PETER NORTH



Christmas Academy 1

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Peter North

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Chapter 1



My phone buzzed as the chairlift cleared the first support tower. I shifted to pull it from my pocket, and the chair swung beneath me. My free hand locked around the safety bar. I could just picture my dumb ass slipping under it and bouncing down the glacier. That was all I needed. To fall to my death at a mandatory corporate circle jerk in the Austrian Alps.

“For fuck’s sake,” I muttered. “It’s not even December. How can Santa’s supply chain already be pooched?”

A fleet of Northstar trucks was headed toward a distribution center in Ohio with water in the loading bays. Most carried inventory for the company’s Christmas in July sale. The rest were loaded with artificial trees and lighting displays meant for later in the year, but apparently none of it could be unloaded where it was going.

I opened the transportation dashboard on my phone and checked the drivers’ locations. Some were already in Ohio. The others were approaching from different directions with enough driving time left to redirect them if I could find somewhere to put the freight.

Beside me, Dick Whitcomb, Northstar's vice president of marketing, was halfway through a rambling bullshit explanation of why Christmas nostalgia represented an underutilized year-round market. I resisted the urge to push him off the chairlift.

"The key," he was saying, "is to stop thinking of Christmas as a season. We need to own the emotional real estate of December, then expand our footprint into the rest of the calendar year."

At Northstar, we started planning the next Christmas before we finished processing returns from the last one. I hadn't thought of it as a 'season' in years. I'd have liked to expand *my* footprint into his ass. But I had enough tattered shreds of self-preservation left to keep that little intrusive thought wrapped up with a shiny red bow.

"Excuse me for a second, Dick," I said. "I've got an Ohio distribution center trying to jingle my balls."

I smashed the contact for my transportation manager, who had clearly been waiting by the phone for me to yell in her ear.

"Don't worry, Mr. Crispin," she said calmly, without even saying hello. "Everything is under control."

"Tell me you found somewhere to put this crap, Wanda. I'll make an honest woman of you."

"That won't be necessary, sir," she retorted. "I'm enjoying the hussy life. But yes, we've got several somewheres."

Wanda was fifty-five going on eighty after years of desk work, cigarettes, and tanning booths. She was probably a pretty hot little number in her prime, but now she looked like someone's grandmother got left in a

dehydrator for too long. The idea of her living the hussy life filled me with an absurd, almost transcendent joy, whether it was true or not.

“Good for you, Wanda,” I said. “What’s the plan?”

“We’ll hold the western loads before they reach Ohio and send the Pennsylvania drivers to Allentown.”

“Allentown is full.”

“It was full this morning. Store transfers cleared part of the dock before lunch, and—” She stopped talking while she checked. “Well, shit. You’re right. They’re full again.”

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you; I’m not just a pretty face.”

“That’s right, sir,” she deadpanned. “You’ve got a damn sexy ass, too.”

I snorted. “Well, you can stop kissing it. I already signed for your bonus. Now here’s what I’m thinking. Indianapolis can take the sale freight. Send the lighting displays to Dayton for cross-dock, but don’t leave anything there overnight.”

“That still leaves the trees.”

“Toledo.”

“They’ll charge emergency rates.”

“Nobody else is bidding for that space. You can tell them to kiss my sexy ass.”

The vice president glanced over. “Problem?”

“Ohio flooded,” I told him.

“What was headed there?”

“Mostly inventory for the Christmas in July sale.”

“See?” He turned his attention back to the pristine mountain vista. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Crispin. People are buying Christmas decorations in *July*. The entire year is open to us, if *we’re* open to *it*.”

He didn’t give two shits about my transportation crisis and we both knew it.

I turned slightly away from Dick and lowered my voice. “If you really loved me, Wanda, you’d fake an emergency bad enough to get me sent home. Preferably before we start singing kumbaya and doing trust-fall exercises.”

“Ohio *is* underwater, sir. Some might consider that an emergency.”

“Dick just tried to turn it into a marketing opportunity.”

“If you’re asking me to set a warehouse full of Christmas trees on fire for you, I’ll do it. But I’m going to need more than a bonus, sir,” she purred. “Like a date.”

“Wait, I can’t tell if you’re bribing me or trying to get me fired.”

“Either way, you’re mine,” she cackled. “Hussies gotta hussy.”

She hung up on me before I could come up with a good comeback. Wanda and I had a longstanding agreement that every conversation we had should stretch the limits between friendly banter and sexual harassment. Why? Neither of us knew. Maybe it made us feel alive while Northstar was slowly sucking our souls out and replacing them with wadded up PVC-laden tinsel.

She was just joking, but I swore to any God that might be listening, if it would get me out of this retreat, I'd happily fuck Wanda six ways from Sunday. She had blue eyeshadow up to her eyebrows, skin like beef jerky, and I didn't even know what that saying was supposed to mean… but I'd do it. I'd do *anything* to get out of here.

But since that was as likely to happen as Wanda actually lighting the Christmas tree warehouse on fire, I sighed and got to work on the transfers.

Allentown needed new route numbers before its warehouse system would accept the freight. Indianapolis needed an arrival order so the sale inventory wouldn't end up trapped behind the artificial trees. Dayton could unload and reload the lighting displays but had nowhere to store them. I set the departure appointments for the affected stores and approved hotel rooms for the drivers who would run out of hours before they finished.

By the time we passed the final tower, every truck had a new destination. Nobody was still headed toward the flooded building, and none of the drivers would be stranded. The sale inventory would arrive late, but it would arrive. I failed to feel even a smidge of satisfaction.

Elaine Kessler, Northstar's regional operations director, would still call to ask why I hadn't somehow kept Ohio from flooding, as if acts of God were under my control. The fact that I'd fixed the problem would barely warrant a mention.

Everyone called Kessler the Snow Queen behind her back. She kept the regional office cold enough to store meat and gleefully took missed company targets as a personal insult. Privately, I wondered if the reason she

kept her office so damned cold was because her heart was frozen, and the frigid temperatures were the only thing keeping her alive.

Dick Whitcomb was going on about an evergreen holiday ecosystem now. I had no idea what the fuck he was talking about, and I didn't care any more than he did about Ohio.

The lift slowed as we approached the upper station. I checked the first confirmations, put my phone away, and raised the safety bar, eager to get the hell away from the marketing VP.

"What do you think?" he asked.

I stared at him, trying to remember a single word he'd just said. "About what?"

"The year-round ecosystem."

"I think Halloween is going to want a word with you about October," I said. "Not to mention all the other cash grab holidays we're competing with outside of December. Valentine's Day, Easter, Back-to-School, whatever the fuck the mattress people are doing with President's Day."

He frowned at the slope ahead of us. "You're right. We need stakeholder alignment."

He said it like he was invoking the bat signal. I imagined stabbing him through the eye with an icicle like Mr. Freeze.

Instead, I smiled and nodded. "Stakeholder alignment. Absolutely."

We slid off the chair at the top. Dick skied toward the rest of the Northstar group and called for someone from strategy. I stayed near the lift, making

an excuse about needing to wait until the Toledo confirmation came through.

The Ohio disaster was handled. Another Christmas catastrophe averted. Ho-Ho-Horray. Now, I could return to the important business of pretending this trip would make me a better leader. *Kill me. Please God, have mercy and end my suffering!*

The plastic badge hanging from my neck read:

NORTHSTAR HOLIDAY GROUP - LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

The retreat program was printed on the back. After lunch, we had the trust-fall exercise—yeah, I hadn't been joking about that—followed by a workshop on Q4 synergy. Whatever that meant. The closing keynote was called *Selling the Magic*.

Attendance was mandatory. And so was "holiday spirit."

I probably should have jumped from the chairlift.

But I hadn't. So I was forced to plaster a big fake smile on my face before I skied down with the group, ate lunch, and disappeared before anyone could ask me to catch Dick Whitcomb's fat ass.



My room overlooked the lower slopes. Northstar had welcomed every executive with gift baskets full of sparkling water, branded chocolates, weak coffee, and—hey look!—a miniature artificial tree decorated with company ornaments. It was a corporate Christmas miracle! Mine stood on the desk beside my laptop. Someone had plugged it in while I was gone. Red and white lights blinked across its branches.

I unplugged it a little more violently than was necessary, and watched the bulbs dim like I'd just pulled their life support.

A quick glance at the transportation dashboard on my phone showed the freight moving along its new routes. Allentown had accepted the transfers. Indianapolis still needed a departure sequence for the following morning. Blah, blah, blah. They could wait until I got out of my ski boots.

When I closed the app, I saw a missed call and a voicemail from Meredith.

I stood beside the desk with one boot unbuckled, feeling like I'd swallowed a lump of tree sap. What the hell did *she* want?

Meredith hadn't called since we divided the contents of our condo eight months earlier. She had taken the dining table I'd picked out, all the good knives, even my fucking espresso machine. I hadn't fought her about any of it, but really? That felt like a low blow.

I'd kept the condo and not much else. I didn't even particularly want to keep it, but breaking the lease and finding a new place to live felt like a hell of a lot of work when I could barely find the motivation to drag my ass out of bed every day. What was the fucking point?

I was tempted to delete the voicemail without listening to it. But that felt childish. So I forced myself to go through the motions, just like I did with everything else.

“Hey, Cole. It’s me. I know you’re away with Northstar, so you might not get this right away. I just… wanted to tell you myself before you heard it from somebody else. I’m… engaged! It happened last night. I’m really happy, and I hope you’re doing well too. I didn’t want this to be strange. Anyway, that’s all. Take care.”

The message ended.

I deleted it. I should have put my phone away, too. But my fingers moved of their own accord. Before I realized what I was doing, before I could talk myself out of it, I had opened Instagram.

I had promised myself I wouldn’t do it. Ever. On pain of death. She’d left me. I wasn’t going to pine over her, even if she had broken my heart.

And it had worked, too. The promise had been easy enough to keep when she posted restaurant pictures and weekend trips. I didn’t care what she’d eaten in Montreal or where she’d gone hiking with the man she started seeing after we broke up.

I hadn’t moved, but I had moved on.

At least, I’d thought I had. The twisting in my guts suggested otherwise, but that could have been the Tiroler Gröstl I’d eaten at lunch. The skillet full of fried potatoes, bacon, onions, and egg had enough grease in it to send me to an early grave.

Yeah. That was definitely it. Not lingering feelings for Meredith at all. I steeled myself and clicked on her profile pic.

The engagement post was at the top of her page, buoyed by the likes and shares of her hundreds of friends and acquaintances.

Meredith sat on a restaurant patio with her left hand raised beside her face. A ring caught the sunlight. Her fiancé had one arm around her. I was surprised to find I didn't even want to punch him in the face.

Both of them looked happy. I knew him vaguely from the consulting company Northstar had hired for a warehouse expansion. He was handsome, successful, and smiling at Meredith the way a man should smile at the woman he planned to marry. I was relieved to realize I didn't actually feel anything about it. I *had* moved on.

But then, I read the caption. "Can't wait to get married and start our family!"

What the fuck?

I read it again.

When Meredith and I had been together, *I* was the one who wanted children. I wanted a house somewhere cheaper than the city, a yard with room for a dog, and Christmas at home instead of wherever Northstar's latest operational disaster happened to be.

I thought we could move back to Minnesota or find another small city. I could take a regional position and accept the pay cut. We could build a life we were actually home often enough to enjoy.

But Meredith liked the condo, the restaurants, and the vacations. I'd liked them too, but Christ on a cracker, we worked ridiculous hours to pay for a home where we barely saw each other. I wanted more.

She didn't want to leave her career or the city, and she wasn't sure she wanted children. We spent the next month trying to find a compromise. Then, suddenly, it was like she got tired of trying. She ended our engagement, returned the ring, and moved out.

The worst part was, I wasn't angry with her. I couldn't be. She hadn't cheated or lied. We'd divided everything without a fight. Even the espresso machine, I'm sure she would have let me have it if I'd only asked. I'd just been so numb I hadn't bothered. That wasn't her fault. The breakup was so civilized I felt guilty about the fact that I secretly wished I *could* hate her. It might have made things easier.

Now, eight months later, she was engaged again and *couldn't wait to start a family?*

I looked at the photo. I had been handsome, successful, and blindingly in love with Meredith too. I didn't mean any of that in a cocky, self-aggrandizing way. I'd worked hard to be the kind of man she would be proud to be with. I had wanted her to be happy, for us to be happy together. What did the man beside her have that I didn't?

My phone buzzed with a message from the retreat coordinator.

Trust exercise starts soon. We're missing you!

I put the phone face-down on the desk and put my face in my hands.

I felt like I should talk to someone, but there was nobody I wanted to talk to. Dad had been dead for four years. Mom had been gone for a year and a half. Did I even know anyone who would care?

I had an insane impulse to call Wanda and tell her about the troubles of my heart. At least she'd have the decency to crack a dirty joke. I hated to admit the fact that her off-color flirting was about the only attention I'd had from a woman since breaking up with Meredith. Apparently walking around with a perpetual scowl on my face wasn't the best advertising for my swingin'-single status.

Fuck this.

I wasn’t going to spend the afternoon alone in that room thinking about my ex and her happy new family-in-the-making. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to go down and fake happiness for a bunch of corporate execs. I’d kept working at Northstar after my dad had died, partly because he was such a huge fan of Christmas. It felt like a way to keep a part of him alive. Instead, Northstar had bled every last drop of joy I had for the holiday season and left me with nothing.

Fuck them, too.

I pulled my other boot back on, buckled it, and left the leadership lanyard beside the artificial tree.

The lift attendant barely looked at my pass when I boarded alone. Most of the corporate group remained at the lodge to drop backward into one another’s arms and make noises about mutual accountability. But what was the attendant going to do? Call the kumbaya police? I could see a few others had escaped to the slopes, too. Their matching blue jackets stood out against the snow below.

As the chair carried me back toward the glacier, I tried to clear my mind.

Skiing demanded enough attention to shut everything else out. I’d learned as a kid and started doing it again after Dad died. A steep slope gave me immediate problems to deal with, with straightforward answers. As long as I kept my weight forward, read the slope, chose my turn, and did all that without making too many mistakes, I’d get to where I was trying to go.

Which, at the moment, was anywhere I didn’t have to think about Meredith.

I pushed away from the lift and crossed the packed snow toward the top of the run. The air had cooled since that morning, and now clouds covered the highest ridge, flattening the light across the glacier. The dull overcast made the uneven sections harder to see.

I started down anyway. What the hell did I have to lose?

My truant coworkers occupied most of the main route. Two had stopped below a narrow turn to take pictures. Farther down, another group of blue jackets spread across the trail while an instructor tried to teach them how to stop.

The last thing I wanted was to get flagged down for an impromptu conversation about how we were all skipping out on the bonding exercise, and wasn't that kind of like bonding, in its own way? Hardy-fucking-har.

I left at the next marker and took the ungroomed line beside the run.

The snow was rougher there, but I had space. I let myself pick up speed.

For a while, the only things that mattered were the pressure under my skis and the ground ahead. I crossed a shallow ridge and dropped into a long open section. My legs knew exactly what to do. I'd played hockey through high school, spent half my childhood driving snowmobiles around the Crispin Tree Farm, and I'd stayed in good condition as an adult.

The farm had been closed for eleven years, but I could still remember winter mornings there. The balers ran beside the lot before the sun came up, and the air had that sappy cut pine smell tinged with the gasoline burn of hot machinery. Dad would always stay outside all day, no matter how cold it was outside, until the last customer left. Mom spent all of December in the kitchen, doing her Christmas baking. The windows would be fogged from the stove and flour spread over every available counter. If I tried to steal something, which was always, she'd grill me about whether I'd gotten all the sap off my hands.

But they were gone now, and the farm belonged to someone else. And I couldn't seem to get back to who I was before. Somehow, I'd ended up in a career that perverted my favorite memories of my parents and turned my

favorite time of year into a never-ending nightmare of corporate greed. Where the hell had I gone wrong?

All I'd ever done was try to do the right thing. I tried to honor my parents, tried to build a life they'd be proud of, tried to marry a woman who shared my dreams. And somehow nothing had worked out.

Every Christmas, instead of spending it snuggled up by the fire next to Meredith, sipping hot chocolate, watching cheesy Hallmark holiday movies, and talking about the future, I'd been working overtime for Northstar, selling my "holiday spirit" for an oversized paycheck and a lump of coal in my chest. I was starting to think I was cursed.

Okay. You're hurtling down a mountainside, jackass. Wrap up the woe-is-me act, put a fucking bow on it, and pay attention.

It was getting icy, I realized. My heart hammered with adrenaline and nerves. The off-piste line narrowed below the glacier. Rock showed through the snow on my left. On the other side, the mountain dropped toward the lower lift and a sparse stand of pines near the melt line.

I should have crossed back to the groomed run. Instead, I continued downhill.

My phone buzzed inside my jacket. Indianapolis, probably. They still needed the morning departure sequence, and I hadn't finished it.

Fuck Indianapolis.

I reached a steeper section and shifted my weight into the turn. But my downhill ski struck ice.

Correction. Fuck me.

The edge slipped. My skis crossed, and my shoulder hit the ground so hard I felt like my lungs were collapsing. One binding released. I was sliding, then rolling. Snow scraped under my jacket and the sky churned across my vision.

I dug my elbow into the slope, but gravity was having none of that shit. My body turned downhill. I saw the pines directly below me. White ground. Gray sky. Dark branches.

Welp. Guess I asked for this. Thou shalt not beggeth the Lord for death in vain.

Bark shattered as I hit the tree, exploding outward in every direction. Every bone in my body felt like it did the same. Pain seared my brain down to one singular thought:

I wish I'd had just one more Christmas to do things right.

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Chapter 2



I woke up, which, all things considered, was surprising enough all on its own. Stranger still, I was warm.

Shouldn’t I have been lying in a broken heap under that tree, dead or waiting for death? There was no way I’d survived the crash without serious injuries. I remembered the impact. I remembered the pain. Yet I was tucked beneath a heavy quilt with a fire crackling nearby, and nothing hurt.

I lay still and tested the important parts. Fingers and toes? Check. Arms and legs? Check. Rock hard cock? Well, it wasn’t rock hard at the moment, but it didn’t seem to be bent or broken. I was calling that a win.

Everything moved when I told it to. My ribs didn’t grind together when I breathed. My skull appeared to contain all the pieces it had started the day with.

That was suspicious as fuck.

I glanced around the room and let the weirdness settle into my bones. There was no way this was a hospital, even with an overly rosy interpretation of European healthcare. Thick wooden beams crossed the ceiling, and the walls were made from broad logs fitted together without any visible nails. Pale light reflected off the snow outside the narrow windows. The only furniture was the bed, a pair of chairs, a wardrobe, and a small table beside a stone fireplace. All looked more suited to a log cabin than a medical clinic.

Someone had taken my ski clothes and dressed me in a long flannel nightshirt like the one Scrooge McDuck wore in that Disney Christmas special. It buttoned to my throat and reached halfway down my calves. The only thing missing was a pointy cap and a candle to carry while I searched the halls for Christmas ghosts. And a duck bill, I guess. If we were going with that version of the story.

Oh, and while I was ruminating on the oddness of my current situation, it would be remiss of me to ignore the old man sleeping in the chair beside my bed.

He was a big son of a bitch, with broad shoulders, a round belly, and a white beard that covered most of his chest. His red wool vest had been left open over a rumpled shirt, and one massive hand rested on top of a wooden cane. Round spectacles had slipped down his nose while he slept.

He looked exactly like Santa Claus.

Of course he did. I had cracked my skull open in a desperate attempt to escape the Northstar Leadership Summit, and my dying brain had sent me back to fucking work.

I shifted under the quilt, contemplating whether or not I was in any shape to make a run for it, just in case the old man was actually a serial killer *disguised* as Santa Claus. Plot twist! That was about the only thing that

could make this situation feel more unreal to me. The threat of murder at the hands of a holiday folk hero.

The bedframe creaked, and the old man opened his eyes. He looked confused for a moment. Then his gaze settled on me, and his expression relaxed.

“Oh, good,” he said. “You’re not dead. Yet.”

Well, that answered one question and raised several worse ones. “What do you mean, *yet*?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. You’re alive for the moment, but the situation is… complicated.”

His voice was low and rough with sleep. He pushed himself out of the chair, set the cane aside, and stretched until something in his back cracked. Up close, he looked less like the cheerful department-store version of Santa and more like an old farmer at the end of a long harvest. His beard needed trimming. Deep lines bracketed his eyes, and weariness showed beneath them.

“Where am I?” I asked. “And how did you get me off that mountain?”

“You’re at the North Pole. Though, technically, you’re still on the mountain too. Or rather, your body is. Your soul is here, awaiting our decision.”

I stared at him. “My soul? Decision? What—?”

