hot tear trails down my cheek. “What could I do to myself that's worse than what you plan to do to me?”

Because I can't blame him for what he's already done. I'm the one who ignored every opportunity I had to put the pieces of that puzzle together.

“Let me finish what I've started. Or let me go, and that will be the end of it.”

He releases my hair, brows pinched. “Is this what you actually want?”

I don't answer him. What I want doesn't matter.

This is what I deserve. A punishment of my own making for a betrayal of my own making. I close my eyes, but I can't stop seeing him.

I can't stop wanting something I never should have asked for... even if only in my dreams.

It takes forever to make him come. A penance all its own.

And I don't let a single drop of it fall to the carpet.

The rum-like burn almost chokes me, but I manage. No glass needed.

When I pull off of him, trying to catch my breath, he reaches for me.

"Elf."

He snatches his hand back so quickly, it's like it was burned.

"Holly—"

"No." I shake my head as I push myself up to my feet and turn my back on him

I have to leave before I do something I can't recover from.

"I've fulfilled my bargain. I expect you to do the same." Stopping just before the hearth, I turn back to him. "I was a fool to think that either version of you might be something more than a cruel god."

"You're not a fool, Holly. And I keep my promises. You'll have everything you desire."

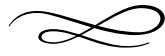
I wanted you.

"What use will any of that be to me when I'm bound to Ester's whim?"

His scowl darkens, but I don't wait for him to tell me some other lie.



# *The End of Holiday Cheer*



THE WAY BACK IS TIGHTER THAN IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I passed through. The walls press against me and the further I get, the less air it feels like I have.

Whether that's my imagination playing tricks, or the old gods' realm expelling me now that I have no bargain to keep me here... I don't know.

But I can't breathe again until the hearth closes behind me with a grating thud.

It should be silent, but the ringing in my ears is so bright, I glance at the clock on the wall. It ticks toward three in the morning. I have four hours—if I'm lucky—and far too much to do.

First, I need to ensure that Klaus fulfilled his end of the bargain.

There's a new, enormous chest beside my hope chest when the fireplace closes behind me and I go to it, even though I already know what I'll see when I lift the lid.

It's filled with gold.

There is enough coin in that box to live the life I'd always wanted to give the girls....

It's enough to live any life we choose.

Or it would have been.

Closing the chest, I let out a shaky breath.

The girls will be safe and happy. That's what's important now.

Pulling my pen and ink from my desk, I check the glass nib to be sure I cleaned it the last time I put it away, and even though I try so hard not to, my eyes stray to the mirror and the shadow there.

I hate that he's still there.

I'd hate it more if he was gone.

But he doesn't get to watch me anymore.

I drag a blanket from the pile in the corner and throw it over the mirror, but my hands tremble when I see what rests on top of the dresser.

My family's rings sit on a red satin kerchief on my dresser. Placed there like they're another gift.

A token of that affection I imagined.

Affection I wanted so badly that I ignored reality.

I stare at it numbly. Sharp, warm liquid prickles at the back of my eyes.

I don't have time to cry.

I shake away the sinking despair in my mind and look down at the ring still on my finger.

It has no place there.

But no matter how hard I pry and tug, it won't come off.

And I can't waste time fighting it.

I sit at my desk and scribble out letter after letter.

Apologies, instructions, an explanation for when the girls are much, much older. My hand cramps a dozen times before I'm done, and I run out of sealing wax before I reach the last letter.

It's the one that should be opened first, so I bundle it up with the others... tying it with the velvet ribbon of one of Klaus' now-poisoned gifts.

I hate that I know exactly which of them it once wrapped.

In thirteen days, he's managed to seep into my skin and I don't know if I'll ever be able to get rid of him.

A traitorous little part of me tells me that's a good thing.

It whispers that this pain is a promise all its own, a reminder for the future.

If I have a future at all.

Dressing in the warmest clothing I have, I take one last look around the room.

I won't leave any more mess for the people I love to pick up after I'm gone.

There's a sparkle from inside my bed, and I freeze as my eyes lock on that twisted snow globe.

I won't make anyone deal with that.

I certainly don't want the girls to find it.

Not looking up at the mirror over the bed, I snatch it from the blankets and go to the fireplace.

It still opens beneath my hand, despite our deal being through.

Throwing it inside, I don't watch it hit the stone floor, but I hear it shatter as I scoop up the letters, and I make sure the hearth is closed again before I slip out the door.

My heart breaks into three more pieces as I pause beside the door to the other bedroom.

I can't say goodbye to the girls or Nan.

I can't risk waking them.

The predawn darkness is bitterly cold and when I've tugged the door closed behind me—waiting to hear the lock fall into place—I take a deep breath of the stinging air.

I may not be a coward like my father, but maybe I was twice as selfish... and it's wound up with the same result.

I walk the familiar path in the silent dark. The weather turns sour after I've left the boundary of our farm and I have to pause to reorient myself twice.

I can't see the lights at the top of the tower—my normal beacon for night walks—but I've come this way so often, I don't need them.

I'm a shivering mess by the time I make it to Susan's house, and I knock softly on the door—the light in the kitchen window tells me John is already up, getting ready to start his day.

His brows are knit with concern as he drags the door open and waves me in out of the cold. He watches me like I'm a ghost before asking, "What's wrong?"

*Everything.*

My teeth chatter, but I manage to say, "I need to see Susan," clearly enough he can hear me and low enough I won't wake her children

He blinks at me once... twice. "Of course. Let me go get her."

I start for the fire and stop, dead in my tracks. I don't want to be close to it.

I can't look at the mirror on the far wall. So, I stay where I am, eyes on the floor, shaking and rubbing my arms.

It takes too long for her to get out to me.

"She'll be out in a minute," John says, coming back to me and handing me a large cup of tea. "Can I do anything?"

I shake my head as I thank him. Because the tea is more than I can ask for against the promise I'll soon beg for from his wife.

But I drink it, hoping that liquid spreads through my body in a way it never has before and I know it won't now.

"Why are you here so early?" Susan asks, wrapping her robe tightly around her as she comes to me, yawning.

"I won one bargain and lost another."

Holding out the stack of letters, I sit when she tells me to.

“I don’t know how much I can tell you, so it’s going to be as little as possible. The letters will explain more.”

It took too long to get the information down. Too long to walk here.

I feel the ticking of the clock in my skin.

“Just know, I have to go pay my debt to Ester. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone... or if I’ll even be able to come back at all.”

Susan stares at my mouth, like she’s not sure it’s really me that’s speaking.

“I need you to take care of the girls.” I squeeze her hand. “And Nan too.”

“Of course I will. Holly, you’re starting to scare me.”

I can’t reassure her.

My eyes move unbidden to the mirror behind her.

It’s just a mirror.

No shadow, no sign of anyone watching from the other side.

No hope.

Just glass and silver.

It feels as though someone’s shoved their hand straight through my chest and squeezed my heart until it popped.

“I have to go.” Because, however Ester decides to collect me, I don’t want Susan to have to see it.

I don’t want to risk her children seeing it.

But as I stand, the sun peeks over the horizon, a sharp, cold light through the window. I’ve lingered too long.

The terms were specific.

Sunrise.

Susan's eyes go wide and I don't hear if she screams as the floorboards open and swallow me whole.

## *When your Goose is Cooked...*



MY MOTHER MAY NOT HAVE TOLD ME MANY STORIES ABOUT the old gods. But I know that their realm exists under ours just as much as it is above and around and throughout.

So I don't think, even for a moment, that I'll land at Death's feet as the mortal world closes over my head.

I hit solid ground a moment later, a mound of soft, black dirt softening my fall.

If I was still a fanciful little girl, I might have imagined it to be a burial mound.

That soil stains me everywhere it touches, embedding itself in my skin and my skirt. Scrubbing it from my palms only turns my scarf black, and I leave the soiled knit in on the ground when I stand.

I hate that the only thing it *doesn't* stick to is the ring I still can't take off.

Giving up on the dirt, I finally look around me. This part of Ester's domain is... wrong.

The trees that nestle close droop, black leaves on grey bark. The copse around me is crowded with foliage that bears neither fruit nor flower.

There is no colour here. It feels... mournful.

Maybe it is a burial mound after all. Just not mine.

I can't stay here.

The debt I have to pay isn't going anywhere, and there's no way to hide from the old gods.