The door opened before I could finish asking whatever I was trying to ask. I’m not sure anything coherent would have come out anyway, if I hadn’t been interrupted, because I was completely lost. A woman entered carrying a tray with a pot of coffee, three mugs, and a covered plate. She had dark hair streaked heavily with silver, gathered into a thick braid over one

shoulder. Her long wool dress was plain and well made. The keys hanging from her belt suggested she was an important woman with important things to do.

“He’s awake,” the old man told her.

“I can see that. I hope you haven’t started without me.” She set the tray on the table and poured a mug of coffee. “This conversation is usually easier after they’ve had something to drink.”

She brought the mug to me. The coffee smelled strong enough to cut through the fog in my head, better than any coffee I’d had since Meredith had absconded with my espresso machine—you know, come to think of it, maybe I should have gone to therapy or something, because there was no way it was normal to be this obsessed with an appliance.

I inhaled the rich steam like it could end this crazy dream, but I didn’t reach out to take it immediately. “Is it drugged?”

“No,” she said. “If we wanted you unconscious, we could have left you that way.”

I accepted the mug. It was warm against my hands, and the first swallow tasted like heaven. Oh God. *Was* this heaven? Maybe I really was dead and for some reason the afterlife that had been conjured for me was influenced by my repressed holiday spirit? This was so fucked.

“My name is Marta,” she said. “This is my husband, Kris. He is the current Santa Claus.”

“Yup. I called it.” I almost laughed. “Of course he’s Santa Claus. Why wouldn’t he be?”

Then my eyes narrowed. “Wait. What do you mean the ‘current’ one?”

“There have been four of us,” Kris said. “I took the coat in 1911. It’s a position, not an immortal condition, although the job does keep a man alive much longer than nature intended.”

I took another sip of my coffee. It tasted real. The heat from the fire felt real too. If this was some kind of coma-hallucination I had to give my subconscious credit. It hadn’t skimped on the special effects. “I think I saw a movie like this once. Only the guy didn’t die first, he accidentally killed Santa by knocking him off his roof.”

“I didn’t like that one,” Kris said. “I prefer the ones where Santa gets weapons and fights off demons or assassins. They’re closer to the truth.”

Marta’s expression tightened. “For Christmas’ sake, don’t start on demons. He has enough to understand tonight.”

She sounded far too serious for a disagreement about Christmas movies.

“I’m Cole Crispin,” I said. “And… I’m sorry… what the hell do you mean, demons?”

Kris snorted a laugh. “Cole. That’s a good one.”

“Save it.” I pointed at the old man in warning. “I’ve heard every possible Christmas coal joke in existence and none of them are funny. I’m strung out enough right now that if I hear another one I might snap.”

“Actually, I was thinking it’s a good thing,” Kris said. “All this time and we’ve only had variations on Nicholas and Christopher on the job. But times are dark, these days. Maybe what we need is a Cole.”

Demons. Darkness. This was not the Christmas special I had been led to believe. But I wasn’t getting the serial killer vibe either. So, what the hell was going on here?

“What exactly did you mean when you said my body was still on the mountain?”

Kris returned to the chair, but he didn’t relax into it. He leaned forward with his forearms braced on his knees.

“The North Pole exists inside a fold in time called the Long Night. Earth’s clock barely moves here. You—or your soul, rather—arrived here at the moment you struck the tree, after the impact but before your next heartbeat. Your body is still lying in the snow, and less than a second will pass on that mountain while you’re with us.”

I set the coffee down before I spilled it. “So, I’m dying.”

“Yes,” he said. “If we release you now, your next heartbeat will likely be your last.”

Marta sat in the other chair. She didn’t soften what he’d said, but her expression was kind.

“The Long Night gives you time,” she said. “If you use it well, you will get a second chance. An afterlife, if you will. In which you don the red suit and bring joy to all the good little boys and girls of the world. It’s an honor to be chosen.”

“You have got to be shitting me.”

Marta scowled. “That is not language befitting of a Santa Claus, young man.”

“You’ll have to forgive me,” I said. “My world has just turned inside out and sprouted candy canes. How much time have I got, exactly?”

“That depends on you,” Kris said. “The time fold can hold you until your First Trial. If you pass, it will hold for another year and another Trial. If you fail, you return to the mountain and die. Probably alone. It’s going to take them a very long time to find you, I suspect.”

It took me a moment to get past the casual way he said it. “What kind of trial?”

“The first one happens on Christmas Eve. You’ll ride the sleigh with me and take responsibility for one district to prove you can do the job. You’ll have to plan the route, manage your share of the load, and complete the deliveries before the Long Night ends.”

Routes, loads, and impossible deadlines I could do. The flying reindeer portion would probably need some work, but I could probably figure that out. “Wait… you said sleigh. Are there reindeer? Or is it just… magic?”

Lord Almighty, I was asking questions like this was a real thing. Like it was really happening and wasn’t an elaborate fever dream brought on by greasy Tiroler Gröstl and crippling, bone-shattering pain. What the fuck was wrong with me? Then again, what else was I supposed to do? Die?

“‘Just’ magic is a bit of an undersell if you ask me,” Kris said. “But yes. There are reindeer. Magic reindeer. Ornery bastards if you get on their bad sides, too. Mind the hooves.”

“Okay…” I racked my brain for the right questions to ask. If this really was a life or death situation I couldn’t afford to make any mistakes. “The Trial will be Christmas Eve. And it’s July—”

“On the mountain,” Marta replied. “Not here. The Academy term was already underway when the List selected you, so your first year will be accelerated. You’ll train until the next Christmas Eve the Pole reaches. It gets a little wibbly wobbly if you try to think about it too much, but the Pole

can experience all of that time and still return you to the moment it took you."

I tried to picture that and gave myself the beginnings of a headache. "So I could spend months here while less than a second passes in Austria."

"Yes."

"And if I pass this Trial, I'm alive again?"

"No," Kris said. "Passing buys you another year in the fold and a second Trial. Pass that, and the fold will hold you for one more year and the final Trial. Only after you pass all three can the sleigh collect your body before the impact finishes killing you."

"That's an important part of the process, dear," Marta said. "Because while magic can keep your soul from decaying during the training and trial periods, without a body, eventually you would die here as well. True immortality requires both flesh and spirit."

I picked up the coffee again. This time I took a much longer drink, wishing there was whiskey in it.

"Let me make sure I understand the sales pitch. You want me to pass three Trials over the next three Christmases, and failing any one of them means I die under that tree."

"That's correct."

"If I fail at any time during those three years, I die."

"Yes."

“Great. So, no pressure or anything.”

Kris rubbed one hand over his beard. “Look, son. I didn’t design the process. But I’ve spent more than a century doing this job, and I’m ready to retire. The coat requires a trained successor, which is why the first Santa founded the Academy. You will study there until you’re prepared to take each Trial.”

A school for prospective Santas. I’d spent the last hours of my life dodging trust exercises, and now the universe wanted to punish me with another mandatory training program.

“And if I pass all three,” I said, “I become… you?”

“You take the coat and become the fifth Santa Claus. The Long Night releases its claim on the moment you died, and the sleigh retrieves you from the mountain. Body and spirit are joined in immortality. And you keep the job until you find your own successor.”

I looked at his considerable stomach. “Does the coat come with that?”

“Not unless you marry a woman who makes ten pounds of sugar cookies every day.” Kris glowered at Marta.

She took a slow drink of coffee, but I caught the movement at the corner of her mouth. “Just because I bake them doesn’t mean you have to eat them, dear.”

“And when you retire?” I asked. “What then? Do you die?”

“Well, I was hoping to spend the rest of my days relaxing on a tropical beach somewhere with my wives and girlfriends,” Kris said. “But anything is possible, I suppose. Immortality doesn’t mean invincibility. So anything is possible.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking. Marta didn’t make any indication that she was offended by his remarks.

“Okay… uh… So, how many people have gone through this Academy?”

The humor disappeared from Kris’s face. “You are candidate forty-two.”

I waited for him to continue. When he didn’t, I looked at Marta.

“There have only been four Santas, right? So, what happened to the others?”

“They’re *dead*,” Kris said. “Haven’t you been paying attention? Satan’s Sleigh Bells, did the List pull another dunce? The Bahamas are getting farther away with every year.”

“I’m sorry,” I snapped. “This is a lot to take in!”

“Some failed during training,” Marta said. “Others passed the first or second Trial but couldn’t finish the third. None survived long enough to take the coat. It is not going to be easy for you, Cole.”

The room seemed warmer than it had a moment earlier. I pushed the quilt away from my legs and laughed.

“You know, when I woke up, I had this crazy thought that you might be a serial killer. And now it sounds like that’s basically true. You killed forty-one people before me.”

“I didn’t *kill* them,” Kris said, rubbing his eyes. “They, like you, were already dead. What I did is offer them a chance to *escape* death. It’s hardly my fault they weren’t up to the challenge.”

His answer should have pissed me off. Instead, I believed him. There was too much exhaustion in his face for this to be an elaborate joke. And at least he was being honest with me about the odds.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m sorry I called you a serial killer. But I still don’t get it. Why did you choose me?”

“I didn’t,” Kris said. “The List did.”

“What list?”

“The Nice List. I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

I waited for the punchline. Kris simply watched me.

“You’re serious.”

“I wish I wasn’t. Nice List candidates are often too soft-hearted for what this job requires. But it’s one of the stipulations set by the first Claus and we’re magically bound to obey his rules.”

“That’s why I’m here? I didn’t steal enough cookies when I was eight?”

“Children are easy. Most of them spend time on both Lists, and eventually they grow up and disappear from them altogether. You have to be a true believer to stay on the Lists, you know.”

“I hate to break it to you, Kris, but I don’t believe in Santa Claus. Hell, you’re sitting right in front of me, and I still don’t believe this is happening.”

“Not in me,” Kris said, with more patience than I likely deserved at this point. “But in the Christmas spirit. In the real meaning of the holiday.”

“But I’m not even *nice*. I hate my job. I’m grumpy all the time. I’m crass and jaded and probably depressed. This doesn’t make any sense.”

I didn’t know why I was arguing against my suitability for the position when the alternative was death, but I felt like there was some mistake. And if they were going to find out eventually, I’d rather not get my hopes up and then end up being told I was going to have to go back to being dead because they’d done an audit and, upon closer inspection, they’d determined I’d banged too many cocktail waitresses and dropped too many f-bombs to wear the suit. Sayonara sucker.

Kris shrugged. “That’s not my call to make and I don’t have the details. The List-Keepers keep the records, and they’re annoyingly territorial about them.”

“This is so fucked up.”

Marta scowled at me. Then she scowled at her husband for not scowling at me.

“As I said, the fact that you are an unusual candidate may work in your favor,” Kris said, ignoring his wife’s eye-daggers. “But the fact of the matter is your name has remained on it for eleven consecutive years. That’s unusual for an adult.”

Eleven years. That was how long it had been since the tree farm closed. I was twenty-one, two years into a business degree, and still planning to come home and run the place with Dad. When the farm went under, my parents moved into town, and I took a job on the loading dock at Northstar’s Cedar Falls warehouse. I told myself it was temporary.

Then I got promoted.

“Look,” Kris said. “The List identifies candidates. It doesn’t explain them. If you’re really that bothered by it, you’ll have to ask the List-Keepers when you reach the Academy. But you should know, the List doesn’t make mistakes.”

He gave me a look that said he knew exactly why I was freaking out right now. Probably he’d seen the same thing every time he explained the gig to a new recruit. Who felt qualified for a job like this? Who felt like they deserved a second chance? Actually deserved one. Not just wished they did because they knew they’d screwed up somewhere along the line.

I took a deep breath and tried to believe what he was telling me. “Sure. No mistakes. Magic doesn’t make mistakes.”

Marta stood and crossed to the nearest window. She opened the heavy wooden shutters, and reflected light flooded the room.

“Come,” she said. “You should see what you’re being asked to take responsibility for.”

I got out of bed, still somewhat surprised by the fact that my legs actually worked, despite the fact that I was in no pain, and joined her at the window. The floorboards were warm under my bare feet, but frost covered the edges of the glass panes.

The room overlooked a town buried in snow. Long wooden buildings filled a shallow valley, connected by paths lit with brass lanterns. Workshops, warehouses, and narrow houses crowded together beneath steep roofs. There were hundreds of chimneys, maybe more, trailing smoke into a deep blue sky. Small figures moved between the buildings with handcarts and sleds. Nobody seemed especially surprised by the dark or the temperature.

A cluster of large barns stood beyond the main workshops. The fenced yards around them were empty, but several sets of antlers showed above the

half doors. *Holy shit.* There really were reindeer. For some reason that made everything feel more real.

The town looked old. Not in a neglected sort of way, but like it had been built in layers and stages, growing as necessary. A lot of towns I'd seen in Europe had this same feel to them, the ancient and the modern side by side, and everything in between.

New wings had been added to buildings that leaned under the weight of previous additions. Covered walkways joined halls that had probably started several streets apart. From this height, I could see routes that doubled back, storage buildings isolated from the workshops that presumably used them, and a line of sleds waiting outside one narrow loading entrance.

Apparently even Santa Claus had bottlenecks. It would have been a nightmare to back a truck in there.

In the center of town, red light glowed beneath the snow. It spread outward from a low stone building and lit the foundations around it.

"What's under there?" I asked.

"The Hearth," Marta said. "It holds the Cheer that powers the Workshop and the sleigh."

"Cheer?"

"The source of Christmas magic, of course. Belief and generosity produce it, especially in children, and the Hearth gathers and stores it. Cheer lifts the sleigh, carries it around the world, and makes the other impossible parts of Christmas possible."

It sounded ridiculous. But there were reindeer, and while they weren't flying, I had an absurd sort of faith in the fact that they *could* if they wanted to. All of a sudden, I felt like a kid on Christmas morning.

"And you think I can learn to use it?" I said, awe creeping into my voice. "Magic?"

"You'll learn to channel Cheer through the Twelve Bond," Kris said behind me. "The Academy covers that during orientation. I would prefer not to."

I glanced back at him. "Why?"

"It's… a sensitive subject," Kris said. I could have sworn the old man was blushing.

Marta smiled at her husband, and there was a sudden twinkle in her eye. If they hadn't both been about a hundred years old, I'd have sworn she was giving him a 'come-hither' gaze.

When she turned to me, she was blushing too. "You'll find out everything you need to know tomorrow, dear."

"Assuming he's willing to take a crack at the Academy." Kris stood near the door and waited. "He hasn't actually accepted the position yet."

I looked down at the red glow beneath the snow. I knew nothing about magic. Obviously I had never handled a reindeer. Or even a goat for that matter. I knew fuck all about farm animals. I couldn't remember the last time I'd climbed onto a roof.

But the First Trial involved routes, loads, and getting everything where it belonged before a deadline. So, I wasn't completely unqualified for the job.

“What the hell,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

“Atta boy.” Kris smiled, but there was something a little sad about it.

I remembered he’d already done this a few dozen times, and every one of the people who’d signed up had ended up dying. But if what he’d said was true, I was already dead. All I was doing was rolling the dice on a second chance. How bad could it be?

As Marta followed Kris out of the room, I remembered something else.

“Hey, before you go. Uh, what was that you said about demons?”

The door clicked closed and I didn’t get an answer.

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Chapter 3



I crashed almost immediately after Kris and Marta left, despite the fact that I'd just been drinking coffee. I crawled back into bed, curled up under the covers, and… that was it. Brain off. No dreams, no nothing. Out like a Christmas light. I guess the shock of being transported to a 'time fold' dimension as a soul temporarily made flesh was more than caffeine could handle. Dying was tough, even if you didn't technically complete the process.

I woke the next morning to find a pile of clothes waiting outside my door, which was a good thing because I hardly wanted to show up to my first day of Santa training wearing a nightgown. I was pleased, but not surprised, to find that they fit me perfectly.

Not only that, but my body here was… fucking incredible. I had still been in pretty good shape at thirty-two, but there was no denying that years of stress and more time behind a desk than at the gym had started to take a bit of a toll. Now, I looked like I had when I was eighteen and playing hockey five times a week, hard and lean, but with a bit more bulk than I'd ever had even in my prime.

Now *that* was a Christmas miracle I could get on board with.

I pulled on the black wool trousers, heavy white shirt, and dark green sweater that had been left for me and admired myself in the mirror. There was a crest on the sweater that read Christmas Academy. I guessed this was my new school uniform. There were a pair of black fur-lined boots and a black wool coat as well. Was I a little disappointed it wasn't a red coat? Yes. But I consoled myself with the fact that the red coat might also come with a round belly and a big white beard, which I wasn't quite ready for.

And I looked damned fine in the uniform, if I did say so myself. Since Meredith had left me, I hadn't really been able to look in a mirror and like what I saw. I had this sneaking suspicion that there was something deeply, secretly wrong with me that she had seen and that was why she'd left. I worried that if I looked too hard, I might see it too.

But here, that seemed crazy. I looked good, and I felt better than I had in years, too. The afterlife wasn't too bad, as far as I was concerned.

Marta fed me enough breakfast to suggest she thought I'd never eaten before, and eating her food I could understand why Kris had such a belly on him. I mean… he'd been Santa since when? 1911? More than a hundred years of eating like a king and I'd be a fat bastard too. I tried to retain a bit of self-control, but I was surprised to find that my appetite matched my physique. I felt as hungry as I had when I was training, which was a strange feeling, too, after being too apathetic to eat for months.

Afterward, a sleigh carried me from the Kringle home into the town I'd seen through the bedroom window. The ride was short and cold. We passed wooden warehouses, workshops, and stables connected by narrow roads packed hard with snow. Elves… yes, those were fucking *elves*… moved between the buildings with handcarts and smaller sleds. Most gave me curious looks, but nobody stopped what they were doing. I wasn't nearly as strange to them as they were to me, I guess. They appeared to be more like Lord of the Rings type elves than the Brothers Grimm shoemaker variety.

Basically human sized, some taller, some smaller, pointed ears, large eyes, in a full range of normal human skin and hair colors.

Come to think of it, didn't Marta have pointed ears? I hadn't really paid much attention to it at the time, as I was a little pre-occupied with finding out that I was dead. And that morning, all I could think about was shoveling food into my mouth. But I was pretty sure she had.

I guess elves went with the territory, just like reindeer did. But for some reason, it still startled me.

The red light beneath the snow grew brighter as we approached the Workshop. I could feel heat rising through the floor of the sleigh when we passed near the Hearth. It was kind of weird that the snow didn't melt but, hey… magic! I was just going to have to start accepting weird as the new normal or I was going to give myself a headache.

Then the road curved north, away from the busier halls, and ended in front of a long wooden building with CHRISTMAS ACADEMY carved above its doors.

A woman waited on the steps. She had silver hair pulled into a tight knot and pointed ears that extended through it. Her charcoal dress covered her from throat to ankle, and a narrow black sash crossed her chest. A piece of polished black stone was pinned to it that looked a lot like… a lump of coal. I hoped that wasn't a bad omen.

The hair made her look old, and the severe expression on her face made her look even older, but the fact was her skin was flawless. And besides the resting bitch face, she was very pretty. Elf genetics, I guessed. Though Marta had looked older, so eventually they must age.

"Cole Crispin," she said as I climbed from the sleigh. "I am Dame Agathe, headmistress of the Academy. Marta has entrusted your instruction to me."

“Nice to meet you.”

“That remains to be seen.” She turned and entered the building. “We have had a disappointing string of recruits lately.”

I followed her. “Yeah, I heard something about that. But I’m here to do my best or die trying. Ha ha.”

She didn’t laugh, and probably it wasn’t funny. But I suddenly wanted to giggle like a maniac. I was actually going to go to a school where I would die if I failed a test. It was insane.

The entrance hall was warm, quiet. And longer than I expected, with portraits covering both walls. Each one showed a man, although they varied in age, clothing, and apparent century. Some wore old-fashioned coats or military uniforms. Others looked recent enough that I could have passed them in an airport.

Most wore ordinary clothes in their portraits, but a few wore red.

I slowed beside one of those. The man had a trimmed brown beard and one hand resting on a carved wooden staff. His red coat was darker and less cheerful than Kris’s, but there was no mistaking what it meant.

“One of the Santas?” I asked.

“Nicklaus,” Agathe replied without stopping. “The second.”

The portraits continued almost to the end of the hall. The men who hadn’t earned the coat by far outnumbered the ones who had. Which I already knew, of course, but it became startlingly clear seeing it laid out in front of me like that. There were no plaques explaining how any of them had failed, but they must have. And that meant they were dead.

An empty frame hung in the final space.

I stopped beneath it. The canvas inside had been stretched and prepared, waiting for paint.

“Is that mine?”

She flicked an icy blue eye at me and I had the distinct sensation of being sized up. “It will be finished once your time at the Academy has ended.”