I pull my mask on, just in case... but what I wrench from my hip bag isn't what I've worn this past week and a half. It's still shaped like a reindeer... despite the fact I am now beholden to *her*.

Stepping onto a sandy path and hating the way the tiny grains work their way in through the lacings of my boots, I have to take off my coat. It's warm here.

Hot, even.

I peel off my layers as I go, holding a thick bundle of clothes in my arms by the time I finally stop in front of her.

She waits on her haloed throne, a faint light emanating from her and only the things it touches have any colour.

"You did not do as you were told." She says, her voice soft, her gaze turned away from me.

"I know. Klaus wouldn't give me his hat and I couldn't take it from him."

"Did you truly try?"

"What chance did I have?"

She does look at me now, and her dark cheeks are streaked with pale lines.

I've never heard of a god crying, but a golden tear slides down one of those lines, dropping to her lap.

She doesn't seem to notice.

"I am merely a mortal. He is a god. I cannot take what he was not willing to give."

I have to blink back my own tears and blow out a long breath to drive back the prickling behind my nose.

"What can I do to settle this debt?"

Her gaze fixed on me, Ester lets the silence lengthen between us and I know I should look away, but her eyes hold me trapped.



I don't know what she sees in mine.

"Do you know why I asked you to bring me my son's hat?"

I shake my head. Any guess I might have is so ill-informed it can't be right.

"You needed to know what he is. And I do believe he would have let you go on thinking that there were two of him."

"I know the truth now."

"You do. But you did not bring me his hat. My intention may have been fulfilled, but the bargain was not. And I can't simply wipe the debt clean."

"You're a god. You can do whatever you want."

"I wish that was true." She plucks a drooping tulip from the ground, "My grandson is dead."

I almost give her an insincere apology, but it catches in my throat. And a single thought swirls in my mind. *How?*

Casaran's mother was a god. God children don't die of anything other than old age.

"The Valley cannot go without someone in the seat of power. A god child must rule."

"Why?"

She looks at me, that sadness momentarily replaced by fury. "It is the bargain that keeps the Valley safe from the outside world."

I press my mouth tightly shut.

If I find my way out of this, I will find all the stories of the old gods and I will make sure Meg and May know them by heart before the Tooth Fairy is forced to abandon them.

"That is how you will repay your debt." Ester says and I blink at her, my mind running through the possible ways I could—

"Absolutely not."

“We both know you’ve enjoyed being with my son. Once more won’t be a hardship.”

“I will not bear the heir to your next dynasty.”

“You speak as though you believe you have any say in the matter.”

Frozen to the spot. Numb. My mind goes utterly blank, save for one word. No.

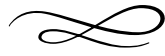
No no no no no no no no no.

“No.”

She stands from her throne, but before she can take that first step, a dark figure appears in front of me, blocking her from my view and vice versa.

“Hello, mother.” Klaus says, his tail wrapping around my waist and drawing me tight against his back. “I’ve come to make a deal.”

## *Between Two Gods*



I CAN'T SEE ESTER, BUT I FEEL HER DERISION WHEN SHE HUFFS a laugh. "I'm about to give you the mortal you've tried to claim. You should be thanking me, not asking for a different favour."

I hate that I melt into his back, fingers clenched in the dark hair on his hips.

"Then we are already halfway done." He says, and I want to hit him for sounding so happy about it. "Release her to me with no obligations, and I will give you something you've been searching for for the last century or more. I never can tell with time."

I hold my breath, because it can't be that easy.

And of course, it isn't.

After a long silence, Ester says. "No."

"You all trade devotees like acorns. What's the difference in this? I have something you want. I'm willing to buy her freedom with it...."

"It's not that simple and you know it."

"It can be that simple. You have seven other children. Surely there is a devotee who would be willing to take their place atop that cursed tower."

"You don't think I know what you've done?" She asks, and an invisible hand grabs me away from him, dragging me to the point directly between them and spinning me to face him. "Tell her why this is a punishment of your own making."

His golden eyes meet mine. “If a god child wishes to die, they may make a deal with Death... but another god must bear witness as a second party to that deal. Casaran made a Christmas wish. I fulfilled it for him.”

He looks past me, but I can't turn around.

“You are welcome to blame me for that if you choose, but whose fault is it that he was given the Power, placed above all mortals in the Valley.... And then abandoned?”

“I can't change what's been done.”

“No,” He says. “But you can keep yourself from making another mistake.”

With a wave of one of his hands, an enormous clock appears beside him. “I will give you five and twenty cuckoos in exchange for her. Every one you lost to the first mortal god parent.”

The magic that had wrapped around me loosens, and when I sag, Krampus catches me.

I might still be mad at him, but I let him scoop me against his side. The future he paints couldn't be worse than what Ester intends for me.

“That is what Casaran trade you, isn't it? There were three cuckoos in the tower...”

“And they were worth incurring your wrath. A wrath that should be directed at me, not an innocent woman.”

“Can a woman who loves *you* truly be innocent?”

“Be careful what you say about her, *mother*.” He takes a deep breath and waves the cuckoos away again. “If you do not release her to me, I will kill every last one of those cuckoos. I will chew them up and I will spit them out and I will hand them to Death and ensure that you never have the chance to lay your hands on them again.”

I don't understand why the cuckoos are so important to her, but her expression tells me she might kill Klaus to get them....

But her fury ebbs and her pink gaze drifts to me. “Surely there must be a compromise. It’s only a child, after all. She’s already raising two. Why should she complain about raising her own?”

“It has nothing to do with *raising* it.”

Her attention snaps back to Klaus. “Why are you arguing with me? You’ve stalked her through those baubles for years. What was the point of this obsession if not to claim her? *That* is what I’m offering to you now.”

“I don’t wish to own her.” He says, looking at his mother as if he’s never seen her before. “If that was all I wanted, I would have tied her up in a neat little bow the moment she stepped into my domain. She never would have had the chance to make this rotten bargain of yours. I wanted time that you tried to steal from me.”

“Time?” Ester laughs. “Time to deceive her?”

“Time to convince her both versions of me are worth what I need from her.”

That leaves Ester silent.

“I love her.” He says, his eyes locked on me. “I would never let you do something as cruel as what you want from her.”

“There has to be a child. You know the rules of this place.”

“Fine, then, I’ll carry it. Or put it in one of your trees, hide it in a cabbage, deliver it by stork... I don’t care. You will not make her have a child she doesn’t want.”

Lips pursed, she studies us both....

“A new bargain, then.” She looks at me, and for a moment she seems... scared. “You will conceive his child. You will return to me and I will take it from you and when it is ready to be returned to you, it will be yours again. From then, raise it until it is twenty five and our bargain is through.”

“Our bargain will be through the moment the foetus is in your possession. I will raise the child when the time comes,

because I don't trust you to do it. Not because I will owe you anything."

"I can accept those terms."

"Just remember," Krampus says, drawing me away from her, "What the forfeit is if *you* fail to deliver."

He turns me and somewhere in the middle of that arc, we wind up back in his domain.

## Give & Take



HIS DOMAIN IS TOASTY WARM, AND THE FIRST THING HE DOES—without saying a single word—is produce a basin of hot water and begin cleaning my hands of that soil.

“You said you didn’t care what she’d do to me?”

“I say lots of things when I’m him.” He doesn’t look at me, focus fully fixed on my hands. “I know it doesn’t... mean anything, but I was wrong. About a lot of things, but in hiding that from you for a start.”

“What would have happened if you’d just given me the hat?”

“No more Christmas.” He produces it out of thin air, flips it over in his hand, and then starts drying mine with it. “If I can’t look like one of you, I can’t set foot in the mortal realm. If I lose the connection to the mortal realm, I can’t see it through my baubles.”

Leaving it in my hand, he reaches up and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. “I risked losing you either way. I couldn’t abandon your world *and* lose you.”

“You’d already made your plans with the cuckoos.”

“To give you everything you wanted, I had to barter favours and bargain myself. I thought the cuckoos were the only thing Ester would be willing to deal for.”

“Is that what the rest of the list was?”

“The leprechaun wanted his doves back from Gren’s temple. I didn’t ask why Diyo needed the sheep.... Mortal

creatures react differently to our world. You saw that. Every item went somewhere.”

“Except the chickens... those you ate.”

“Those I ate.” He nods, a sheepish smile on his lips.