That covered both possibilities.

I looked back at the red-coated men. When someone eventually painted me into that frame, I wanted to be wearing the suit. Not that it was such a difficult decision. It was that or death. But I really wanted it then. To be one of the few. Santa Claus number five. Lou Bega could write a song about me.

Agathe opened the doors at the end of the hall, and the thought disappeared from my mind.

Holy shit.

The mambo king wouldn’t be writing any songs about me if he’d been to this place. The room beyond was filled with women. The most gorgeous women I’d ever seen.

They sat at long tables beneath high wooden rafters or occupied chairs around the fireplaces. Some had books open in front of them. Others worked with tools, ribbons, harness leather, or bowls of glowing material I assumed was some kind of magic.

Conversations overlapped throughout the room, but the moment Agathe and I entered the room, they all fell silent. Wide-eyed faces began turning in our direction, and I noticed that every one of them, like the workers I'd seen outside, had pointed ears.

It was a fantasy nerd's wet dream. Other than the elf ears, they looked mostly human, in a hyper-idealized fantasy art sort of way. They were dressed in variations of white shirts, fitted jackets, tartan skirts, and pale stockings, the colors of which matched my own. The uniforms did little to disguise long legs, full breasts, narrow waists, or curved hips. In fact, they seemed designed to emphasize their feminine assets. Either that, or every single one of them had opted to wear a uniform that was a size or two too small. Maybe both? Who the hell was I to complain?

There were blondes, brunettes, and redheads. Their skin ranged through every shade I would have expected to see in an international airport, although no airport had ever assembled this many beautiful women in one terminal. Some looked mature and composed. Others lounged across the furniture or laughed with their friends like college coeds. They all had those unmistakable ears extending through their hair.

Maybe I had died and gone to heaven after all. It might explain why somebody had turned the North Pole into a Christmas-themed fantasy full of beautiful elf women.

The problem was that I hadn't been good enough to deserve a heaven designed specifically for my dick. Was it possible to be that good? If I'd known it was a possibility I probably would have tried harder.

I mean, Meredith had been pretty. More than pretty. I'd loved her, and for years she had been the woman I pictured whenever I thought about home, marriage, or children. But she had always looked real. These women did not. My mind kept snagging on pointed ears, long legs, and flashes of cleavage.

For the first time since hearing her voicemail, my ex-fiancée faded entirely from my mind, like an icicle melting in the sun. Good riddance.

The room was as silent as a fresh snowfall. I became aware that all those beautiful women were studying me in return.

Some looked curious or whispered behind their hands to their friends. A few examined me with open skepticism. Apparently being the only human man in a room full of elven women wasn't enough to make me the prize. Maybe I wasn't going to get to deck their halls in an epic Christmas-themed gang bang. But damned if it didn't still feel like heaven on earth. Or an earth-adjacent 'time fold.' Whatever.

A tall woman rose from a chair near the fire.

She was pale, with sharp features and glossy black hair that fell past her shoulders. Her pointed ears were decorated with silver chains. The fitted black jacket she wore over her white shirt looked more formal than the other uniforms, and she carried herself with the confidence of someone accustomed to having the best seat in every room.

"Hmm. I admit this one looks stronger than the last," she said. "But I wouldn't get my hopes up, girls. I doubt he has what it takes to graduate."

Several of the women nodded. I gritted my teeth and tried to stand a little taller.

"Bea," Agathe said, "you are welcome to return to your studies."

"I was studying *him*."

"And now you have finished. Sit. Down."

Bea’s dark eyes moved over me once more. She didn’t seem impressed, but there was enough interest in her gaze to make the inspection feel personal.

“Have I?” she said. “Perhaps.”

She gave me another cold, lingering look before she followed the headmistress’s order to sit down.

“Friendly place,” I muttered.

“The Academy is not responsible for making you feel welcome,” Agathe said. “Its purpose is to determine whether you can become the next Santa Claus without killing yourself or permanently harming the women who assist you.”

That killed some of my enthusiasm.

Before I could ask what she meant, I spotted another woman across the room.

She was smaller than most of the others, with a straight black bob cut beneath her chin and dark eyes fixed on me. Ink stained the fingers resting on the table in front of her. Her white blouse fit closely over her small breasts, and I was pretty sure she wasn’t wearing a bra. Despite this, it was her stare that held my attention.

She studied my face with an intense concentration, as if she were trying to memorize it.

I met her eyes, and she smiled. There was nothing shy or friendly in the expression. She looked pleased that I had finally noticed her. Maybe too pleased. The smile stretched so wide she was kind of starting to freak me out.

I turned back to Agathe. “Are elves from all over the world?”

I couldn’t help thinking about the stereotypical Tolkienesque elves with their albino complexions, fair skin, pale hair, and washed out eyes. There were a few elves in the common room who looked like that, but there were plenty who didn’t, too.

“Elves are born here, within the fold,” she said. “We don’t have human nationalities. Each guild is divided into lines that keep particular regions of Earth. A line may spend centuries watching over the same people, learning their languages and caring for their Christmas traditions.”

“And that changes how they look?”

“Cheer changes everything it passes through eventually. An elf’s appearance comes to reflect the people her line serves. It helps us understand them, and it allows children to see themselves in Christmas.”

Huh. Well, that made some sense. I was starting to think Santa ran an international elf-recruitment operation when he wasn’t doing the whole gift-delivery thing.

The doors opened behind us and a dark-haired woman entered carrying a leather folder.

The room’s reaction to her was quieter than it had been to me, but it was immediately noticeable. Women straightened in their chairs and moved their belongings out of her path. She wore a long red coat tailored closely to a slender figure, black boots, and white gloves. Her pointed ears were slightly shorter than the others, but clearly visible beneath her smooth dark hair.

I had the strangest sensation that I’d met her before, but that was impossible. She was breathtaking.

“Dame Agathe.” She held out the folder. “The candidate’s intake authorization and Trial record.”

Agathe accepted it. “Thank you, Noelle.”

Noelle looked at me for the first time.

“Candidate.”

Her gaze passed over me without warmth or curiosity. Or, unfortunately, any sign that she had noticed I was male. She turned and walked out of the room without saying goodbye.

I stared at the door as it closed behind her, wishing I’d said… something. I didn’t know what, but anything to have made her stay a little longer.

“Kris and Marta’s daughter,” Agathe said. “Noelle Kringle will serve as proctor for your Trials. Don’t get your hopes up. She does not fraternize with school candidates.”

Fraternize wasn’t the word I’d have used for the thoughts running through my head, but I took the headmistress’s point.

“Sure,” I said. “Understood.”

Agathe carried the folder to an empty table. I followed, reluctantly taking my attention away from Bea and the closed door. She sat, but as she didn’t make any motion for me to join her, I remained standing.

“So…” I said. “I can’t help but notice that all of the other students here are women.”

“Naturally.”

“Can I ask why?”

Agathe sighed. “Did Kris refuse to tell you about how all of this works? That man is becoming such a prude in his old age. It really is time for him to retire.”

“He…” I cleared my throat. “Uh, he mentioned something about a Twelve Bond. But he didn’t really go into any detail.”

“A Santa cannot channel enough Cheer to complete the Big Night without assistance,” the headmistress said primly. “The magic would consume him. The Twelve Bond is a magical union that distributes the power through twelve elf women, each trained in one of the twelve Gifts of Christmas.”

“So I need to find… elf helpers?” This was starting to sound a little bit more like a shoemaker scenario than I’d initially thought.

“Eventually,” she said. “You require four Bonds before your First Trial. Four more will be added during your second year, and the final four before graduation.”

I looked around the room again. Four didn’t seem like an unreasonable number under the circumstances. “And what does forming a Bond involve, exactly?”

“It begins with mutual affection and physical closeness.” She waved her hand as if she were bored, but my interest was immediately piqued. “Mistletoe assists with opening the Bond, greater intimacy deepens the connection, and physical union completes it. It’s all very straightforward.”

“Physical union.”

“That’s what I said. Is there some confusion?”

“I… just want to make sure we’re using it the same way.”

Agathe folded her hands over Noelle’s folder. “You will not complete a Bond while holding hands.”

I coughed into my fist. “Okay. All right. That’s what I thought.”

Several women at the nearest table were listening now. One hid a smile. Bea’s lips curled in disgust.

“So…” I lowered my voice. “I’m expected to have sex with four elf women before Christmas.”

“I would not have expressed it so crudely, but yes.”

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it. Yesterday I’d been sitting alone in a hotel room wondering why one woman hadn’t wanted a future with me. Now my survival depended on convincing four insanely gorgeous *magical* women to sleep with me. The universe had a mean sense of humor.

A thought occurred to me, triggered by a memory of something Agathe had said when we’d first entered the hall. “You mentioned that I could permanently harm the women who assist me,” I said. “What happens to them if I fail?”

Agathe’s expression remained severe, but her eyes softened as if she knew she was delivering bad news.

“An elf can give this Bond only once,” she explained. “If you die after she has bonded with you, the connection breaks violently. Her Gift will be scarred, and she will never Bond with another candidate. None of the students at the Academy have made a Bond with a candidate, and some have been here for many of your human generations. Those with broken

bonds leave the school to work elsewhere in the village or, more rarely, become faculty."

I looked around the room again. Their skepticism made more sense now. I wondered if Dame Agathe had a broken bond, or if she'd simply given up trying to find a match.

"So, nobody gets assigned to me?" I said, actually feeling a bit of relief at that. "I have to convince them I'm the real deal?"

"That's correct," she said. "Every Bond must be freely chosen by both of you. The Academy will teach you what the Gifts do and how to channel them, but no woman here owes you her magic or her body. In fact, most will be loath to give either up. It is no secret how many candidates fail to complete their training."

A side door opened, and a tall blonde woman strode into the room carrying a coiled leather harness. She wore fitted blue trousers, a white training shirt, and heavy boots. Her long braid reached halfway down her back. Her cheeks were red from the cold, and her powerful legs suggested she had been running rather than riding.

Agathe raised a hand. "Britta. Before you go."

The blonde stopped. Her pale eyes swept over me, taking in my shoulders, hands, and legs like she was taking stock of a horse. "Hello. You must be the new candidate."

Agathe cleared her throat. "Fennick wants his measurements before tomorrow's Flight lesson."

Britta stepped closer. She had to tilt her chin only slightly to look up at me.

“Ooh, a *big* one,” she said. “Very nice. He’s much nicer than the last man the List chose sent us. Nice and meaty, I mean.”

“Bea reached the same conclusion,” Agathe said, as if she knew the fact would annoy the blond woman. “She wasn’t impressed.”

“Bea doesn’t know anything about Flight.” Britta shifted the harness against her hip. She looked me up and down like she was considering putting it on me. “I’d say it’s too soon to tell. But I will certainly enjoy testing him.”

“The measurements, Britta,” Agathe said with a long-suffering sigh. “That is all.”

“For now.” Britta gave me a hungry look. Then she drew a flexible measuring tape from the coiled harness and pointed at the floor in front of her, for me to stand in front of her. “Arms up.”

I did as she asked, not really knowing what she was measuring me for. A harness for what? She’d mentioned Flight. So… something to do with reindeer? Why did I need a harness? Hell, maybe she was going to ride me like a reindeer. I felt myself stir at the thought and quickly tried to push it away.

Britta stepped close and passed the tape around my chest, pulling it snug beneath my arms. Then she measured my shoulders and waist, her hands moving briskly over my sweater while several women in the common room watched with obvious interest. I was enjoying the attention until Britta crouched and ran the tape along the inside of my leg, when I became acutely aware of the fact that I was half hard already from her attention.

“Is that… uh… necessary?” I asked.

“The harness has leg straps. Unless you want the reindeer to crush your delicate bits when they pull, I suggest you hold still.”

“Okay,” I said. “Yeah. I’d really rather they didn’t do that.”

“Good.” Her eyes lifted to mine, and she snugged the measuring tape up right under my junk, keeping eye contact with me as she worked. “Now be a good boy and let me do my job.”

I stopped moving, willing my erection to fade, so she didn’t get the wrong idea. Or the right idea in the wrong place. Everyone was watching us, which didn’t help.

Britta finished the measurement, rose, and rolled up the tape. “That should do for Fennick’s purposes. Come to the Flight House before breakfast tomorrow, and I’ll make the final adjustments while you’re wearing it.” Her gaze traveled down my body once more. “A proper fit requires a more thorough inspection.”

She walked away before I could think of an intelligent rebuttal. My mouth had gone dry. I was zero for two on talking to gorgeous elf women so far. Three if you counted Bea, which I wasn’t sure I wanted to. I wasn’t going to waste my time on someone who was determined to hate my guts. I’d had enough of that in the real world. At least Britta showed some interest.

I guess it was a good thing I didn’t have to worry about any of these women trying to butter me up to get close to me. There would be no flattery or false sense of security here.

I glanced toward the table where the black-haired elf had been sitting, but her chair was empty. It made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck, like I’d just lost sight of a dangerous animal.

When a voice came from directly beside me, I jumped. “I was worried the crash might have damaged your handsome face.”

When I turned, the small elf stood close enough that her shoulder almost touched my arm. Her dark eyes moved slowly over my face, then lower. She bit her lip so hard that a little jewel of blood formed beneath her teeth.

“I’m pleased it carried over intact,” she said. “The transfer to the fold can be… inconsistent. The rest of you seems more than satisfactory too.”

“Uh… thanks?” I said. “But how do you know what happened to me?”

Her tongue darted out to lick the blood from her lip. Her smile deepened.

A group of students walked past us, laughing and talking loudly. I felt their gazes on me and glanced up at them. They giggled and hid their faces. When I looked back to the black-haired girl, she was gone.

I searched the room but couldn’t find her. “What the fuck was that all about?”

“Mr. Crispin,” Agathe said, picking up her folder. “Your orientation is not complete.”

I turned back to her. “Who was that?”

She scowled disapprovingly, like my question went against her plans. “You will meet the List-Keepers later.”

That didn’t really answer my question. But it gave me a little more information than I’d had. The strange woman was a List-Keeper, one of the secretive ones Kris had complained about. She was definitely unusual. But there was no denying she had that sweet-but-psycho vibe that many men couldn’t resist. I’d never fallen for a crazy woman before, but I could suddenly understand how it might happen. The shot of adrenaline I’d gotten when she’d disappeared seemed to have gone straight to my groin.

I cleared my throat again. “Right then. Lead on, Dame Agathe. Orientation awaits.”

The remainder of my first day was a blur of classrooms, workshops, and warnings about things I wasn’t supposed to touch. At some point Agathe handed me a class schedule and a stack of books heavy enough to qualify as strength training.

She also gave me a separate sheet headed *The Reindeer Games*. A list of events filled the page, each associated with one of the Academy Houses.

“What are these?”

“Public practical examinations,” Agathe said. “Each House holds an event based on the skills taught in its classes. Every student must complete each event for a practical score, regardless of her House. The competition results are counted separately toward the House standings.”

“So they’re *fun* exams.”

“We aim to please.”

“Do the scores affect my Trial?”

“Not directly,” Agathe said. “Every candidate possesses some natural ability to channel Cheer, although some begin much stronger than others. Four sealed Bonds are the essential requirement. Together, they will give you enough Cheer to attempt your district even if your control remains merely adequate.”

“And the Games?”

“They measure whether you can apply what you’ve learned under pressure. You aren’t required to win, but strong practical scores will improve your chances of completing the Trial safely.”

“So winning a few would be encouraging.”

“Completing one without injuring yourself would be encouraging.”

“Do all of them involve reindeer?”

“No. The Games began as Flight House competitions. The other Houses eventually added their own events, but the original name remained.”

One entry on the schedule had been printed in larger type than the others.

KRAMPUSNACHT—ALL ACADEMY DOORS BARRED AT SUNSET.

“Why are the doors barred?”

“It’s an old Alpine observance,” Agathe said.

“Is Krampus real too?”

She passed me the last book. “The Academy has kept that precaution for centuries. As long as you’re inside before sunset, you have nothing to worry about.”

That didn’t answer my question, but she had already continued down the corridor. By the time she brought me to the candidate’s quarters, I had forgotten where the dining hall was, along with most of the rules governing the magical objects I wasn’t supposed to touch. And I hadn’t gotten another

chance to ask about demons or Krampus either. Hopefully, like she'd said, it really was nothing I needed to worry about.

I understood that the other students were organized into Houses, based on one of the twelve types of magic they were attuned to. Being the only male student—and the Academy's only Santa candidate—my quarters consisted of a lonely tower at the end of a long empty corridor. The tower contained a sitting room with a study desk and a private washroom complete with magical baths on the first floor; a room with twelve beds, desks, chests of drawers and closets on the second floor; and a huge master bedroom suite with more of everything than I could possibly need on the top floor. There was a fireplace on each level with a chimney connecting them all.

Presumably, I was meant to fill the space with nubile and willing elven maidens. Eventually. But for now it echoed with silence and made me feel strangely morose, considering the incredible world I'd found myself in. I shook off the feeling and inspected my room. The furniture was solid and old, not lavish by any means, but well-made and expensive. Or it would have been expensive in my old world. Someone had placed clean sheets on the bed and lit the fire, but little else had been done to prepare the rooms.

Agathe left me there with instructions to report for Cheer Channeling after breakfast the next day.

I opened the dresser and found the first two drawers filled with duplicates of the clothes I was wearing, as well as socks, underwear, and pajamas in various styles. Fortunately there was only one nightshirt. The middle drawers were empty. I tried to open the bottom drawer, and it stuck.

I pulled harder. Something shifted behind it and the drawer came free, revealing a narrow leather book wedged against the back of the dresser.

The cover was scratched, and several pages had been torn out. There was no name inside. I scanned it quickly. Most of the entries concerned classes,

reindeer, and complaints about the food. But there was one that caught my attention.

Today I learned I have to fuck twelve beautiful elf women before they'll let me take the coat. If I can't do it, I'll die. And if I do manage to convince some poor girl that I'm not a loser, they'll be scarred for life if I fail. I don't know how to tell them that before the factory accident, I hadn't even found <u>one</u> woman willing to fuck me. And that was under normal circumstances! Sure, my body is a little tougher than it used to be, and my acne scars have mostly gone away, but how the hell am I supposed to 'perform' under that kind of pressure?

Ouch. That was rough. I hadn't considered how hard this job would be if I hadn't gotten plenty of experience with women before I'd died. I felt for the guy, whoever he was. I flipped forward, hoping he found his groove.

One of them kissed me beneath the mistletoe. I don't want to write her name in case it jinxes it or something. It was incredible though. The Bond opened immediately. I mean, they told me what would happen, but I didn't understand until it happened. I could feel her inside my chest. Not her body. Her magic. Wind, cold, speed, and like something that wanted to climb into the sky. Flight. I could feel her Gift of Flight inside me. For a moment, I felt like I could fly right over the moon.

I found myself grinning at that. At least he'd gotten a kiss out of the deal, and it sounded like a hell of a smooch at that. I bet he was glad he'd gotten the chance at this afterlife just for that moment. I flipped forward again.

Last night we sealed it. Part of me is actually glad I never got to do this before I died, because any experience I'd had would have paled in comparison to this. God, I felt everything she felt. Every touch reached me twice, through my body and hers. When she came, the Cheer flashed so brightly I could see it with my eyes closed. Afterward, her Gift stayed inside me. I can feel it now, waiting for me to call it.

I have to make three more Bonds before the Trial. If the others are anything like the first, dying may be the best thing that ever happened to me. I actually feel like I might be able to do this, no matter how dangerous they say it's going to be. I have never felt so powerful. Like I really could fly around the entire world in one night. This is crazy. I can't wait for what happens next!

I was still smiling as I turned the page, hoping to read more.

But the next one was blank.

I flipped ahead some more, thinking maybe he'd accidentally skipped a page.

But all the pages after it were blank too.

I blew out a slow breath and said a silent prayer for my fallen comrade. Then I got undressed, put on a pair of plaid flannel pajamas, and got into bed, resolving not to think too much about the ones who'd come before.

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Chapter 4



Britta had told me to report to the Flight House before breakfast for the final adjustments to my harness. I left early, since I didn't know where I was going, but managed to find the place without too much trouble. I found her alone in an equipment room beside the reindeer barn.

Leather bridles, reins, and traces hung from pegs along the walls. A worktable filled most of the room, its scarred surface scattered with buckles and pieces of harness leather. Britta stood beside it in fitted blue trousers and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled above her elbows.

She closed the door behind me.

"Where's Fennick?" I asked.

"He won't be joining us."

Britta picked up the measuring tape she had used on me in the common room. "My first measurements were taken through several layers of

clothing. I'd like to get some more accurate specifications before he cuts the leather."