“I did not know the geese could not lay eggs in winter. That was foolish of me... I assume Minoka did that on purpose.”

That is a name *everyone* knows. “Never trust the trickster.”

“I cannot change this bargain you made. You don’t have to be with me. I can make it happen without desecrating your body again.” He swallows and looks down at the floor. “And when it’s done, you will never have to see me again if you don’t wish it. But my hearth will always be open to you.”

I should probably take him up on that offer. Get this over with, leave, and sort through everything that’s gone on... at least sleep on it. But...

“I have questions.”

“I will tell you anything.”

“When did you realise I didn’t know there were two of you?”

He doesn’t even hesitate. “The morning I came to you... when you told me you’d delivered the partridge to *him* and not me.”

“Why didn’t you correct me?”

“When I wear that hat... I feel like a different god.” His voice lowers. “I don’t like him... But I need him. And he is me despite that dislike.”

That doesn’t explain why he didn’t tell me when he was like this... “I don’t ever want to see you in that hat again. At least, not for a very long time.”

“I will do everything within my power to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Good.”



There are hundreds of questions swirling in my head and I try to fit them together in a semblance of an order, but there's really only one question that matters.

“You've said you love me.... Is that true?”

“I've loved you for so long, it feels like I always have. I don't expect you to love me back. I am... me, obviously, and I've had years to get to know who you are... you've known me for mere days.”

That doesn't change the fact that I did fall for him. Hard and fast. Like slipping on ice and landing with the sharp snap of bones.

I almost tell him I want to make a new bargain... but no. No more bargains between us.

Sorting through all the things he said to me in both forms, I finally recall the words I want.

“You are going to beg for my forgiveness. You are going to breed me.” I say, stepping closer to him, pushing him back toward that holly and mistletoe swathed bed. “And eventually, you are going to bind me. Do you know why?”

He shakes his head slowly as his legs hit the back of the bed.

I push and he lets himself fall.

“You are mine.”

He takes my hips as I climb up onto him and says, “I have been for far longer than you know.”

“Good.” I kiss him so hard, it feels like my jaw might break, but I don't pull back.

My clothes vanish somewhere along the way, and I have no idea how much time we spend there, lying against each other, kissing, getting no closer to our eventual end goal.

“Forgive me, Holly.” His lips coast over my throat. “I will spend eternity making this up to you.”

It won't take that long.

But I don't plan on making it easy on him, either.

"You can start now." I crawl over him, pinning his knees to the mattress and stroke his cocks, licking my lips as my fingers follow the twisting lines of them.

His tongue reaches out, slick saliva coating himself as it follows my strokes, and then it slips between my legs, licking and twisting my clit...

By the time I rise up to take him, we're both slick enough. I slide onto him with no resistance, just one low moan.

"Untwist them," I say, and he obeys.

The movement makes my eyes cross, but as they are now, two cocks set on top of each other within me, they feel like too much and just enough all at once.

They fit inside of me so tightly, it's almost impossible to move on my own, but his hands help and every rise and fall makes me wish there was even more of him.

I lean down to kiss him, and let myself enjoy the way his chest hair rasps at my nipples.

Here, like this, I can pretend that the last day didn't happen. I can pretend that nothing happened to sour this moment... And I let myself.

I let myself fall under his familiar spell, and I almost lose myself entirely.

But I still. That worry aching deep inside me makes me ask. "You're certain she won't go back on her word?"

"Completely. If she tries to go back on your deal, she loses all her power... and you gain it."

And if there's one certainty with all the gods... they don't give up their power.

I shove all those thoughts away and lean down to kiss him again.

"Fuck me, Krampus. Fill me up and remind me who you belong to."

“I’m yours, little berry.” He thrusts his cocks up into me, dragging me down and then a wicked smile covers his lips. “And I know what you want.”

His tongue curls around the tip of his tail, coating it in that slick saliva, and then, his tail whips down behind me and a moment later it wiggles along my bum and between two breaths, it slithers inside me.

That whip-thin tip curls and bunches and I can’t stop the moans he drives from me, pistoning in and out, working both holes in a rhythm that drives me wild.

And when I come, head thrown back, I see us in the mirror overhead... exactly as we were meant to be.