"Uh," I said, remembering how snugly she'd had that measuring tape between my legs in the common room. "How much more accurate are you looking for?"

Her braid hung over one shoulder today, and the end brushed the swell of her breast when she stepped closer. She was tall for an elf, though still a few inches shorter than me. Her pale eyes moved over my clothes with the same direct interest she had shown the day before.

"Take those off," she said.

"My clothes?"

"Yes, all of them."

"Does Fennick normally require a naked inspection?" I asked, stalling.

"I'm the one conducting the inspection," she said. "And no… I've yet to meet a candidate who inspired my curiosity. You should be flattered."

Agathe had curtly informed me that no woman at the Academy owed me her magic or her body. Obviously, I agreed completely. But I would be a fool not to make myself available when one clearly wanted something from me. Even if that something was just the kinky use of a measuring tape.

If the other elves' interest was any indication, it wasn't going to be easy to find four of them willing to risk their Gifts to get into bed with me. Bea had all but announced to the school that she expected me to die. Noelle barely acknowledged that I existed. The strange black-haired List-Keeper seemed interested, but I wasn't certain whether she wanted to sleep with me or

preserve my head in a jar. Britta's interest seemed genuine though, and a lot less complicated.

Plus, she looked like a buff Princess Elsa with that thick white braid, and I didn't mind admitting I was already imagining what I might do if I had it wrapped around my hand. The fact was, I needed four Bonds before Christmas. Refusing to take my clothes off for Britta seemed strategically unwise.

And hey, I looked damned good, and I knew it. I didn't mind if she wanted to look at me.

I removed my coat and draped it over a chair. Britta watched while I pulled off the sweater and shirt. Her gaze settled on my chest, then traveled down my stomach. She made a low, approving sound.

That encouraged me more than it should have. My boots and trousers followed. I hesitated with my hands on my underwear. "Uh, these too?"

Britta raised one eyebrow. "Did I tell you to stop?"

"No, but…" I shrugged. "Hey, I don't want to get kicked out of Christmas school for being too forward with my fellow students."

"I want to see everything," she said. "Take them off."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. And she gave me that hungry smile again.

The equipment room was warm, but I covered myself with my hands, feeling I needed to preserve a modicum of modesty. Britta raised an eyebrow at that, but she didn't tell me to remove my hands either. She studied me without embarrassment, walking around me in a circle, making little noises of approval as she went. She moved slowly enough that I had a lot of time to enjoy the fact that she was liking what she saw.

When she returned to the front, she put both hands on my shoulders.

“Lift your arms.”

So much for modesty. I unclasped my hands from my junk, which was semi-rigid and getting harder under her gaze. I knew I didn’t have anything to be embarrassed about in that department either, though, so I lifted my arms for her. She was standing close enough that the tip of my cock almost brushed her stomach as she leaned in.

She pressed her thumbs into the muscles beneath my collarbones, then worked outward across my shoulders. Her hands were warm and surprisingly strong. “Hold them straight to the side now.”

I did. She ran the measuring tape around my chest. This was similar to what she had done yesterday, except the tape lay directly against my skin and her breasts brushed my arm when she leaned around me to read it.

Britta made another pleased sound.

“Everything look up to spec?” I asked.

“Your dimensions are… acceptable,” she purred. “Enticingly so. And your cooperation is very much appreciated.”

She set the tape aside and put her hands on my upper arms. Her fingers tightened while she tested the muscle. She moved down to my forearms, turned my hands over, and examined my palms.

“You were not a man who shied away from hard work in your past life,” she said. “That is good.”

“Yeah, I mean, I liked to be active,” I said. “My family had a tree farm where I worked when I was younger. I played hockey until college. Spent some time in the gym.”

“Very nice.” Britta stepped behind me. Her palms passed over my shoulders and down either side of my spine. She pressed into my lower back, then slid her hands around my waist, barely avoiding brushing against my straining cock. “Bend forward.”

I looked over my shoulder. “Uh… why?”

“I want to see how you move,” she said. “How your muscles feel under tension.”

“Okay…” As far as unofficial first dates went, this was getting weirder and weirder. But she still had her hands on my waist and their nearness to my junk was making it hard to think about anything besides giving her what she wanted. I bent forward. Her hands traveled over my back and the backs of my thighs. She squeezed one hamstring, then the other. I groaned. “This is some inspection.”

“I haven’t had the opportunity to examine such a fine specimen,” she said. “Excuse me if I take some… liberties.”

“Keep touching me like that and you can take any liberties you like,” I said, only half joking. “But it seems a little unorthodox.”

Britta could hardly have missed what she was doing to me; my dick was raising the roof at this point, but she didn’t comment. She only looked down, took a slow breath, and smiled. Which, honestly, was about as good as comments got anyway.

She made me raise my arms, twist, squat, and bend each knee. She crouched in front of me to inspect my calves, then ran both hands up the

outside of my legs. Her thumbs pressed into my thighs while she tested the muscle there.

“Very good,” she murmured.

I swallowed hard, feeling the heat of her body radiating against my bare skin. Her hands remained on my thighs when she looked up at me. Her eyes were level with my cock. It was twitching with my heartbeat.

“I hope you’re enjoying this as much as I am,” I said. “Or else this is really awkward.”

“Oh, I am. Very, very much.”

“And… what are we doing after you finish inspecting me?”

“You’re going to breakfast.”

“With a raging case of blue balls,” I said. “How festive.”

Britta stood, but she didn’t step away. Her fingers followed the line of my hips before sliding back and settling on my ass, which she squeezed firmly.

“The List has not disappointed me for once,” she said.

“Is this… unusual?”

“The magic of the Long Night restores candidates to a kind of idealized form of their real body,” she said. “Here, you are the best you ever were in life. With a little bit of a boost depending on your inherent Cheer.”

“Yeah, I basically look like I did in my prime,” I said with a laugh. “If I could afford to eat three thousand calories of lean protein every day.”

Britta traced the edge of one pectoral with her fingertips then gave it an exploratory squeeze. “There are few adults who retain enough Christmas spirit to stay on the Nice List long enough to become candidates. Finding one with your physical condition is rarer still.”

“Are Santas usually out of shape?”

“Some candidates have been strong. Many were not. The spirit of the season doesn’t require broad shoulders or powerful legs.”

“But being a Santa does?”

“I have always been of the opinion that our recruitment process is flawed,” she said. “But… perhaps you will prove me wrong.”

“Kris Kringle doesn’t exactly look like a powerlifter.”

“He’s been the Santa for over a hundred years,” she said. “Age does take a toll, even with the magic of the Long Night to preserve us. But make no mistake, what he loses in physical strength he has gained in power. Kris Kringle is not a man to be trifled with. And if you fail, he will continue wearing the coat until he finds a suitable replacement. But I do hope that you won’t.”

“Yeah. Me too. Is it really that dangerous?”

She gave my chest a final pat and let out another contented purr. But she ignored my question. “You may get dressed.”

“That’s it?”

“A man of your size does require his breakfast.”

“And… uh… the harness?”

“I’ll give Fennick the measurements,” she said. “It will be completed later this week, before your first flying lesson.”

I picked up my underwear. “Right… and where does that leave us?”

Britta leaned against the table and watched me dress, still with that hungry look in her eyes. “I’ve seen what I wanted to see of your body,” she said. “Next, I’ll want to judge your performance.”

“You mean…”

“Reindeer, Cole,” she said with a grin. “I want to see how you handle the reindeer. I’ll see you later this afternoon.”

“Great,” I said, pulling on the last of my clothes. “See you then.”

Her grin widened. “It will be my pleasure, I’m sure.”



By the time I reached Cheer Channeling, every seat around the practice circle had been taken. I slipped into an open place near Bea and tried to

ignore the possibility that Britta might tell the entire Flight House how cooperative I'd been. Not that I was ashamed of what she'd seen, but the idea of an entire sorority house giggling about me being manhandled like a piece of fresh meat was a little embarrassing.

Our instructor introduced herself as Holly Kringle. She was a mature, full-figured elf with thick auburn hair, bright green eyes, and a red Academy jacket fitted closely over generous curves. Fine lines showed at the corners of her eyes when she smiled. She looked warm and confident. And she also seemed entirely aware that I was trying not to stare at her breasts.

"Kringle?" I asked. "Are you related to Noelle?"

"Through Kris," Holly said. "I hold the Gift of Song in his Twelve. Marta holds Hearth."

I wasn't sure whether that made her Noelle's aunt, stepmother, or one of several Mrs. Clauses. Holly's smile widened. "Those of us who join Santa's Twelve take his family name. Noelle was born with it. The rest of us took it when we Bonded with him."

"So, you and Marta were students together?"

"Hardly," Holly giggled in a way that made her breasts jiggle enticingly. "Marta had already been at the Academy for generations when Kris arrived. She was practically a teacher for Christmas's sake. I was a fresh-faced new student in Song House."

She batted her eyelashes at me in a teasing way, clearly knowing she still had the goods, despite having been married to Santa Claus for like a hundred years. I guessed that explained why Holly appeared younger than Marta, although neither woman looked old enough to have known Kris for more than a century.

Holly placed an unlit candle in front of me. “Now that we’ve settled my family history, perhaps you can direct your attention to the flame.”

There were a dozen candles burning on low stands around the room, and the flames produced a faint golden light even though the walls were already bright with Cheer globes.

“Candidates can sometimes touch ambient Cheer before forming their first Bond,” she said. “You won’t be able to hold much, but you may be able to guide enough through the wick to light it.”

I touched the wick tentatively with my finger. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Stop looking for something to grab.” She winked at me. “Cheer responds to generosity, affection, and joy. Think of a Christmas memory that connects you to one of those feelings, then allow the magic to pass through you.”

I looked at the candle.

I had lots of fond Christmas memories. It had been my favorite time of year as a kid. But the one that came to mind immediately was from when I was an adult, of my father bringing a tree into the farmhouse. My mother griped good-naturedly about the snow he’d tracked across her clean floor, like she did every year. The moment was so familiar and timeworn that it made me feel like the world made sense, like it would never change. There would always be a safe place in our home, where we were a family, no matter what else life threw at us. I remembered helping my father straighten the tree in the stand. Mom had brought us coffee and pretended not to see Dad slipping bourbon into both mugs.

The memory made my chest hurt, but nothing happened to the candle.

“Don’t force it,” the instructor said.

“I’m not,” I said. “I’m just remembering.”

“You’re tightening every muscle in your body.”

She was right. For some reason I’d tensed up, like the idea that I was supposed to be ‘doing something’ put my whole body on alert. I tried to relax my shoulders and gave it another go. This time, I remembered customers arriving at the farm with their children. Dad had let the younger ones ride on the wagon for free, even when their parents couldn’t afford one of our better trees. Mom kept candy canes behind the register and gave them out until every child left sticky.

But the wick remained cold and black.

There was a soft laugh from beside me, to my right.

Bea sat with one leg crossed over the other. Her black hair lay smooth over her shoulders. Silver chains glittered along the pointed edges of her ears.

“If you glare any harder, the candle may light itself just to make you stop,” she said.

I attempted a smile, hoping we could get off on a friendlier foot. “Do you think that would count?”

“No,” she answered in a clipped tone that told me my efforts were in vain.

Oh well. She might be a bit of a bitch, but at least she was nice to look at. It could have been worse.

The instructor gave Bea a fresh candle. “Here you go, dear. Why don’t you show him how it’s done?”

Bea placed one finger against the base. She didn’t close her eyes or appear to search for a happy memory. In fact, her expression remained completely impassive, almost bored. But gold light passed beneath her skin, bright enough to illuminate the fine bones in her hand, and just like that, the wick ignited.

The flame rose several inches. A warm pulse of Cheer spread across the circle and stirred every other candle in the room. Even I could feel it, a tingling warmth like the excitement you get just before opening a present, or when the Christmas cookies come out of the oven.

Several students murmured appreciatively, so I got the impression that Bea was better than average. I decided not to feel bad about my own efforts if she was a star pupil. It was my first day, after all.

“Passage House teaches excellent control,” Holly said. “Bea’s line has kept the Austrian mountain routes, one of the most difficult, for generations.”

“I’m going to pretend I know what that means,” I said. “I assume it’s impressive.”

Bea lifted her finger and the flame settled to its former size.

“That’s how it’s done, human,” she said. “Cheer isn’t a reindeer. You can’t overpower it with your shoulders.”

Her glance dropped briefly to my chest, almost involuntarily. When she noticed my raised eyebrow, she quickly looked away. I managed to suppress a victorious grin. She might think I was an idiot who wasn’t worth her time, but she still liked what she was looking at.

I tried several more times, but the wick didn’t so much as smoke. By the time Holly dismissed us, I was getting frustrated. I needed a problem I could solve with my brain or my hands, not some magical connection I was

supposed to feel. I wondered if working for Northstar had permanently damaged my ability to channel the Christmas spirit.

When I checked my schedule, I saw that my next class was Reindeer Handling.

Perfect. Not only did that not sound like it involved magic, but it would almost certainly involve Britta. And unlike Bea, she seemed to actually like me.

The reindeer barn was already busy when I arrived for Handling. Flight House students in blue training clothes had gathered along the wide central aisle, where Fennick had brought several reindeer out of their stalls. Most of the students had paired off. One elf was trying to retrieve the end of her braid from a young doe's mouth while her partner laughed at her. Farther down the aisle, there seemed to be a disagreement brewing as another pairing tried to decide who was in control of the reindeer who kept wandering off.

Fennick stood in the middle of it all with a halter over one shoulder. He was a wiry old elf with white hair growing from his pointed ears and hands permanently curled from years of working leather.

"One student handles the lead," he told the class. "The other watches her position and corrects her mistakes. If both of you start pulling on the animal, I'll put the harness on you instead."

The students separated toward their assigned reindeer. Britta remained beside Fennick.

"Crispin, you're with Britta," Fennick said. "She knows what she's doing, so don't try to be smart."

"I'll resist the temptation."

Britta crooked her finger at me, enticingly, and led me to an open stall. The reindeer inside had antlers broad enough to block most of the doorway.

“This is your first Flight class,” she said, “but you won’t leave the ground. You don’t go near a flying sleigh until you can control a team safely from here.”

That suited me. I was still working on the idea that reindeer could fly.

Britta entered the stall without hesitation. She ran one hand along the animal’s neck and spoke quietly near its ear. The reindeer lowered its head for her. She slipped the halter into place, fastened it, and led the animal into the aisle.

Around us, the other pairs were attempting the same thing with varying degrees of success. The doe released the first student’s braid only to begin chewing on her sleeve. One of the elves near the stall door had finally convinced her reindeer to move forward, although it appeared to be doing so out of pity more than because it wanted to cooperate.

Britta took her time with me, demonstrating how to approach the animal, where to stand, and how to guide its head without yanking on the halter. Seeing her now, all business, one would never know she’d been giving me an impromptu naked inspection that morning. The reindeer followed her readily. It backed up when she asked and turned through the grooming area without crowding her.

“You see, he understands exactly what I want,” she said. “If he ignores me, it’s because I haven’t given him a reason to cooperate.”

“You make it look easy,” I said, with real admiration in my voice. “They’re such big animals up close.”

“It is easy when you know what you’re doing.” She gave me a wry smile that had a hint of the desire she’d shown a few hours ago. “And controlling big animals is a special interest of mine.”

Then she handed me the lead.

The reindeer looked at me, snorted, and drove one shoulder into my chest, almost like it was testing me. My boots slid several inches through the straw, but I stayed upright. I planted my feet and pushed against the animal’s neck.

Activity slowed around us. The nearest students were pretending to concentrate on their own animals while keeping their attention on the human candidate being shoved across the barn.

It pushed harder.

“Don’t fight him straight on,” Britta said. “You’re a big man, Cole, but you’re not eight hundred pounds big.”

I grunted. “He started it.”

“They’ll do that,” she said with a laugh. “See if you can turn his head.”

I shortened my grip on the lead and pulled sideways. The reindeer resisted until Britta showed me where to place my hand against its jaw. I redirected its head, and the rest of the animal followed, immediately stopping fighting me.

“Good,” she said. “Do it again.”

I walked the reindeer to the end of the grooming area. It tried to crowd me into a post, but this time, I turned its head before its full weight reached me

and made it circle.

Fennick grunted. “He learns.”

“I told you he had promise,” Britta said. “And you know I’m not easily impressed.”

The old elf snorted. “I’m impressed you’ve even bothered to learn his name.”

Fennick moved on to inspect the other pairs, apparently content that Britta had both me and the reindeer under control.

By the time I completed another circuit of the grooming area, the other students had returned their attention to their own animals. I guess the fact that I hadn’t been immediately stomped into the ground by a set of reindeer hooves meant they needed to get back to their own work.

The sexy blonde elf didn’t let me stop, however. She made me repeat the circuit until I could keep the reindeer beside me, turn him without pulling against his full weight, and stop him before he crowded me. Whenever I became comfortable, she narrowed the space or changed our direction. She corrected my grip several times but never took the lead from me. And I noticed that her blue eyes spent a lot of time considering my body as well as my slowly improving technique.

I thought about what Fennick had said, about how she hadn’t bothered to learn the other candidates’ names, and I felt pretty proud of myself. She’d used my name that morning, even before she’d gotten me naked. So, something about me must have impressed her from the start. And it seemed Britta was one of the more accomplished Flight House students, if the others in the Reindeer Handling class were any indication. She controlled the animals like it was second nature, while many of the other girls were fumbling their way through, even more awkwardly than I was.

Partway through the class, Fennick rearranged the practice rails and had each pair guide their reindeer through the tighter course. We practiced backing them into stalls, bringing them around sharp turns, and holding them still while another student approached. Fennick moved between the pairs, correcting hands and feet and criticizing everyone equally.

By my final circuit, my shoulders and forearms ached, and my coat smelled strongly of reindeer. The animal still ignored me whenever he thought he could get away with it, but he had stopped trying to shove me through the wall, so I figured that was progress. Around us, the other students were returning their reindeer to the stalls.

A bell sounded from the Academy, and Fennick dismissed the class with a warning that anyone who left a halter improperly stored would be wearing it at the next lesson.

The reindeer shoved me again on the return trip, but I held my ground. When Britta took the lead from me, she was grinning.

She rubbed the big animal between the eyes and it blew a puff of steam out its nostrils. “Most new students end up on their ass or pinned against the wall the first time with Burly Ben.”

“He’s kind of an asshole.”

“He’s stubborn,” she admitted. “That’s why I picked him. I wanted to see how you’d react to frustration.”

“Well?” I asked. “How did I do?”

Britta smiled. She led the reindeer back to its stall, removed the halter, and secured the door.

“You have the strength,” she said. “But that’s only half the battle. A big part of Flight is learning how to communicate with the animals without every order becoming a contest of wills. If you can learn to work with a team… well. You may just be the most interesting candidate I’ve seen here in decades.”

I raised an eyebrow at the word decades, since she barely looked like she was twenty years old by human standards. But I assumed the old adage that it was impolite to ask a woman’s age was just as true for elves as it was for humans.

“Interesting, huh?” I said. “I have to admit I was hoping for something a little more… I don’t know.”

I glanced up at the sprig of mistletoe that hung above the barn’s outer doors. I had noticed it when we entered and spent most of the lesson pretending I hadn’t. They were all over the Academy halls, so it wasn’t anything special. But every time I saw one, I couldn’t help but think about that first step in Bonding. The kiss.

“Passionate?” Britta looked toward the mistletoe, then back at me. She touched my chest and stepped closer. “Prove that you belong in my sleigh, Cole Crispin. And I’ll show you exactly how passionate I can be.”

“Any suggestions for how to do that?”

“Come back tomorrow and sweat for me.” She licked her lips and let her gaze travel over my body. “I like watching you work. And I like seeing you improve. Makes me feel all… warm and fuzzy inside.”

Most of the students had already left for their next classes. I glanced toward the doors at the rear of the barn. “Do you keep the sleighs here?”

“In the storage hall behind the equipment room.”

“Can I see yours?”

Britta looked at me. “Why?”

“If I’m going to prove I belong in it, I’d like to see what I’m shooting for.”

She cocked an eyebrow at me and checked the large, ornate Christmas clock above the barn doors. “We have a few minutes.”

She led me through the equipment room and opened another door at the back. The storage hall beyond held rows of training sleighs in different sizes. Some had broad wooden bodies and raised passenger seats. Others were little more than narrow frames mounted over runners.

Britta’s sleigh stood near the far wall. Its dark blue body sat low over polished silver runners, with a driver’s bench in front and a second seat close behind it. The reins had been coiled neatly beside the brake lever.

“This is the one you race?” I asked.

“And train in. The larger sleighs are built to carry passengers or cargo. Mine is built for speed.”

I stepped onto one runner and tested the handrail beside the rear seat. There wasn’t much room to move once another person took the driver’s position.