## *Special Delivery*



KRAMPUS—I’VE DECIDED TO CONTINUE TO THINK OF HIM AS two separate gods for the time being—helps me clean up and drapes me in a dress made of red velvet with white trim. It’s flouncy and beautiful, and all I can think is how dirty it will get.

But I don’t argue with him when he takes my hand and leads me to another wall of flowers, this one inside his domain... and made entirely of poinsettias.

We walk through it, no vine pull necessary, and Ester watches us, warily.

“Come here.” I do as she asks, letting go of Krampus’ hand to climb the step to her. “You’re sure you won’t carry it.”

My jaw hardens and I meet her eyes. “I will not. Are you trying to go back on your bargain?”

“Of course not.” The god rolls her eyes at me and then presses her hand to my abdomen.

There’s a sharp spike of pain, and then she draws her hand away, holding a pear... upside down.

“I will keep this safe until the baby is ready for your world.” She holds out her hand, and one of the trees seems to take it from her, nestling it in its branches. “In nine months, look for it in your garden.”

Klaus steps beside me and tosses a familiar gold bird into the tree. The partridge roosts beside the pear, fluttering its wings. “I plan to keep an eye on my son.”

Ester doesn't look like she approves, but she doesn't argue.

"Fine." She looks at me. "Your bargain is done. Now, where are my cuckoos?"

"Oh, they've been here the whole time." He points to the back of her throne and all twenty-five of them burst out, screeching and making her flinch.

He drags me away, running back through that poinsettia wall.

"The fireplaces are yours to use now whenever you wish. Think of any place you want to be when you push on those back stones, and that is where you will go... so long as there is a fireplace there, of course."

He leads me to the hearth. "I know you have much to do in the mortal world."

"Apparently, I have to figure out how to hold the Valley together for the next twenty-five years."

"I'll work on that." He kisses my knuckles. "Come back to me, little berry. Every night and any time in between them, too."

He lets me go, but he watches me until I disappear behind those red and green flames.

There's nowhere else I plan to be.



I BREATHE a sigh of relief when I step out of the hearth and into Susan's living room and dawn has barely broken.

She's staring at the floorboards, her eyes wide as saucers.

"I'm okay," I say, quickly taking off the mask and she turns to me, robe spinning wide.

"Oh, thank the gods."

Crushing me to her in a hug so tight it hurts, Susan doesn't let me go until I tap her on the arm and ask to breathe.

“I worked out my bargain. Everything is going to be alright.” *Better than alright.*

“I came back here first, so you wouldn’t worry.” My gaze goes to the table. “And to collect those letters you no longer need.”

She hands them to me and I set them directly in the fire.

“I love you, Susan.” I wait for her to look at me. “And I would be honoured to deliver any babe you have from now until John can no longer perform.”

“Hey!” John says, coming in from the back room. “That’s not nice.”

I laugh, because it isn’t, but I’m not worried which list I’m on anymore.

“I’ll see you soon.” I step into her fireplace and out of my own.

When I drag the blanket down, he’s not a shadow anymore. I see him as if it’s a window, and he waits on the other side of it.

Our home seemed shiny on Christmas morning. Today, it’s all brand new. The chair that had been broken for three years looked as though the spindle had never split. The icebox has been replaced by a square machine that hums and blasts cold air at me when I open it.

“What’s this?” May asks as she comes into the kitchen and when she flips a switch, a new chandelier over the table flicks to life. “Electricibee!”

“Electricity,” Meg corrects, staring at the light. “It’s practically magic.”

“Magic, because we certainly didn’t pay for anyone to run power lines this far out of the city.”

“Sit down and I’ll tell you what’s going on.”

They do, thankfully, and I manage to get them all to fill their plates before I start.

“You know how there’s a man who runs the city and lives in the tower?”

“The magician!” May says and Meg shakes her head, but doesn’t correct her.

“He was kind of like a magician, but not quite. He’s gone now, and because Santa likes me,” I pick the words out carefully. “I’m going to be taking care of things until his replacement is able to.”

They both stare at me blankly.

“Does this mean we have to move into that icky old tower?”

“Nope.” Because I won’t. “It just means that I’m going to be doing some different work from now on.”

“Okay!” They take the news as I expected—not a care in the world.

Nan, on the other hand....