“So I’d sit back here?”

“For now. If you learn to handle a team, I may eventually let you take the reins.”

Britta showed me where the harness traces connected and how the driver shifted her weight between the runners during a turn. She became more

animated as she explained the sleigh. I liked watching the way her face lit up as she got into her favorite subject matter. I could tell she really was passionate about her sport, it wasn't just an act. Which meant I was going to have to work extra hard to impress her.

On our way back toward the equipment room, I noticed another training sleigh pushed out of line with the others. A red cord had been tied around one of its front supports. White frost covered the metal fitting where the support joined the runner.

I reached toward it.

"No." Britta caught my wrist. "Don't touch that one."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It was supposed to be yours for next week's handling assessment," she said. "I checked it after Fennick assigned it to you and something felt wrong, so I had him pull it out of service."

"Wrong how?"

She held her palm near the fitting without making contact. "There's something… cold… about it."

"It's a sleigh at the North Pole."

Britta sighed. "I'm not talking about the weather."

I placed my hand beside hers. The air around the fitting stung sharply enough that I pulled back.

"Okay," I said. "That is strange. What does it mean?"

“I don’t know. Fennick tied the cord around it and submitted a work order, so no one is supposed to touch it until Liesl has inspected it. She’ll strip it down and find out what’s wrong.”

I didn’t know who Liesl was, but anyone who could dismantle a magical sleigh sounded useful.

The first warning bell sounded from the Academy. Britta closed the storage doors, and we hurried back through the barn. She waved as we parted ways for our next classes, and I smiled to myself, feeling like that class had gone a hell of a lot better than Cheer Channeling. Maybe there was some hope for me after all.



Over the next few days, I rotated through more of my first-year schedule. I learned the names and colors of the Houses, failed to channel Cheer in a second lab, and discovered that almost every ordinary Christmas tradition had a complicated magical explanation behind it.

Route Planning was the first subject that looked remotely familiar.

The classroom held a map large enough to cover the entire front wall. Colored lines crossed the continents, looped through oceans, and doubled back over themselves. Smaller panels displayed load sequences, departure windows, and lists of regional restrictions.

I chose a seat near the back.

A voice boomed through the room.

“MR. CRISPIN, YOU WILL SIT IN THE FRONT.”

I looked toward the lectern, but I couldn’t see a professor standing behind it.

“THE FIRST ROW,” the voice ordered. “I WILL NOT COMPETE WITH YOUR ATTENTION SPAN FROM ACROSS MY OWN CLASSROOM.”

I squinted. There was something moving above the lectern. A weird purple blur. As I moved closer, I realized I was looking at a man no taller than my hand.

He hovered beside the map. Translucent wings beat behind him, and his formal plum-colored coat had tails that nearly reached his polished shoes. White hair surrounded a narrow, deeply lined face. A point of purple light glowed at his throat.

I moved to the front row.

To reach it, I had to walk between two rows of desks. Conversations paused as I passed, and the attention of another roomful of gorgeous elf women followed me. Every new class introduced me to more of them: unfamiliar faces, different House colors, pointed ears rising through every shade of hair. Some studied me with the same skepticism I’d encountered in the common room, but several took their time looking over my shoulders and chest. A dark-skinned elf with pale curls let her gaze drop farther before smiling at me.

I sat a little straighter when I reached the front. The attention was flattering, but these women weren’t just sizing me up for my looks. Any one of them

could become one of the four Bonds I needed. Behind their lingering and appreciative gazes, they were judging whether I was likely to survive long enough to justify the risk of getting to know me in an intimate way.

The tiny man descended to the lectern. His amplified voice continued to shake the tabletop when he introduced himself.

“I AM PROFESSOR HALVARD BELL. LOWER YOUR HAND, MR. CRISPIN.”

I had been about to raise it, but I hadn’t yet. I gave him a confused look. “I… didn’t?”

“YOU WERE ABOUT TO!”

“How…?” I had wanted to ask, in as polite a way as possible, what he was. Since it was obvious he was not an elf. But if I tried now, it would just be awkward.

Apparently, Professor Bell knew exactly what I was going to ask anyway, because the next thing out of his mouth was, “SUGAR PLUM FAIRIES ALWAYS KNOW WHEN SOMEONE IS ABOUT TO INTERRUPT THEM.”

Okay, then. Sugar-plum fairies were apparently real, male, and considerably less cheerful than the ballet had led me to expect.

Professor Bell paced along the edge of the lectern while the rest of the students opened their route books. I tried not to stare.

Bell spent the first part of class explaining that the Big Night route balanced darkness, sleeping patterns, Cheer currents, regional access points, and the physical limitations of the sleigh team. The route had been refined over generations and preserved through every Santa’s tenure.

“Miss Bea,” he said. “Come to the map and trace the Austrian mountain corridor from its western entry to the southern handoff. Explain each change in direction as you go.”

Apparently, she was the teacher’s pet in this class too. She gave me a smug look as she walked past, which I ignored, deciding if I was going to pay any attention to her at all it might as well be at her ass. Fortunately, her sour attitude didn’t in any way impede my appreciation of her finely shaped behind.

Bea took the long pointer resting beneath the map. She followed the colored route across the mountains without consulting her book and explained why every turn belonged where it was.

The tiny sugar-plum fairy buzzed around her as he questioned her about the places where Passage magic was required. She answered everything immediately, and I heard a few of the other students grumbling about her under their breath. But I had to admit I was impressed. In my old job, I’d have happily hired Bea’s skill in route planning, even with the resting bitch face.

When she finished, Professor Bell addressed the class. “That is the standard I require. Of course, the Austrian line has maintained this corridor since the earliest routes, so I expect nothing less from Miss Bea. However, all Passage House students should know the regions their lines serve equally well.”

Bea returned to her seat and gave me a smirk as she passed.

Bell moved on to the next section, describing routes like they were as immovable as the laws of nature. I followed the colored lines through Europe, across Asia, and back toward several areas the sleigh had already crossed.

Tentatively, I raised my hand.

Bell stopped speaking before he'd even turned around to see me do it. "What now, Mr. Crispin?"

"Why aren't those zones handled on the first pass?"

"Because they occur later in the sequence."

"That's what the map says," I said. "But why? It makes more sense to do them when the sleigh is already in that area, doesn't it? Why backtrack?"

Bea snorted and several students turned toward me.

Bell lifted from the lectern and flew closer to the map. "The northern pass must align with the regional sleep window. The second pass uses a separate Cheer current."

"Okay, that explains the timing, but… I don't know. I still don't understand why the sleigh crosses the same corridor twice before moving south. It seems inefficient to me."

"The route has operated successfully for centuries, Mr. Crispin. I suggest you learn the basics before you start trying to reinvent the sleigh runner."

There were a few nervous chuckles from the other students. But I wasn't about to give up so easily. Almost every class I'd taken so far had been completely outside my comfort zone, but this was something I understood. And it was clear to me that there were issues with the current route.

I studied the cargo diagram beside the map. The sleigh's hold was larger inside than its wooden body, but it wasn't one endless pile of presents. The gifts were packed in sections according to where Santa would deliver them.

As each section emptied, Craft magic brought the next one within reach and kept the sleigh balanced. I didn't understand how that worked, exactly, but I didn't know how truck engines worked either and that hadn't stopped me from doing my job.

"Could the hold be arranged in a different delivery order?" I asked.

"Yes," Bell said. "The Toymakers arrange the hold to match the official route before every Big Night. As populations grew and new communities were built, their deliveries were inserted into the existing sequence."

The sleigh could follow a different sequence, but they'd kept adding destinations to the old route instead of redesigning the whole thing.

Northstar had tried the same bullshit before I took over distribution. Their delivery network started with a few warehouses and grew by adding buildings wherever the company found cheap land or tax incentives. Nobody redesigned the original routes. They patched them until drivers crossed the same states twice and freight traveled five hundred miles to reach a store thirty miles from where it started. After I scrapped the whole thing and started fresh during my first season, Northstar expanded its distribution without adding to its fleet, saving millions of dollars every year.

"No wonder it's inefficient. You've just kept adding destinations without rebuilding the route," I said. "How many of those crossings are actually required by magic?"

Bell turned from the map. "You have attended *one* Route Planning class, Mr. Crispin. The route is the product of centuries of knowledge you do not yet possess."

"I get what you're saying, Professor," I said. "But I've spent years fixing this exact problem. I'm not saying the magical requirements don't matter. I'm asking which parts—"

“You are here to learn the established route,” Bell snapped, “not redesign it.”

“Then you should rename the class Route Memorization,” I snapped back. “Planning usually involves using your brain.”

A few of the women laughed and I realized I’d fucked up. Bea leaned back in her chair, thoroughly enjoying herself. Not because she was on my side but because the tiny purple blur looked like he wanted to turn my head into a figgy pudding.

Bell flew toward me until his polished shoes hovered level with my face. The purple light at his throat brightened.

“Leave my classroom.”

I winced and gathered my book. “Can I take a copy of the route?”

“No.”

“I’ll have to work from memory if—”

“GET OUT!” His amplified voice rattled the windows.

I got out, wondering if I’d somehow managed to ruin my chances to become the next Santa Claus before my first week at the Academy was up.

To my surprise, Marta was waiting for me in the corridor. She held two cups of coffee and offered me one before she glanced at the closed classroom door.

“Congratulations,” she said. “You actually lasted longer than I expected.”

I took the coffee, grateful to see a friendly face. Hopefully it meant I wasn’t getting kicked out just yet. “You knew he’d throw me out?”

“Given your background, I had a strong suspicion he might. Professor Bell has never taken kindly to what he calls ‘back talk.’ He’s been that way since my first year at the Academy, and I don’t expect him to change.”

“It’s frustrating,” I said. “There’s no reason for it to be so convoluted.”

Marta sipped her coffee. “I oversee the Workshop’s daily operations, including Big Night staging and sleigh loads. I’ve spent more than a century adjusting both around that map. Every time the route gained a new stop, Professor Bell found somewhere to fit it. It frustrates me too, but I haven’t been able to convince him to change anything. I’d like to know whether you can improve it, Cole.”

“Maybe, if I can see the detailed constraints.”

She reached into her pocket and handed me a brass key.

“The Route Planning room is locked outside scheduled classes. Use the side board, and don’t touch Professor Bell’s official map.”

“Are you allowed to give me this?”

She winked. “Kris trusts my judgment.”



That evening, I returned to the classroom with the key and a box of chalk. The official map remained illuminated on the front wall. I copied one portion onto the side board and began moving the deliveries into a more direct sequence.

The route improved until I reached the first major load change.

I didn’t know how the sleigh’s balance shifted as gifts were removed or how quickly its compartments could rearrange themselves. The charts beside Bell’s map showed the loading order but not the underlying mechanics. Maybe it didn’t matter, maybe magic took care of everything. But unless I knew for sure, I was shooting in the dark.

The door opened behind me.

A red-haired elf entered with a wooden toolbox in one hand. She wore brown trousers, a fitted cream shirt, and a leather work apron that emphasized a full chest and generous hips. Her hair had been twisted into a loose knot, secured with a small metal tool, and several curls had escaped around her face. Freckles crossed her nose and both cheeks.

She stopped when she saw me at the board. “Oh, hello. Are you the candidate Professor Bell expelled?”

“Good news travels fast.”

“His *voice* traveled fast.” She set her toolbox beneath the official map. “I’m Liesl, by the way. Bell complained that his cupboards are sticking, so I’m here to fix that. I won’t ask what you’re doing here. After hours. When you shouldn’t have a key.”

“Liesl,” I said. “You’re the one who fixes the sleighs, too, right?”

“I’ll fix just about anything,” she said with a grin. “Or take it apart. Sleighs are a lot more interesting than cupboards.”

“Can you tell me how the sleigh compensates when the load gets lighter?”

She looked at my chalk route.

“The bed shifts the remaining compartments toward the center. Craft enchantments keep the weight balanced across the runners.”

“How quickly can it do that?”

“That depends on which compartments empty and how far the others have to move.”

“If I change the delivery sequence, could it compensate?”

“Probably, but the current mechanism is determined by the current route. So the whole system would need to be recrafted.” She stepped closer and studied what I had drawn. “You moved the southern deliveries ahead of the second northern pass. Nice!”

“Yeah, it cuts out a lot of empty travel.”

“Unfortunately, it also puts this compartment on the wrong side when the sleigh enters the mountain current.”

“Can the compartment move before then?”

“With the existing drive? No.”

I reached for the eraser, but Liesl caught my wrist. Her hand was warm, with small calluses across her palm.

“Wait, I didn’t say it was impossible.” She tilted her head and looked at me with renewed interest. “I just said the existing drive can’t do it.”

She released me, pulled a piece of white chalk from the box, and drew a small gear beside the load diagram.

“If we change the route, we’ll have to change the sleigh with it.”

“We?”

Liesl glanced at me. Her green eyes moved over my face, then down over the rest of me before returning to the board.

She pursed her lips. “You bet! I want to see whether your idea works.”

She dragged a stool closer and opened her toolbox.

“All right,” I said. “Here’s the problem.”

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Chapter 5



The morning after Liesl agreed to help me redesign the route, Dame Agathe intercepted me outside the dining hall and told me I was due at the Hall of Lists for a candidate-record review.

Kris had said the List-Keepers could explain why my name had remained on the Nice List for eleven consecutive years, so I was interested in what they wanted with me. What the hell was a candidate-record review, anyway? I followed Agathe across the village, curious to see what they had on me. I expected the List itself to be a book. Maybe a never-ending scroll if they wanted to be all arcane and dramatic about it.

What I hadn’t expected was high-tech, military-grade magical surveillance. But hell, nothing should have surprised me anymore by this point.

The Hall of Lists occupied a long room along one side of the Workshop, with rows of desks facing upright panes of glass. Each pane held a moving view of somewhere on Earth. Children helped with chores, fought with their siblings, returned things they had found, or attempted things their parents had specifically told them not to do. The adult elves seated at the desks recorded what they saw in open ledgers.

It was unsettling as hell.

“Every candidate reviews the record that qualified him,” Dame Agathe said. “The List-Keepers will answer reasonable questions about your file and record anything you can tell us about the choices behind it. The List selects our candidates, but understanding why may help us prepare the next one more effectively.”

“What if I have unreasonable questions?”

Agathe pursed her lips at me, giving me a perfect ‘Professor McGonagall is disappointed’ impression. “Those will likely be ignored, Mr. Crispin. Do try to behave yourself.”

She left me beside a high counter near the entrance. The elf working behind it had silver hair pinned into a tight knot and narrow spectacles perched on her nose. She checked a ledger when I gave her my name, although the sudden interest from the surrounding desks suggested everyone already knew who I was.

“Cole Crispin, you say?” She tapped her pen against her lip like she was really working, but I caught her sneaking glances at me over the tops of her glasses. “It appears Rin signed out your file already.”

“Okay…” I shrugged. “So, who’s Rin?”

The keeper looked past me at something over my shoulder and made a faint grimacing expression.

“I am.”

The voice immediately behind me made me jump. I turned and found the black-haired woman from the common room standing close enough that I almost stepped on her. She was one of the smallest elves I’d met, with a

straight bob framing a delicate face and dark eyes fixed on mine. I knew now that elves didn't really have nationalities or ethnicities, but if I had to guess, Rin's line spent a lot of time around Japan. Ink stained her fingers. Her white blouse fit snugly over small breasts. The top button had been tugged open a little messily, and I caught a glimpse of the curve of one breast beneath the fabric.

"Oh," I said. "We've met before. You disappeared last time."

"You looked for me." Her voice was quiet and controlled. Only her eyes betrayed the same hungry excitement I'd seen in the common room. "I was watching. It made me feel all wet and runny inside."

"Uh…" What the hell was I supposed to say to that?

The silver-haired keeper cleared her throat. "You may use your station, Rin."

"Yes." She nodded, her dark eyes still fixed on me with startling intensity. "We need our privacy."

The keeper's mouth hardened, but she returned to her ledger.

Rin took my hand and led me between the desks. Several List-Keepers glanced up. Rin walked normally until we reached the back of the hall, where two tall cabinets formed a narrow alcove against the wall. A dark green curtain concealed the entrance.

"They make you work in a closet?" I asked.

"I prefer it in here," she said. "And they prefer it when they don't have to see me. They say I'm… strange."

“Oh,” I said. I didn’t add ‘obviously,’ which was what I was thinking. But the fact that my personal List-Keeper was weird enough to be kept in solitary confinement wasn’t especially reassuring.

She drew me inside and closed the curtain.

The alcove might have held file boxes at one time, but Rin had turned it into a nest. Cushions covered the floor and a narrow bench. Blankets filled the corners. Used coffee cups competed for space with stacks of paper, open ledgers, and jars of ink. Enchanted panes, like computer tablets, hung from brass arms attached to the walls and cabinets. They surrounded a low worktable so completely that anyone sitting there could watch them all without turning her head very far.

And the subject of every screen was me. They weren’t live images, but looping recorded videos from moments in my past. My record, I guessed. But suddenly I felt a little sick to my stomach. The North Pole was fucked.

One panel held an image of me behind a desk at Northstar. Another showed me walking across the Cedar Falls Christmas lot with snow on my coat. A third had caught me shirtless in my old kitchen, drinking straight from a carton with the refrigerator door open. The pane beside it showed Wanda laughing at something I’d said during a video call.

“What the…?”

Rin released my hand. The controlled little woman from the main hall disappeared. She scrambled over the bench, tucked her bare feet beneath her, and crouched among the cushions. Her dark eyes darted from one version of me to another.

“Do you like it?” she whispered. “I made it for you.”

“This is completely fucked up.”

“I know.” Her knees squeezed together. A tremor passed through her body before she pressed both hands over her mouth and gave a muffled sound that was much too close to a moan. “I knew you’d love it too. I know everything about you.”

If she thought I liked this, she obviously didn’t know me as well as she thought she did. I looked back at the curtain. “Do the other List-Keepers know about this?”

“Of course,” she said. “I’m a List-Keeper. They know I keep records.”

“Do they know *all* your records are *me*?”

“No.” Her eyes moved lovingly over the panes. “They know you’re one of my adult assignments. But they don’t know you’re the only one I care about. Ever since I found you, Cole, none of the others have been worth watching.”

Rin reached over the table and stroked one pane with an ink-marked finger. The image changed to the Cedar Falls Northstar store during my first Christmas with the company. I stood at the layaway counter in my warehouse jacket, talking to the assistant manager. I had the strangest sense of déjà vu, watching the screen. I remembered that moment exactly.

“With the Gift of Sight, we follow every child on the Lists.”

“Yeah,” I said. “The Naughty and Nice Lists. We’ve heard about them. It’s always creeped me out. Do you really watch kids all the time? That’s totally messed up, you know?”

She shook her head. “No, no, no. Not *all* the time. That *would* be weird.” She let out a high-pitched giggle that made the hairs on my arm stand on end. “The magic only homes in on moments where the child is actively

being naughty or nice. Real List moments. We see when they shout at their parents or help a friend find a lost puppy. That kind of thing."

"So you only see those moments?"

"Those are the moments the glass brings to us. Once someone appears on a pane… a List-Keeper can continue following them between List moments."

"Are you supposed to do that?"

"Only when the record requires it."

Her eyes darted to one of the screens that showed me in the shower, and another where I was getting changed after the gym. Mercifully, I was an adult in those videos, but seriously. What the fuck?

"Why the hell did the 'record' require shower footage?"

"*I* required shower footage," she whispered.

"This is so unhinged."

"We don't follow *children* into bathtubs or school locker rooms," she added. "Gross. Children are boring anyway."

I rubbed my face with my hands.

"Each line watches the children in its own part of the world," Rin went on, her eyes snapping back to me in an instant. "Adults are different. And they can be *much* more interesting. But there are so few of them left on the Lists that we monitor them as a group. When I found you… I kept you all to myself. Look!"

She pointed to the pane that showed the assistant manager passing me a slip of paper. I remembered the amount written at the bottom and how much it had hurt to pay it. I had only been at Northstar for a few months. Half my first overtime check had disappeared in one transaction.

“This is what put me on the Nice List?” I said. “Seems like a pretty low bar.”

“You were already on the List,” she said. “But it’s the first time I saw you. I was… intrigued. Invested!”

I had been working the loading dock when an abandoned layaway order was sent back to inventory. The family had paid most of it, but they couldn’t cover the balance by the deadline. Northstar had cancelled the order three days before Christmas and charged them a fee for the privilege.

I’d gone to the store manager after my shift. He refused to give me the family’s name, which was the first decent thing anyone at Northstar had done that day, but he agreed to take my money and reinstate the order.

“They didn’t know it was you,” Rin said.

“Why should they?” I said. “They didn’t owe me anything.”

She slid off the bench and crawled across the cushions toward me. “You did it again the next year.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I asked the store to call me if another family was going to lose their layaway. There always seemed to be at least one.”

“And every year after that.”

“It was one bill a year,” I said. “I could afford it. And as I made more money, I could help more families. It was the right thing to do.”

“Yet you wouldn’t let Northstar use it for publicity.”

My lip curled. “That would have made the whole thing… gross.”

Rin stopped at my feet and tilted her face up. “You know what I liked best about that first video?”

I watched the younger me at the counter and shrugged. “What?”

“You called the assistant manager a dickless corporate parasite five minutes after you paid the bill,” she giggled. “Dickless!”

“Yeah, he kept pushing me to take a picture for the fucking company newsletter.”

“I know.” Her breath caught. “That was when I started to wonder about you.”

I didn’t know what to do with a beautiful, obviously insane woman kneeling at my feet and shivering with excitement over an argument I’d had eleven years ago. I stepped around her and picked up the thick file lying open on the worktable.

The first pages held my name, birthplace, and a history of movements between the Lists when I was a child. Most of it involved ordinary bad behavior. I had lied about breaking a neighbor’s window, put a garter snake in a teacher’s desk, stolen beer from my father, blah, blah, blah. Some of them actually made me laugh to read about now, remembering what a little shit I’d been sometimes. But apparently, I had always regained enough ground each December to qualify for presents.

The later pages held dates and short descriptions of things I barely remembered doing. Giving an employee paid leave when corporate refused to authorize it. Sleeping in my office during a blizzard so I could coordinate emergency deliveries. Stopping to pull a stranger's car out of a ditch. The layaway payments appeared every year.

One of the panes changed as I turned the pages.

It showed the main bedroom in our farmhouse. My mother sat against the headboard while a younger version of me entered with a tray balanced between both hands. Coffee steamed beside a plate of Christmas-shaped sugar cookies covered in thick white icing.

I recognized the moment immediately. It was the last birthday my mother and I had celebrated together.

Dad had already died, so I had made the cookies myself that year. The trees leaned, the stars had uneven points, and too much red sugar covered everything. Mom laughed when she saw them. Then she put the tray aside long enough to hug me.

The recording ended before I let her go.

The Sight must have preserved the moment because bringing her breakfast had counted toward the Nice List. I couldn't think of it as a point in my favor. I could only remember that she had died before another birthday came around.

The family information in my file marked both of my parents as deceased. I was their only child, and my body was lying broken on a mountain. The Crispins ended with me.

Unless I became Santa.

Noelle was Kris and Marta's daughter. So half human, half elf offspring were possible. If I survived the Academy, wore the coat, and formed the Bonds they wanted from me, I could still have children. I could still have the family I'd spent years trying to build with someone who hadn't wanted it with me.

It was too early to imagine any of that. I didn't know if I could survive my First Trial, much less three. I barely knew the women I was supposed to convince to risk their Gifts on me.

But the possibility existed. And knowing that lightened an invisible stranglehold that had been clutching at my heart since I'd arrived.

Rin had climbed onto the worktable. She crouched beside the file and studied my face from a few inches away.

"You haven't asked why I kept watching," she whispered. "Don't you want to know why you're special?"

I closed the file. "I assumed it was the Nice List thing."

She made a disgusted sound.

"Most adults on the Nice List are boring. They donate soup, attend church, and apologize when they have dirty thoughts. Some of them even apologize while they're having sex."

"You watch all of them have sex?" Now I was even more horrified.

"Always," she said. "But only until I lose interest."

"Which takes how long?"

“Less than a minute.” She snickered to herself. “The churchy wieners are the worst. So boring.”

She crawled closer. One knee pressed against my arm. Her blouse fell away from her chest enough to expose the upper curves of her breasts, which were obviously bare.

“You were different,” she said. “You did good things, sure. But then you swore at people. You worked all night when your drivers needed you, then went home with women you had no intention of marrying. And you fucked them.” Her voice thinned. She drew in a shaky breath and pressed her lips together. A soft whimper escaped anyway. “So good. So hard. So much better than anyone else I’d ever seen.”

My mouth went dry. “You’ve been watching me have sex for eleven years?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“You said that often. Usually when one of your whores used her mouth.”

Heat rushed into my face. “Holy shit, Rin. Stop.”

She moaned at her name.

That did nothing to reduce the problem developing in my trousers. What the fuck was wrong with me that I was aroused by the idea of this psychopath watching me screw Tinder dates for the past decade? Well, until I met Meredith anyway.

Rin slid off the table and landed on the cushions. She circled behind me, then climbed onto the bench so she could whisper near my ear.

“You always knew what to say to them,” she said. “Even when they were embarrassed. Especially then. I used to turn down the other panes so I could hear you.”

“Were you supposed to be watching other people?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t anyone… *notice*?” I could not understand how she’d gotten away with this in Santa’s fucking Workshop of all places.

“Eventually. That’s why they gave me the nook.”

I looked at the crowded panes again. “This is a disciplinary measure?”

“It’s private. I can make noise now.”

Rin’s breathing quickened against my neck.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

She put her mouth close to my ear. “I’ve touched myself every time you’ve had an orgasm for the last eleven years.”

My cock hardened completely.

“*Every* time?”

“That’s right, every time.” Her fingers curled into the front of my coat. “Does that turn you on, Cole? Because just talking about it is making me wet.”

She rubbed her cheek against my shoulder and sang softly.

“I know when you are sleeping. I know when you’re awake. I know when you’ve been touching yourself, so jerk off for Christmas’ sake.”

Oh my God. Had she been watching me jerk off, too? Realizing I’d had an audience made me feel… okay, honestly, it was turning me on. But I sure as shit wasn’t about to admit that to my stalker. Even if she was insanely gorgeous. The important emphasis was on ‘insane.’

“That’s beyond fucked up.”

“You like it.”

Her hand slid down my stomach and stopped at the hard ridge beneath my trousers. She released a broken little moan when her palm pressed against me.

I caught her wrist before she could do more and pulled her away, but not before she felt how hard I was.

“Rin… this is not normal,” I said. “Or healthy.”

“I don’t want to be normal.”

There wasn’t a trace of embarrassment in her face. She looked feverish, almost pained, but completely certain.

It was kind of bizarre to have a woman look at me like that, with a need so desperate it seemed to be driving her mad. Like most guys, I’d spent my whole life doing the chasing. I asked women out. I planned the dates, made the first move, and tried to prove I was worth choosing again after each

relationship ended. Even when someone wanted me, I had spent half my time trying to keep her convinced.

This woman had chosen me before I knew she existed. Her obsession was invasive and alarming. Possibly grounds for some kind of magical restraining order, if that was a thing. It was also the most unquestionable desire anyone had ever directed at me.

And I wanted her. That was the truly fucked-up part. I couldn't stop my brain from wondering what this unhinged elf would be like in bed. Was she a screamer? I hoped she was a screamer.

"I'm glad you broke up with that horrible woman before you died," Rin said, her expression tightening. "It would be so much harder to get you to forget about her if you still loved her."

"Meredith?" I said, startled. "I guess you watched us too."

That made me feel… something unpleasant. Not so much the sex stuff, but the fact that she'd probably also watched my unravelling after she'd left.

"I *hated* her."

"You didn't know her." For some reason I felt like I needed to defend her. Not to protect Meredith, but to protect me from Rin's unbearable scrutiny. "She wasn't a bad person."

"She was boring, and she made you work for every scrap of affection she gave you. She wasn't *good* enough for you, Cole."

"I can appreciate the sentiment," I said. "But that's not really your call to make."

“I already *did*.”

She pulled against my grip. I released her wrist, and she climbed onto the worktable again.

“The others didn’t matter,” she said. “You fucked them, and then you left. I liked watching you with them because I could imagine I was there, with your cock plunging into me instead. But her… you *loved* her. I felt it. I wanted to drag her through the glass and tear her apart.”

The image was disturbing enough that my erection should have disappeared. It didn’t.

“You understand I’m supposed to form four Bonds this year,” I said. “And twelve if I make it through the Academy.”

“Of course.”

“So you know, even if I *did* choose to Bond with you—” I said, trying to put on a stern tone with her despite the fact that I was increasingly unsettled by her hungry, black-eyed gaze, “—which at this point is not looking good —you would never be the only one. You’d have to share.”

Rin gripped the edge of the table and leaned forward. “I’ll share you with women who deserve you.”

“And who decides that?”

“I do.”

“That’s not going to work.”

“If you try to Bond someone weak, I’ll kill her before she can ruin your chances.”

She whispered the threat while staring at my mouth. I couldn’t tell whether she expected me to be reassured.

“Do you hear yourself?”

“Constantly. Like an incessant noise inside my head. Even when my lips aren’t moving.”

Rin rose onto her knees. A sprig of mistletoe hung from the brass arm above her worktable. She had positioned it directly over the only place two people could stand without stepping on cushions or files.

She grabbed the front of my coat and pulled me between her knees. From the raised table, our faces were nearly level. Her legs opened around my hips, and the heat between them pressed against my stomach.

“I’m ready for my kiss,” she whispered.

Her lips parted. Her entire body trembled with the effort of waiting for me to close the last inch. But she wasn’t strong enough to force me.

Honestly, I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to push her down among her files and fuck her brains out, punish her for all those years she’d been watching without my consent. My cock yearned to know what eleven years of desperation and anticipation had done to her. My hands settled on her thighs before I caught myself.

No. No, no, no. Big nope. I couldn’t do this. Even if I’d been riding out days of sexual frustration in this school full of hot, horny elves who flip-flopped between teasing me mercilessly and turning their backs on me.

A kiss under mistletoe wasn't casual here. It could open a Bond that would tie her Gift to my life. And to my ability to pass the upcoming Trials. Did I really want to bet on a wild card? I didn't know anything about her except that she was obsessed with me.

I took her wrists and removed her hands from my coat. "Sorry. No."

Rin whimpered. "But I've been waiting so long!"

"I didn't ask you to do that," I said. "And I only met you five minutes ago."

"That's not true," she said. "I met you during orientation."

"When you whispered something creepy to me and disappeared like a ghost," I said. "Not the best first impression. But actually, better than the second one."

"You *want* me." She hissed it like an accusation, twisting her fingers in my shirt and trying to drag me toward her. "I can *feel* it."

I laughed. "Shit, yeah. Against my better judgment, I really fucking do. But you just threatened my future Bonds. I'm not tying myself to someone I can't trust."

Her eyes narrowed. For the first time since the curtain closed, she held completely still.

"You don't understand," she whispered. "I don't want to control you, Cole. I want you to have the best. You need women strong enough to protect you, with Gifts powerful enough to get you through the Big Night. I want them to love you and make you happy. I know I have to share you. I will. But I only want to share you with women who deserve you."

“And if you decide one of them doesn’t?”

“I’ll protect you.”

“Protect me how?” I said. “Spell it out for me, please.”

“Any way I have to.” Her fingers dug into the edge of the table. “I’ve watched people take from you for eleven years, Cole. But I won’t let anyone here use you, weaken you, or get you killed. My threats aren’t about keeping you to myself. They’re about keeping you alive.”

“Then you have to trust me to decide who’s good for me.”

“I trust you with everything except women.” Her mouth tightened. “*You* loved Meredith.”

“That was my mistake to make.”

“Here, a mistake like that will kill you,” she hissed. “And ruin every woman you Bond with. Remember that.”

Her eyes burned into mine, refusing to look away. Like she was trying to show me deep inside her soul. I took a deep breath and found I actually believed her. She really did want the best for me. But somehow in her twisted mind, she’d decided homicide was an acceptable screening process.

That was more control than I was willing to give her.

I stepped away from the table. Rin let me go. She didn’t apologize or withdraw the threat, but she didn’t try to force the kiss either.

I opened the curtain. “See you around, Rin.”

“And I’ll see you.” Her gaze followed me. “I know where you sleep, Cole Crispin.”

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Chapter 6



I spent most of the next week working with Liesl. We started in Professor Bell's classroom, but our chalk diagrams quickly outgrew the side board Marta had given us permission to use. Liesl moved the work to her shop in the Toymakers' Hall, where we could cover an entire wall with route maps and dismantle things without Bell hovering over us. She was quickly becoming one of my favorite people at the Christmas Academy, though I was still enjoying the teasing and occasional grope from Britta during the Reindeer Handling class we had together.

For now, the blonde elf seemed more interested in showing off her skills than letting me impress her with mine. Still, every time I made an improvement, I could see the interest flare in her bright blue eyes. That's usually when she gave my bicep a squeeze or ran her fingers over my abs or patted my ass. But she hadn't made any mention of the mistletoe, and I figured I still had a ways to go before she considered me ready for her sleigh.

Liesl was different. She was sweet and smart. Her green eyes lit up whenever she started talking about something that intrigued her, and she genuinely seemed to love listening to my ideas about the gift delivery route. She was also sexy as hell, thicker and a little softer than Britta, and she

always seemed to be falling out of her work apron in a way that made it hard for me to concentrate on my plans.

The only part of the week that I wasn't enjoying was my alone time. I just couldn't shake the feeling that Rin was hiding around a corner or sunk into the shadows, watching me. I kept catching myself checking over my shoulder in the halls or glancing toward the door while I worked with Liesl. It was ridiculous. If Rin was following me through the Sight, looking behind me wasn't going to help. But I could feel her there.

It was the worst at night, when I was alone in my tower. It was lonely enough as it was, being the only person rattling around in the huge space. But now it was creepy too. I found myself checking under the bed and in the wardrobe before I went to sleep. I felt stupid every time I did it, but not as stupid as I would have felt if I pulled back the covers and found my beautiful little stalker waiting beneath them with a knife and a sprig of mistletoe.

But by the day before my mother's birthday, she had yet to appear, and I managed to convince myself that I was just being paranoid.

That afternoon, our latest design required a full-sized receiving frame, several spring reels, and more cargo webbing than Liesl had in her shop. She took me to the Academy's supply warehouse to collect the parts.

The elf behind the counter examined her requisition without reaching for anything. He had neatly trimmed gray hair, round spectacles, and a dark coat without a trace of grease, chalk, flour, or reindeer hair on it.

"Tobiah," Liesl said, "this is Cole. Cole, Tobiah is the Academy Bursar. Nothing enters or leaves the warehouse without passing beneath his nose."

"An exaggeration," Tobiah said. He tapped an empty space on her requisition. "You've omitted the project authorization."

“Marta approved the work.”

“Then Marta can sign the form.”

Liesl produced a folded note from her apron pocket. Tobiah read it twice before entering the authorization into his ledger.

He checked the maker’s mark on each fitting, measured the webbing, and counted the reels before placing them on the counter. Then he turned the ledger around and indicated the final column.

“Sign there. You are receiving four spring reels, two compartment brackets, six buckles, and twenty feet of cargo webbing.”

“I know what I’m receiving,” Liesl said.

“And next month, when you ask me where it all went, I will know who received it.”

She rolled her eyes and signed the paper.

Tobiah pressed a red Bursar’s stamp beside her name and allowed us to take the parts.

I had managed enough warehouses to appreciate his methods, even if Liesl clearly didn’t. Every item had a source, a usable quantity, a stated purpose, and someone responsible for it. If anything disappeared, Tobiah’s records should show exactly where the chain had broken. When it came to operations management, that was pretty damned important.

That night, Liesl and I were working in the Toymakers’ Hall, and she was looking even sexier than ever. I was totally distracted by trying to catch a peek of her narrow waist and the way her breasts curved beneath her apron.

She was laughing at me, teasing me for being overtired, and completely oblivious to the fact that she was the one scrambling my brains.

We were still testing the route on paper. Each time I shortened one section, Liesl checked the revised sequence against the loading schedule and her diagrams of the sleigh's compartment drive. Sometimes my changes called for a compartment before the mechanism could move it into receiving position. Others forced the load bed to rebalance in the middle of a turn or left too little time for the drive to reset. Liesl would point out the conflict, I would find another approach, and then she would start grinning and figure out how to build it.

It was the most fun I'd had working with someone in years. I'd always mostly worked alone at Northstar because no one else really had the same obsessive energy as I did for optimizing our routes. They appreciated it when I saved the company money, but they didn't really care how I got there. I liked to talk through my ideas out loud and have someone answer for a change, someone who was just as excited about it as I was.

That evening, Liesl had cleared most of her workbench for a cutaway model of the sleigh. The wooden body had been split down the middle to expose a series of small compartments mounted inside it. Brass tracks ran beneath them, with gears connecting each section to a drive shaft near the rear.

She stood on a stool beside the model, leaning over it with both hands braced on the bench. Her red hair had been pinned up with a narrow screwdriver, although several curls had escaped around her face. She wore brown trousers and a cream-colored shirt beneath her leather apron. The sleeves had been rolled above her elbows, exposing compact, strong forearms dusted with freckles.

She pointed to a compartment near the front of the model. "That one holds your first local batch."

“Local batch,” I repeated. “Not the entire region? I just assumed the sleigh could hold everything it needed at once… because… magic.”

“Not even close.” She lifted a little wooden present from a tray and placed it beside a square brass frame mounted at the edge of the workbench. “Watch.”

Liesl touched two fingers to a copper contact on the frame. Warm red light moved through the engraved lines around it.

The empty center shimmered, then filled with a view into the model compartment. A matching brass receiver stood on the far side.

I blinked. “Is that… a *portal*?”

“We call them Craft gates,” she said, looking up at me with those adorable green eyes.

“So, yes.”

There was a strand of hair in her face that I wanted to tuck behind her ear, but as much fun as we’d been having together, I hadn’t wanted to move too fast with her. I was genuinely enjoying getting to know her. Besides, Britta gave me all the teasing I could handle anyway.

Liesl bit her lip, looking away shyly all of a sudden. She must have noticed the look in my eye.

“A very limited portal,” she said, and pushed the present through the frame. It disappeared from her fingers and dropped out of a matching brass opening inside the model compartment.

The compartment shifted slightly beneath the added weight. Tiny gears turned, moving the other sections until the sleigh balanced again.

“The Big Night sleigh doesn’t leave the Pole carrying every present in the world,” she said. “It couldn’t. The inside is much larger than the outside, but it isn’t infinite. The local orders are staged here and transferred aboard as Santa reaches each section of the route.”

“So every compartment has its own portal?” I asked.

“Not a complete portal. It has a receiving frame like this one, while the loading gates stay in the warehouses. When the schedule calls for a new batch, Craft magic connects one of those warehouse gates to an empty receiver aboard the sleigh. The warehouse elves push that area’s presents through their end, and the presents emerge inside the compartment.”

“So the receiver is basically a loading dock.”

“More or less. Once Santa empties that batch, the compartment moves aside and another one takes its place. Then the schedule connects the empty receiver to the warehouse holding the next set of deliveries.”

“How does the magic know which warehouse to use?”

“It doesn’t make that decision. Craft magic follows the dispatch schedule exactly. The schedule tells each gate when to open, which receiver to connect to, and which batch the warehouse crew should send through.”

“And if Santa changes the route?”

“The gate still follows the schedule.”

“Meaning the presents arrive in the wrong order.”

“Or at the wrong receiver. Or while a compartment is still full. Or while the sleigh is turning and the load bed is moving.”

That was considerably more dangerous than putting someone’s bicycle in the wrong pile.

“Okay…” I said. “Can I see the warehouses?”

Liesl’s smile widened. “I was wondering when you’d ask.”

She hopped from the stool and led me through a door at the back of her shop. A covered bridge crossed between Toymakers’ Hall and the building behind it. Halfway across, Liesl opened a narrow door in the side of the passage.

Cold air rolled over us. Beyond the door, a railed gallery overlooked the largest warehouse I had ever seen. The floor stretched so far in both directions that its ends disappeared behind rows of shelving. Elevated tracks crossed overhead. Wrapped presents, wooden crates, canvas sacks, and unfinished pallets filled marked lanes below us. Elves pushed carts between the shelves, loaded conveyor belts, and stacked orders onto broad staging platforms.

Tiny winged figures flew above them.

The sugar-plum fairies carried glowing tablets no bigger than playing cards. They swept between the upper shelves, called instructions down to the elves, and redirected carts with flashes of colored light. One fairy hovered over a staging lane while another inspected a row of square brass gates set into the floor.

“Holy shit,” I whispered, gripping the railing. “It’s huge!”

“This is only one warehouse,” Liesl said.

“How many are there?”

She shrugged. “Enough to get the job done.”

Northstar had warehouses across the United States, distribution centers serving regional stores, fleets of trucks, computerized inventory systems, and entire departments dedicated to making sure boxes arrived in roughly the correct state. I had spent years learning that network well enough to understand what a minor delay in Ohio could do to a store in Minnesota.

This operation served the entire planet in one night.