As they chatter and butter their toast, she leans close. “You told me there was not going to be a god child.”

“Circumstances have changed... it will be here in nine months.” I think about what Krampus said when speaking to Ester. “We should plant some cabbages this year.”

*From Now On Our Troubles Will Be  
Out of Sight*



WHEN I PUT MEG AND MAY TO BED FOR THE NIGHT, I SLIP into my room, slip out of my dress and into my nightgown and mask and go to him.

It is a routine I look forward to making a habit.

He waits for me at the edge of the fire, scooping me into his arms and taking me straight to his bed... our bed.

“You need to sleep,” He says, drawing me to his side and pulling the covers up, over us.

“You’re delivering Susan’s baby.”

“I am.” I say, snuggling close with a yawn I feel down to my toes. “It occurred to me that if I have this power now—though I don’t think I believe it. I don’t feel any different.”

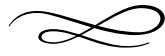
“You do.”

“*If* I do... then I can be the person I’m mad doesn’t exist.” I set my chin on his shoulder and look up at him. “The Tooth Fairy can attend for the babe, and I will be there to look Death in the face and tell him where to go if he wants the mother.”

“That, my little berry, will definitely put you on the nice list forever.”



# Epilogue



IT'S STILL WARM ON THE SEPTEMBER MORNING THAT A BABY cries from my garden.

I drop the paperwork I'd been sorting through and go to it immediately.

A tiny black mask rests on top of the green leaves

And there, settled in the middle of an enormous cabbage, an itty-bitty baby boy with bright gold eyes and hair dark as coal.

He kicks his feet and coos, and I bundle him up as the girls race out to me.

“Who is that!?” They ask, hopping on their toes to get a better look at him.

“This is your nephew.”

“We have a nephew?” May asks as Mag screws her nose up. “But you didn't have a baby.”

“We'll talk about how... Noel got her when you're older.”

“Noel?” Nan asks, leaning over me to wiggle her finger at him.

“It only feels right, given his father.”

“His father?” Meg looks confused. May does not. “Santa doesn't like you. Santa *loves* you.”

They both run off giggling, saving me from any possible need for explanations.

“I’ll keep an eye on them. You get yourself settled.”

I nod, but I watch them go a moment before I go back inside. But I don’t take the baby to the bassinet by my desk that’s been waiting for him.

Instead, I push open the back of the fireplace and take him directly to his father.

“What is that?” Krampus asks as soon as I cross over the hearth, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“It’s a child. Your child.”

His brow crumples and he looks at it in distaste. “They’re just... tiny mortals?”

“Yes, what did you think they would be?”

“I don’t know... something slimier.”

That makes me laugh. “They certainly can be slimier if they want to.”

Noel looks at Krampus with his wide golden eyes and lets out a burbling laugh. I’m not even sure he can see him yet, but I know the moment Krampus melts.

“I suppose one child isn’t that unpalatable.”

Laughing, I kiss him and shake my head against his lips. “One isn’t bad, but neither of us are going to enter into a bargain that gets him a brother. Right?”

“Right?” His tongue tickles at my ear. “I prefer being able to breed you without consequence.

“Me too.” I lick my lips and then Noel starts to fuss.

“I like him less now.” Krampus says with a smile that tells me he’s joking.

“I’ll see if Nan can watch him a little later and I’ll sneak away. I have work to do, after all.”

It’s taken me nine months to figure out how to make a balance work between the life I want and what the tower needs. But I think it’s safe to say, we’ve found our happily ever after.

## *Author's Note*

Krampus was one of those stories that got away from me. It was intended to be a short book, about one and a half times the size of the first Easter Bunny book. It was meant to act as a little companion to the Yule Cat book, and yet....

What I started out with turned into something a little weirder and ultimately better than what I'd originally intended. And now, the Yule Cat is playing the companion.

Also, I felt comfortable playing with the different items in the 12 Days of Christmas, because there are too many versions to count and this is the Valley, who knows what their version would be like. Maybe Meg or May took that list and turned it into a song, years later in an act of retaliation against her brother-in-law?

I don't know what it is about Christmas that makes me lean toward the dark and maudlin, so I'd like to formally apologize for the darker tone of this one.