The size of the warehouse stopped being impressive and became nauseating.

Every present had to be made, wrapped, identified, sorted, and placed in the correct staging lane. Every lane had to match a section of the route. Each batch had to reach the right Craft gate at the right moment. The receiving compartment aboard the sleigh had to be empty, positioned correctly, and ready to accept the weight.

Then Santa still had to deliver everything before sunrise.

“Holy shit,” I said again.

“Most humans say something more festive the first time.”

“Uh… holy reindeer shit?”

“That’s better.” She giggled.

“How does anyone do this without having a nervous breakdown?”

“The elves handle production and physical staging. The sugar-plum fairies oversee inventory and dispatch. They track every batch, open the gates, and adjust for ordinary delays.”

“But they can’t adjust for a completely different route.”

“Not without rebuilding the schedules.”

I watched a team of elves push a loaded cart onto one of the staging platforms. A fairy dipped low, checked the tags, and sent the cart toward another lane.

I suddenly understood Professor Bell’s irritation. If I’d built a system that worked and got the job done, the fact that it was inefficient would be the least of my concerns. The idea of someone messing with one of my systems, if it was on this scale, would have thrown me into a murderous rage. I was suddenly very grateful that he hadn’t turned my head into a figgy pudding. I’d have deserved it.

“I still think the route is inefficient,” I said.

“So do I.”

“But now I understand why he wanted to strangle me.”

She grinned again. “That’s progress.”

I looked over the warehouse again. “If I had my laptop and the routing software I helped design for Northstar, this would be a hell of a lot easier. I could run simulations instead of filling another wall with chalk.”

“Can human software account for Craft gates?”

“Well, no. But I helped design it, and I’m pretty sure I could figure out how to adapt it to this system.”

Liesl tilted her head.

“I mean, the program is only useful if I understand the rules well enough to tell it what’s impossible,” I said. “Otherwise, it’ll give us a beautifully optimized route that looks great on the screen and crashes the sleigh and dumps half the world’s Christmas presents into the Arctic Ocean the first time we tried to use it.”

“That would be difficult to explain to the children.”

“Not to mention Professor Bell.”

“Honestly? I’d rather face the children.”

She closed the gallery door, and we returned to the warmth of her shop.

The cutaway sleigh still waited on the workbench. Beside it stood a full-sized receiving frame Liesl had built from spare compartment parts. Canvas webbing crossed its open top, connected to buckles and spring-loaded reels along the sides.

“What’s the webbing for?” I asked.

“The Craft gate doesn’t always place things gently. The web holds a new batch while the compartment moves into position.”

“I thought the enchantment kept the load balanced.”

“It keeps the sleigh balanced by moving the compartments around the load bed as their weight changes,” Liesl said. “It can’t stop the individual

presents from sliding inside them. When a new batch drops through the receiver, or the sleigh makes a hard turn, the webbing holds everything in place until Santa starts unloading."

"So without it, the sleigh could still be balanced while everything inside the compartment gets smashed."

"Or a rocking horse flies through the access hatch and hits the driver in the head."

"Poor Santa," I said. "Another design flaw."

She winked. "Another thing keeping me employed."

"Employed?" I asked. "I thought you were still a student."

"Technically, I'm both for a little while longer. I've completed every course the Academy offers and taken all twelve Gifts as far as my own magic allows. Craft is my strongest, so I'm moving into a permanent position with the Toymakers and helping teach the younger Craft students."

"So you've graduated."

"More or less. The Academy hasn't finished moving me off the student rolls yet."

"Does becoming an employee make you ineligible to Bond with a candidate?"

"No. Any eligible adult elf can choose a candidate, whether she studies here or works here." Liesl rested one hand on the test frame. "But I don't need to take that risk anymore. My magic is at full strength, and I can keep working

here without ever forming a Bond. If I choose a candidate who fails, the scar could permanently weaken everything I spent years developing."

I already knew what a candidate's death could do to the women Bonded to him. I hadn't considered that an experienced elf like Liesl had more power and an established career to lose.

"So you'd have to be pretty damn certain before you chose someone."

"Yes," she said. "I would. Usually, it's the younger elves who risk Bonds with the less ideal candidates. If their chosen candidate succeeds, they stand to grow much stronger than they might on their own. But if they don't, they're stuck working in one of the warehouses for the rest of their life."

Well, damn. Figures I'd start falling for the one elf who was least likely to want to take a chance on me. How was I going to prove to her that I was worthy? Had I been imagining the interested looks she'd been giving me? I didn't think so.

Liesl untied her apron, hung it from a peg beside the workbench, and climbed onto the low platform around the test frame. The webbing loosened across the empty receiver.

"We'll need to alter the anchor points if your sequence makes the compartments move sooner," she said. "Hold that strap."

I took the end she offered me.

"No, like this." Liesl wrapped her fingers around mine and changed my grip. Her hand paused there. "Oh, these are new."

"What?"

She turned my hand over and rubbed her thumb across the thickening skin at the base of my fingers. “The calluses.”

“All thanks to Reindeer Handling,” I said. “I guess they’re pretty rough now.”

Her thumb moved slowly across my palm. She didn’t seem particularly interested in the strap anymore. “Maybe. But… they feel capable, too. I like it.”

She lifted her eyes to mine. There was nothing coy in her expression. Liesl looked at me the same way I’d seen her look at a broken machine. Curious, and like she couldn’t wait to get her hands on it. Maybe I didn’t have anything to worry about after all.

“I like that you like it.”

She stroked my palm again. “I… have to admit, I’m intrigued by you, Cole. Most candidates stop listening as soon as I start talking about laws of magic or mechanisms. They just want everything to work the way they want it to work. They don’t want to talk about any of it.”

“And I keep making you explain things.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “For hours.”

“You could tell me to shut up.”

“I don’t want you to shut up. You could tie me to that workbench and talk about loading sequences all night. I would never get bored.”

I looked at the scarred wooden bench behind her.

Then I looked at Liesl.

Her gaze followed mine. A flush spread beneath the freckles on her cheeks.

“If I had you tied to that bench,” I said, “I’d probably have other things on my mind.”

“Oh.” The word came out much softer than anything else she’d said. “Umm…”

Neither of us moved. Liesl’s eyes dropped to the front of my trousers and the flush reached the tips of her pointed ears.

“I suppose,” she said, “that would depend on how securely I was tied.”

My grip tightened around the strap, and I tugged it toward me without realizing it. The webbing slid several inches through the spring-loaded reel.

A metal latch clicked inside the test frame. The platform beneath Liesl shuddered.

Her eyes widened. She looked down at the mechanism beside her hip, and I realized I had triggered something.

“Wait—let go of the—”

I released the strap, but the compartment had already started moving. It slid sideways along its rails and pulled the loose webbing with it. Liesl reached for the nearest section, but another loop dropped over her shoulder. It tightened around her waist as she turned and pinned one arm against her side.

The compartment stopped with Liesl caught against the frame. She stared down at herself.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

“No.”

“Here, I’ll get you out of there,” I said. “Hold still.”

She gave an awkward laugh. “I think I’ve got that part covered.”

I stepped onto the platform. Liesl’s free hand rested on the side of the frame. The webbing crossed diagonally over her body, pinning one arm beneath her breasts and wrapping twice around her waist.

It wasn’t tight enough to hurt her, but it held her firmly. I couldn’t help my eyes lingering on her bound form. Or the swelling in my pants. The blush on her face deepened as she noticed too.

Okay, self. Fuck us. I mean, focus! I found a loose length near her hip and reached for the buckle.

“If you pull that one, it’ll tighten everything,” she warned.

I stopped with the strap in my hand.

The webbing already outlined the curves of her body. One section circled her narrow waist, while another pinned her forearm beneath her full breasts and pushed them higher against her cream shirt. The fabric had pulled tight enough for me to see her nipples hardening beneath it.

The worry from the accident had faded from Liesl’s face. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips had parted, and her eyes remained fixed on the strap in my

hand. She shifted her hips against the frame and tested the webbing with a slow pull. It held her firmly. A small shiver passed through her.

She was getting excited.

My cock hardened as I imagined tightening the web around her, holding her exactly where I wanted her while I put my hands on every part of her she couldn't protect.

"Do you want me to let go?" I asked.

Her breath caught. "Not yet."

The shop was so quiet that I could hear our breathing and the faint creak of the webbing whenever Liesl moved.

"How tight do you want it?"

"Pull slowly."

I drew the strap through my hand. The canvas rasped through the buckle and contracted around her waist. Her trapped arm pressed more firmly beneath her breasts, lifting them until the top buttons of her shirt strained across her chest.

Liesl inhaled sharply. Her back arched instead of pulling away, and her free hand closed around the edge of the frame. She rolled her hips once more and discovered the tightened webbing wouldn't let her turn.

Her eyes rose to mine. The open desire in them left no doubt about what she wanted.

"A little more," she whispered.

I pulled again.

The buckle clicked as the last inch slid through. Liesl shuddered against the frame, her fingers tightening around the wood.

“That’s enough,” she whispered.

I released the strap without loosening it. Liesl remained pinned in front of me, breathing hard. Her cheeks and throat were flushed, and her nipples pressed visibly against the strained fabric covering her breasts.

I placed one hand around her restrained wrist. Her pulse beat rapidly beneath my fingers. My other hand settled at her waist, where the webbing had cinched her soft body into an even more dramatic hourglass. She shivered when my thumb moved along the edge of the strap.

“Did you plan this?” I asked.

She gasped. “No, I swear I didn’t!”

“But you’re enjoying it.”

“V-very much.”

She pulled against the webbing again. Her breasts rose with the effort, but the restraint barely moved. A small moan escaped her, and her free hand caught the front of my shirt.

“Do you want me to free you?”

“No.” The answer came immediately. Her fingers tightened around my shirt and pulled me closer. “For Christmas’ sake, I want you to kiss me, Cole.”

My cock pressed against her hip. Liesl drew in another sharp breath, and her thighs squeezed on either side of me.

A sprig of mistletoe hung from the beam above the test frame. It had been fastened directly over us, close enough that several waxy leaves brushed the top of my head.

“You know what happens if I do that,” I said.

“Of course I do.”

“You just told me you’d be better off keeping your Gift at full strength. If I fail, you could lose part of the magic you spent years developing.”

“I know.” She gave a strained laugh. “I’ve been trying to convince myself that my attraction to you makes no sense. But every day we spend together, I just want you more. Please, Cole… don’t make me beg!”

“And you’re sure you want to risk it on me?”

Liesl met my eyes. She was still breathing hard, and her body trembled whenever she strained against the webbing.

“If I were any more certain, my thighs would be shaking,” she said. “Kiss me please, before I return to my senses.”

I slid my hand from her wrist to the back of her neck. Liesl made a soft sound as her mouth opened beneath mine, hot and eager. Her tongue slid over mine while her free hand knotted in my shirt and dragged me hard against her. The webbing creaked as she strained into the kiss. Her breasts pressed against my chest, and one thigh pushed between my legs. She moaned when my hand grasped at the back of her neck, then chased my mouth when I drew back for breath.

The mistletoe above us grew warm. At first, I thought the heat came from Liesl's mouth and the body straining against mine. Then a sharp pulse flared beneath my breastbone and spread down both arms.

Liesl gasped into the kiss.

Her Gift poured through the newly opened Bond.

The strap beneath my hand changed. I still felt the rough canvas against my palm, but I also felt its entire length at once: the pressure around Liesl's waist, the brass teeth gripping it inside the buckle, and the spring coiled inside the reel. When she arched against the restraint, the pull traveled through the anchors and into the wooden frame. I knew which joints carried her weight and which buckle would release her.

The awareness spread through the shop. I could sense every pin inside the hinges, every gear waiting to turn, and every bolt Liesl had driven into the workbench. Her Craft surrounded us, warm and precise. The frame holding her carried the memory of her hands shaping each piece and fitting them together. I couldn't command any of it—the Bond was open, not sealed—but I understood how it would respond if she touched it.

All the while, Liesl's tongue moved against mine. Her body strained against mine, and the tension in the webbing changed with every breath she took. Her magic let me feel exactly how the frame held her while my hands learned the warm, soft body caught inside it.

Then the awareness vanished. The frame became wood and brass again, and the strap beneath my palm was only canvas.

I broke the kiss and dragged in a breath. My hands remained locked around Liesl as I tried to understand what had just happened.

Liesl stared at me with swollen lips and unfocused eyes. “Did you feel that?”

“Was that your Craft? I could feel the straps, the frame, everything you built in this room. It all made sense.”

Her free hand pressed against my chest, directly over the heat left by the Bond. “I felt you too. You’re so warm, Cole. There’s more Cheer in you than you realize. Buried deep inside.”

“Don’t give me ideas when you’re tied up like this.”

Her pupils widened. The webbing creaked as she pushed her hips toward me.

“Open my shirt,” she said.

I slipped my fingers beneath the strained top button and pulled it free. The next two followed quickly. Her shirt opened around the webbing, exposing the pale curves of her breasts above the band that pinned her arm against her body. Freckles scattered across her chest, and both nipples were already hard and dark pink.

“Touch me, Cole. I need to feel those calluses.”

I filled my palm with one breast. Her skin was hot and soft, and the firm nipple pressed into the center of my hand. I rolled it beneath my thumb.

Liesl moaned and arched into my touch. The movement tightened the webbing beneath her breasts and lifted them higher. “Yes, harder!”

My fingers closed around her. I squeezed until her breath caught, then dragged my thumb firmly across her nipple. “Oooh, it’s so much better than

I imagined… Please, put your mouth on me.”

I was not about to give up the opportunity to explore every inch of her body with my tongue. I bent over her breast and drew the hard peak between my lips. Liesl’s breath caught. Her free hand grabbed the back of my head and held me there while I sucked. Her heart raced beneath the breast cupped in my other hand.

Her fingers slid into my hair, then down the back of my neck and across my chest. She reached between us and closed her hand around my erection through my trousers.

I groaned against her skin and pushed into her grip.

Liesl tried to open my trousers, but the webbing around her waist stopped her from reaching the fastening properly. She strained harder, and the frame creaked beneath the movement.

A frustrated sound escaped her.

I lifted my head, caught her free wrist, and moved her hand back to the wooden frame beside her shoulder. “Hold on.”

Liesl wrapped her fingers around the edge. Her eyes stayed on mine as I reached for the loose strap at her waist.

I pulled it another inch.

The webbing cinched around her middle and drew her more firmly against the frame. Her trapped arm pushed beneath her breasts, leaving them raised and completely exposed between the open sides of her shirt. Liesl gasped, and her free hand tightened around the wood instead of reaching for me again.

I cupped her breast and pinched the wet nipple between my fingers.

Her mouth opened, but she gave me no new instruction. She pulled against the restraint and moaned as I increased the pressure. When I released her nipple and moved to the other breast, she let her head fall back against the frame and gave herself over to whatever I chose to do next.

The realization made my cock throb. Liesl had started by telling me exactly what she wanted. Now that she knew I understood, she wanted me to take control.

I kissed the side of her neck while my hand worked her breast. Her body responded to each change in pressure. She shivered when I stroked her nipple, gasped when I squeezed, and pushed her hips toward me whenever my mouth moved lower.

I tightened the strap once more.

“Mmm, Cole…” Liesl moaned and strained helplessly against the webbing.

I covered her mouth with mine and kissed her harder.

Her bare chest pressed against me, and every pull against the webbing forced a breathless moan from her throat. I kept one hand around the strap at her waist. Whenever she strained toward me, I tightened it enough to hold her against the frame.

She shuddered each time she realized she still couldn’t move.

I lowered my mouth to the breast I had been squeezing and caught the nipple between my teeth.

Liesl cried out and arched hard against the restraint. Her fingers dug into the wood beside her shoulder. I bit down gently and held it until her thighs trembled.

Her body shifted beneath me.

Liesl winced. “Ow!”

I stopped immediately and lifted my head. “What happened?”

“The strap caught my side.”

I slipped my fingers beneath the band at her waist. One narrow section had rolled under the broader webbing and pressed its edge into her skin. A bright red line curved across her side.

“I’m fine,” she said, still breathing hard.

The mark deepened when she moved again.

I pulled the release. The buckle opened, and the webbing slackened around her waist. Liesl made a disappointed sound, but I continued until I could slide the rolled section away from her skin.

“This isn’t safe,” I said.

I released the remaining tension and lifted the webbing from her trapped arm. Her breasts settled as the band beneath them loosened. She flexed her hand, then opened and closed her fingers while the blood returned.

I rubbed her wrist and checked the skin beneath the strap. It was warm and pink but unbroken.

“We could keep going,” she said.

“Not in this thing.” I shook my head. “You couldn’t reach the release, the compartment already moved once without warning, and the reel could have jammed. I’m not gambling with you, no matter how sexy that was, Liesl.”

She studied my face. Her disappointment eased, and she placed her free hand over mine. Then her attention shifted to the loose webbing around her waist.

“The bands need to be wider,” she said. She ran two fingers over the red mark on her side. “Padded, with separate anchors so tightening one section doesn’t pull on all the others. And there should be a second release within easy reach of the person controlling it.”

I laughed. “You’re already designing another one?”

“I can build something much better than this.” Her eyes moved over the frame, then returned to me. “Something that would hold me tight enough that I couldn’t get away, no matter what you did to me…”

My cock hardened again. “You’d like that?”

Liesl pushed the loosened webbing down over her hips and stepped free. Her open shirt hung at her sides, leaving her breasts bare. She moved into my arms and pressed her warm body against me.

“Next time,” she whispered, “you won’t have to stop until *you* want to.”

I cupped the red mark at her waist carefully and kissed her.

Without the webbing between us, Liesl wrapped both arms around my neck. Her breasts flattened against my chest, and one of her thighs slipped

between mine. The kiss remained hungry, but neither of us rushed. I stroked her side with my thumb while her fingers moved through my hair.

The new Bond warmed inside my chest. A quiet pulse answered each movement of her mouth. I could no longer sense every mechanism in the shop, but the steady presence of her Craft remained inside me. It was warm, precise, and unmistakably hers.

Liesl drew back far enough to breathe. Her forehead rested against mine.

“Your first Bond,” she said. “I… I can hardly believe, after all this time.”

“I am the luckiest man in the North Pole.”

Her smile softened. “I’m glad it was me.”

“So am I.”

I kissed her again and held her until the trembling in both our bodies finally eased.



Later, after Liesl had buttoned her shirt and we’d gotten back to work, resetting the test frame, someone pounded on the shop door.

Liesl glanced at me. “Are you expecting anyone?”

“I’m dead. I don’t get many visitors.”

She rolled her eyes at me and crossed the shop and opened the door.

Britta stood outside with Fennick beside her. The old Flight instructor wore a heavy leather coat, although the hall wasn’t cold. There was frost on the hair sticking out of his ears, which I didn’t even know how was possible. His gnarled hands opened and closed with impatience.

“There you are,” Britta said. “Fennick says you still haven’t inspected the marked sleigh.”

Liesl frowned. “What sleigh?”

I came to stand beside her, ignoring the suspicious look Britta gave me. “There’s one in the storage hall. Britta showed me a few days ago.”

Liesl turned to me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought Fennick had,” I said with a shrug. “I don’t know how this stuff works. When you didn’t mention it, I assumed you’d already inspected it.”

“I placed a work order in the Toymakers’ collection box at the beginning of the week,” Fennick said. “Usually you’re much faster than this, Liesl. I’m disappointed. Has he been distracting you?”

“Good question,” Britta said, narrowing her eyes at me. “What have you two been doing together?”

“I never received a work order.” Liesl looked toward the small wooden box mounted beside her door. “I empty that box every morning.”

Fennick’s mouth flattened. “I’m not a young elf anymore. I don’t want to keel over before it gets fixed. Then it will never get done.”

“I told you there was something strange about that sleigh,” Britta said. “I’ve got a bad feeling about that missing work order.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” Fennick grumbled. “You and your bad feelings. Everything gives you a bad feeling when it isn’t painted blue. Isn’t Sight your weakest Gift?”

“That has nothing to do with it.” Britta glared at him. “And it’s not just me. The candidate felt it too.”

Fennick looked at me as though this somehow made the situation less credible. “I see.”

Liesl reached for her toolbox. “Show me.”

We followed Britta and Fennick through the Academy’s rear halls and into the reindeer barn. The animals had settled for the night, but several raised their heads as we passed. Our footsteps echoed through the dark equipment room beyond the stalls.

Fennick unlocked the storage hall.

Rows of training sleighs stood in the gloom. Moonlight came through high windows and shone across their runners. The marked sleigh remained out of line near the far wall, with the red cord tied around its front support.

Frost covered the metal fitting where the support joined the runner.

Liesl stopped several feet away. “A charged fitting should produce enough warmth to prevent that.”