## *About Dalia*

Dalia Davies came up with the title for “Railed by the Easter Bunny” as a joke. But that joke grew legs and hopped right out of her brain and onto the page for you to read and enjoy with her. She writes fantasy romance that pairs old gods and monsters with mortal women who get exactly what they want and maybe a little more than they came for. Living in the southwestern US, she’s let the outside heat permeate her stories and hopes they leave you panting.

Find more info and sign up for the newsletter at [www.daliadavies.com](http://www.daliadavies.com)

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*Also by Nalia Davies*

# VALLEY OF THE OLD GODS

[Railed by the Easter Bunny](#)

[Sequel to the Easter Bunny](#)

Railed by the Krampus

Railed by the Yule Cat

Railed by the Reaper

# DEVIL'S DANCE

[The Dame & The Devil](#)

[The Flame & The Fallen](#)



*Books as Ara Lunaria*

# PARANORMAL MATES OF ERINBREN UNIVERSITY

[Seized by the Pack](#)

[A Taste For Blood](#)

[Alone with the Alpha](#)

[Surrender to the Night](#)

[Stealing my Father's Pack](#)

[One Month with a Wolf](#)



# COVEN OF CURIOSITIES

*Scarlette Mathis*

[Blue Moon Lover](#)

[Blood Moon Huntress](#)

[Midwinter Mistress](#)

*Elaria Mason*

[Witch's Bane](#)

Crossing the Coven

The Wolf Wife



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# SHADOW ZONE BROTHERHOOD

[Alien Passion](#)

[Alien Obsession](#)

[Alien Fascination](#)

[Alien Captive](#)

[Alien Attraction](#)

[Alien Magnetism](#)

Alien Devotion

Alien Entanglement



# SOLAR DELIGHTS

[Hotter than the Sun](#)

[Slick as Mercury](#)

[Circling Venus](#)

*Books as Andi Simms*



# A TASTE OF SOMETHING WICKED

[Fate at Fault](#)

[Fair Bargain](#)

[With this Vow](#)

Extra Credit

[All Fun & Games](#)

[At Summer's End](#)

[Like & Sub](#)

One Last Chance

# *Detailed Content Warnings*

## BIRCHING/CANING

In his mythos, the Krampus is known for many things, some of those I ignored completely, one of them I kept was his bundle of birch sticks. He uses those sticks on Holly on two occasions. Once, as a punishment, and a second time by her request.

## BREEDING

On multiple occasions language alluding to breeding is used. There is no “traditional” pregnancy in this book. Holly does not want to carry a child and will not be made to by any god, or this author. (please see “Use of emergency contraceptives / Unconventional Family Planning” warning)

## DEATH OF A PARENT / POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION / SUICIDE

Both of Holly's parents have died before the opening of the book. Her mother from illness during her struggles with postpartum depression and her father shortly after by his own hand. It is briefly mentioned in several places, but never in detail.

## EXPLICIT HUMAN/NON-HUMAN SEX

This is a monster romance, and while he is “Klaus” the Krampus looks human, but he is more often not-human. If you need to know what you’re getting into ahead of time, there is an illustration of him [here](#).

## FAT SHAMING / SLUT SHAMING

Mid way though the book, Holly details a a very brief list of things others have said about her weight, and late in the book several elves make unseemly remarks relating to both her size and her relations with the Krampus. They get their comeuppance (and then some).

## USE OF EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVES / UNCONVENTIONAL FAMILY PLANNING

Holly uses a medicinal “potion” after sleeping with the Krampus in order to counter effect any possible pregnancy. And, at the very end of the book, Ester removes her uterus in order to make a bargain without forcing Holly to endure a pregnancy she does not want.



# *Spice Menu*

[Holly seals her deal with a Kiss](#)

[Kissing the Krampus](#)

[Holly learns just how much she likes the taste of eggnog](#)

[Holly & Klaus play with a special snow globe](#)

[Holly gets a little Birching](#)

[Klaus eats his Christmas dinner...](#)

[Holly finally gets her eggnog cream pie](#)

[A doubly delightful time for Holly, two cocks & a tail.](#)

[Santa Clause is coming \(to town\).](#)

[Caning with Krampus](#)

[A very angry blowjob](#)

[Holly makes Krampus apologise](#)