She set down her toolbox and crouched beside the sleigh. Both hands hovered near the frosted metal while she closed her eyes and reached for it with her Gift.

The new Bond tingled between us.

For an instant, Liesl's Craft carried me into the fitting with her. I sensed the bolts securing the support, the reinforced plate beneath them, and the weight distributed along the runner. The metal was straight. Every joint was tight. Nothing had cracked or shifted.

Beyond the physical structure, though, an empty channel ran through the fitting where its enchantment should have been. The cold inside it hurt.

Liesl opened her eyes and drew her hands back. "The hardware is sound, but the Craft pattern is gone. This wasn't ordinary depletion. When an enchantment uses all its Cheer, the pattern remains inside the material. We can recharge it, and the magic follows the same path again."

She touched one fingertip to the frost. Her body jerked, and she snatched her hand away.

"Something consumed the pattern itself," she said. "It feels as though the magic was eaten out of the metal."

Fennick moved closer but kept his hands away from the runner. "Would the support have failed in flight?"

"Under enough strain. A hard turn or rough landing would force the metal to carry the entire load without its enchantment. The support could shear away from the runner. It could have been very dangerous."

I looked from the frosted fitting to the red cord. "This was the sleigh assigned to me."

“For your next handling assessment,” Britta said.

Fennick studied the support. “And a novice is more likely to make the kind of hard landing that would break it.”

Britta stared at the sleigh with her arms folded tightly across her chest. I couldn’t read the expression on her face, but she did not look happy.

Fennick turned toward the door. “Don’t touch anything else. I’m bringing Agathe.”

While he was gone, Liesl remained beside the runner and examined the frost without making contact again. Britta stood between the marked sleigh and the others in the storage hall.

Without Britta’s warning about her ‘bad feeling’ and her insistence that the sleigh remain grounded, a student might have taken it into the air while Fennick waited for an inspection that Liesl didn’t know she was supposed to perform.

The missing work order didn’t seem like an administrative mistake to me.

Fennick returned with Dame Agathe. Liesl explained what she had found and showed her the untouched frost around the fitting. Agathe listened without interrupting.

“And you’ve never encountered this in an ordinary depleted enchantment?” she asked.

“Never. Depleted Craft is empty, but I can still feel the pattern. There’s no pattern left in this fitting.”

Agathe studied the sleigh from several angles without crossing the red cord. Her attention remained on the frost for several seconds.

“Who knows what you found?”

“Only the five of us,” Fennick said. “Some students saw that I marked the sleigh, but they don’t know why.”

“Keep it that way.” Agathe faced him. “Lock the storage hall and make a list of every sleigh used since the term began. Inspect each fitting for frost or unnatural cold, but don’t dismantle anything without Liesl present.”

Fennick nodded.

“Liesl, leave this fitting exactly where it is. I want the entire assembly preserved until we understand what happened to it.”

Agathe started toward the door.

“Wait,” I said. “There’s something else.”

She stopped and looked back at me.

“Fennick submitted the work order after Britta grounded the sleigh. Liesl checks the collection box every morning, but she never received it.”

“There’s no one between that box and me,” Liesl said. “If Fennick put the order there, someone removed it before I could collect it.”

I looked at the red cord around the support. “The damage was already done before Britta had the sleigh grounded. Whoever sabotaged it expected me to fly it. Then they saw the cord, knew an inspection was coming, and took the order before Liesl could find out what they’d used.”

Agathe held my gaze. Her expression revealed nothing.

“That conclusion does not leave this room,” she said. “None of you will discuss the fitting, the work order, or your suspicions with anyone who isn’t present now.”

After she’d left the room, I realized she hadn’t told me I was wrong.

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Chapter 7



It was late when I got back to my quarters, but I found myself unable to sleep. Fennick had locked up the storage hall after Dame Agathe had ordered everyone involved to keep quiet. The image of frost crawling over that metal fitting followed me back to my room.

I couldn't stop thinking about what might have happened if Britta hadn't noticed the issue with my training sleigh. I knew candidates sometimes died during training as well as during their Trials, but I hadn't realized someone might be trying to arrange it.

But despite the revelation that someone might have been trying to kill me, I'd still had a good day. Liesl's new Bond remained warm inside me. When I paid attention, I could feel the steady trace of her Craft magic and knew the connection was still there. It also reminded me of her mouth, her bare breasts in my hands, and the promise she'd made before we parted.

That did not help me sleep. I don't know if it was my newly jacked body pumping with youthful hormones, or if it was being surrounded by and physically tempted by gorgeous elf chicks at every turn. But my cock was aching so bad I thought if Britta put her hands on me in Reindeer Handling

the next day I might just make a mess of my trousers. This was getting ridiculous.

I lay in bed for almost an hour, tossing and turning. Every time I thought of having Liesl tied up, an image of the sabotaged sleigh would interrupt me. And if I tried to puzzle out what was going on with the Academy's saboteur, I'd be distracted by thoughts of what Liesl had promised me for next time.

Then the recording Rin had shown me pushed everything else out of my mind.

My mother had looked so happy when I carried that tray into her bedroom. Seeing her alive again, even through a Sight pane, had brought back everything I missed about her.

It wasn't her birthday now. Back on the mountain, July hadn't advanced by even a second. But eventually her birthday would come around again, and I already knew how badly I would miss her when it did.

She never liked cake very much, so every year Dad and I made her favorite Christmas sugar cookies instead. We cut them into trees, bells, stars, and reindeer, then covered them with thick white icing and enough colored sugar to stain our fingers for days.

Dad called it Christmas in July. My family had been celebrating it long before Northstar turned the phrase into a sales campaign.

When I was a kid, we got up early and brought her coffee and a plate of badly decorated cookies in bed. Dad did most of the baking, and I stole broken pieces while pretending to help. After he died, I kept the tradition going with her. My cookies never looked as good as his, but she always acted like they did.

I rolled onto my other side and pulled the blanket over my head.

That didn’t work either.

The room was too quiet, and I could almost smell butter and vanilla from the farmhouse kitchen. God, I wished I had one of those cookies now.

My stomach growled. I groaned and threw the covers off again. Maybe I was just hungry. It was always hard for me to sleep if I hadn’t eaten enough that day, especially when I’d been training. This new body probably needed twice as many calories as I’d been eating. I wondered if the kitchens were still open.

I got out of bed, pulled on trousers and a sweater, and went looking for food.

The Academy dining hall was dark, and the kitchen behind its serving counter had been closed for hours. I pulled on my coat and went outside. Light still burned in a large building beyond the Academy courtyard, and the smell of fresh bread drifted through the snow. I followed it.

A side door opened into a kitchen large enough to feed most of the village at once. Copper pots hung over broad worktables. Brick ovens filled one wall, and red light glowed between the stove grates.

A solitary woman stood at a flour-covered table in the middle of it, and for a second I thought I was seeing a ghost. But no, she didn’t look anything like my mother. She just had the same essence, somehow. She had a warm, motherly glow about her that immediately attracted me in my emotionally vulnerable state.

She wore an Academy uniform beneath a white apron. Her thick black hair had been tied away from her round face, although there was a frizz of escapees around her pointed ears. She was shorter than Liesl and full-figured, with warm brown skin and soft curves the apron managed to

emphasize in a very sexy way. Flour dusted both forearms all the way up to her elbows.

She looked up from the dough beneath her hands and froze. “Oh!… um. Hello.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I was just looking for something to eat. I didn’t mean to disturb you. Should I leave? Are you busy?”

“No.” She wiped her hands quickly on her apron. “Please, stay. You don’t have to leave.”

Her cheeks darkened as she looked me over. I had seen her around the Academy, usually carrying food into a classroom or helping in the dining hall, but we’d never spoken.

“I’m Paloma, of Hearth House.” She tucked a loose strand of hair behind one ear. “You’re Cole, right? I’m supposed to be your tutor when you begin Kitchen Craft and Healing.”

“So Hearth magic involves actual cooking?”

“Cooking, warmth, and healing.” She glanced at my empty hands. “You said you were looking for something to eat?”

“If there’s anything available,” I said. “I know it’s late.”

“I do a lot of cooking late at night,” she said with a soft smile. “Come. I’ve just taken a batch out. Sit down.”

Paloma went to one of the cooling racks and selected a round bun with a crisp, sugared top. She placed it on a plate, split it with a knife, and spread

butter across the steaming middle. By the time she set it in front of me, the butter had already started to melt.

“Thank you,” I said. “This looks amazing. But why are you cooking in the middle of the night?”

“Senior Hearth students take working rotations at the Hearth Guild once we’ve passed our practical examinations. Some shifts are in the village healing clinic, and others are here in the kitchens.” She looked down at her apron. “I have the night bake this week.”

“So you’re a student,” I said. “Not on the cooking staff?”

“That’s right,” she said. “Though soon I’ll be making the transition to full time cook staff, I suspect. I’m not much good in any of my other classes, but my Hearth Gift is strong, so I would probably be more useful if I picked a focused profession instead of continuing to train.”

I got the impression that she was in a similar position to Liesl, an older student who had reached the end of her academic career without finding a candidate to bond with. That made me look at Paloma again, with a new appreciation for what she had been hiding beneath her apron.

She was short, but there was nothing small about her. Her breasts were disproportionately large for her frame, full and heavy enough to stretch the white fabric of her Academy blouse even beneath the broad bib of her apron. Every time she reached across the worktable, they shifted against the strained buttons. I could imagine Flight training being a nightmare for her. Fitting a harness around that chest would require custom engineering, and running with Britta would probably count as cruel and unusual punishment.

On the other hand, there were other activities her body seemed exceptionally well suited for. Snuggling in bed came immediately to mind.

Paloma looked soft and warm enough that I could imagine pulling her against me on a winter night and happily remaining there until spring.

Her waist narrowed sharply beneath her breasts before flaring into broad hips and thick thighs. When she turned toward the cooling rack, the back of her apron was open enough to reveal how little her Academy skirt covered. The plaid fabric rested high on an incredibly round, juicy ass and barely reached the tops of her stockings.

My imagination supplied red lingerie beneath the uniform. Lace strained over her breasts while they overflowed the cups, and a matching scrap disappeared between the soft curves of her ass. I wondered how much of her I could fit into my hands and whether she would make that same shy face while I undressed her.

I dragged my attention back to the bun before she caught me staring at her ass and took a bite of the food she'd offered me. A groan escaped me. The bread was soft and warm, with cinnamon running through it and enough sugar on top to break beneath my teeth.

"Oooh, fuck yeah."

Paloma's eyes widened.

"That's a compliment," I assured her. "A strong one."

She blushed and returned to the dough. "I… I'm glad you like it."

I finished the bun faster than I meant to. Paloma had another one on my plate before I asked, then poured coffee from a pot warming beside the stove. I carried both to her worktable and sat on a stool while she divided the dough into equal pieces.

Her dark brown eyes ran over my large frame. “You have a healthy appetite. Are you usually a late-night snacker?”

“No,” I laughed. “I like my sleep. But… I don’t know. My mind just wasn’t cooperating.”

“I imagine it’s a big change,” she said. “Coming here as a candidate. Many times, the ones they choose don’t seem to handle it very well. If you’ve just got a midnight sweet tooth, you’re probably doing okay.”

I licked some butter and cinnamon from my lips and sighed. “It’s not that. It’s just… I’ve been thinking about stuff.”

She waited. When I didn’t offer more, she pressed her thumb into a piece of dough and folded it over itself. She continued working while I decided what I wanted to say. It felt kind of private, and given the nature of the world I was now living in, it felt kind of weird to be bringing up my mom. But if anyone was going to understand, the busty, motherly elf in front of me seemed like a good person to try with.

I wrapped both hands around the coffee cup. “Today would have been my mother’s birthday. I think. The time thing is weird between here and where I’m from. But… yeah.”

Paloma stopped shaping the dough and looked at me, her kind eyes wide.

“She died about eighteen months ago,” I continued. “Her next birthday will be the second one without her. Rin showed me a recording of the last one we celebrated together, and I couldn’t stop thinking about it. She didn’t like birthday cake, so we always made sugar cookies for her instead. Eventually, thinking about them made me hungry enough to come looking for something.”

“What were they like?”

“Soft in the middle, with vanilla and butter and way too much icing. We made them in Christmas shapes even though it was July.”

Paloma smiled. “Tell me about them.”

I told her about the red candies my mother used for reindeer noses and the strange association in my head between Christmas baking and pine sap from the years I had spent helping Dad on the tree farm. Once I started, other memories followed.

Before long, I wasn’t talking about the cookies anymore. I was telling Paloma about my parents and how happy we had been together. I had never told anyone else most of it. Not even Meredith. It felt good to remember them without immediately forcing myself to stop.

Paloma kept shaping the dough while she listened.

“I had a happy childhood,” I said. “I always thought I’d give my own children the same thing.”

“You still could.”

“If I survive three Trials here and become Santa.”

Paloma folded another piece of dough. “I’ve always wanted children too. I thought I would Bond with a candidate eventually, and that we might have a family after he earned the coat.”

“But now you’re preparing to leave the Academy.”

“That wouldn’t stop me from forming a Bond. It would just make it less likely.” She kept her attention on the dough. “But I’ve waited a long time

already. Sometimes I think perhaps a husband and children weren't meant to be part of my life."

The thought of Paloma giving up on something she wanted bothered me more than it should have, considering we'd just met. Maybe because I understood exactly how it felt to watch the future you had expected move farther out of reach.

"I could make sugar cookies for you," she said. "Not tonight, but soon. You could tell me whether my recipe is as good as your mother's."

"I'd like that very much."

Paloma smiled and reached for the next piece of dough.

I nodded toward the rows she was working on. "What are you making?"

"It's practice for the Posada."

"What's a Posada?"

Paloma's shyness faded as soon as I asked about her work. She explained that her line had kept the Christmas traditions of Mexico for centuries. During the nine nights before Christmas, people walked together and asked for shelter in remembrance of Mary and Joseph searching for a place to stay. They were refused until a final door opened and welcomed everyone inside for food, songs, and celebration.

"The Hearth Guild used to organize a Posada that crossed the whole village," she said.

"What happened to it?"

“Kris took part when he was a candidate,” she said. “The procession always ended at the Academy, and the candidate opened the ninth door.”

Paloma’s hands slowed over the dough.

“Several of the men who followed him took part too, then died during their Trials. Eventually, the faculty decided it was cruel to ask a man they expected to lose to stand at the final door and promise shelter to everyone else. The last Posada was held more than a hundred years ago.”

Without the candidate, the procession had no one to welcome it inside at the end. The Hearth Guild could still hold a feast, but it wouldn’t be a Posada.

“I’ve already spoken to the other guilds,” Paloma continued. “They agreed to open their halls, some of them working together so everyone can participate. But I didn’t know whether I should ask you to—”

“I’ll do it.”

Her flour-covered hands became still. “Are you sure?”

“If I’m training to become Santa, welcoming people inside seems like part of the job.”

Paloma’s expression softened. “Do you think you can get Dame Agathe to agree?”

I shrugged. “I’ll try. But even if she doesn’t… I’ll just do it anyway.”

Paloma giggled and returned to her work. For a while, the only sounds in the kitchen were the scrape of dough against the table and the quiet crackle of the ovens.

She glanced at my plate. “You’ve eaten both of them already.”

“I was hungry.”

“I’m glad.” She selected another bun from the cooling rack and brought it to me. “You’re much larger than the elves I cook for, and most of the candidates we’ve had. You must need a great deal of food to keep those muscles…” Her gaze moved across my shoulders and chest before she lowered it to the plate. “Muscle-y.”

The flush returned to her cheeks.

“My appetite has been ridiculous since I got here,” I said.

“I’ll start keeping extra food ready for you,” she said. “Just in case.”

She leaned across the table to set the bun in front of me. Her heavy breasts pressed against the edge beneath her apron, and the top buttons of her blouse strained with the pressure. My attention settled there until Paloma straightened.

She caught me looking.

I picked up the bun and took a bite before my expression could reveal how badly I wanted to find out what she looked like without the blouse.

Paloma turned back to her dough. The Academy skirt barely covered the full curve of her ass, and it lifted higher when she reached across the table for another tray. Her thick thighs showed above her stockings. The view made me forget what I was eating for a moment.

“So…” she said without turning around. “You’ve seen your candidate record?”

The question pulled my attention away from her ass. “Last week.”

“There’s an unusual elf who works with the Lists,” she said. “Did you meet her?”

“Rin?” I guessed. “She’s the one who showed me my record, actually.”

Paloma turned. “How did that go?”

“I’m…still trying to decide.”

Paloma studied my face for a moment, then returned to shaping the dough.

“Most people don’t know what to make of Rin,” she said. “They laugh at the odd way she acts and the strange things she says. But I worry about her.”

I could understand being worried about Rin in the sense that one might worry she was about to kill them. But I didn’t get the sense that was what Paloma meant. “Why?”

“Her Sight appeared much earlier than it should have. She probably began having visions before she was old enough to understand what she was seeing, and before she learned to redirect them to the screens the List-Keepers use. The Academy was excited by how powerful she was, but I don’t think anyone considered what it would be like for her to see so much.”

Paloma divided another piece of dough and rolled it between her palms.

“Most List-Keepers have to concentrate to hold a pane open,” she continued. “Rin has to concentrate to close them. Sometimes she still sees things when she shuts her eyes.”

“That sounds exhausting.”

“I think it is. Sometimes she comes here and sits near the ovens because the warmth helps her sleep. But she’s often too tired to speak, so I just feed her and leave her alone.”

That explained the nest of cushions and blankets Rin had built inside her work alcove. It also made her obsession with me a little more understandable. Maybe it was easier for her to keep all the ‘panes’ closed except one, instead of being inundated with the lives of thousands of strangers all the time.

“She seems very certain about me,” I said. “She wants to be one of my Bonds. But I don’t know…”

“It’s a good thing if she does.” Paloma looked directly at me. “She’s never had any interest in a candidate before. It means she can see something promising in you. That doesn’t mean you owe her a Bond, or anything else she wants, of course.”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” I said. “I wouldn’t say I’m totally not interested. She’s very… intense. Which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. But she seems unpredictable too.”

Paloma nodded. “You should be clear with her. Rin understands firm rules better than hints.”

“Okay. Thanks. That helps, actually.” Whatever else I thought about Rin, she *had* released me when I refused to kiss her. So maybe Paloma was right and she just needed some really firm boundaries.

The busty chef glanced at my empty plate and placed another bun in front of me.

“I’m starting to think you’re trying to fatten me up.”

Her gaze traveled over my shoulders and chest. “I think it would take a great deal more than a few buns to do that.”

The flush returned to her cheeks. She turned away and carried a tray toward the ovens.

As she bent to slide the tray into the oven, her skirt lifted enough that I could actually see the bottom of her ass cheeks peeking out beneath the pleats. Goddamn. I imagined what it would feel like having her back that thing up against my lap.

When Paloma returned, she wrapped two more buns in a clean cloth and handed them to me.

“For the morning,” she said. “You’ll need them.”

Our fingers touched around the warm bundle, and neither of us pulled away immediately. “Thanks.”

“The Academy library has a book about the old Posadas, if you’re interested,” she said. “*Nine Nights at the Pole*. It has the procession route and the words you’ll need to say at the final door.”

“I’ll check it out. If I’m going to argue with Dame Agathe, I should know what I’m arguing about.”

Paloma walked me to the kitchen entrance and waited while I pulled on my coat.

“Thanks for listening tonight,” I said. “It’s been a long time since I talked about some of that stuff. About my parents.”

“You can talk about them whenever you need to,” she said with a soft smile. “Or anything else for that matter.”

Her eyes dropped briefly to my mouth and I suddenly wanted to kiss her. The kitchen door stood beneath a bare wooden beam without a trace of mistletoe. I didn’t care, though. I wanted to pull her soft body against mine and find out whether the desire she kept trying to hide would overcome her shyness once I touched her.

But that probably wasn’t the best idea. She didn’t seem ready for that, even if she was thinking about it. And I hadn’t left my room looking for another Bond. I’d already made one with Liesl, only a few hours ago. There was no need to rush.

Even if it did seem like a really, really good idea.

I smiled. “Good night, Paloma.”

“Good night, Cole.” She sighed. “Come see me again soon.”

I stepped into the cold with the warm bread tucked beneath my arm. But I still wasn’t tired. The coffee had made it unlikely that I would sleep anytime soon, so I decided to make good on my promise and crossed the courtyard to the Academy library.



The library occupied two floors at the south end of the school. Tall shelves formed narrow aisles around a central reading room, and ladders slid along brass rails to reach the upper books. Garlands and red ribbons decorated the balconies. Mistletoe hung above the main doors and several of the private study alcoves, which seemed unnecessarily suggestive in a building full of women with Bonds on their minds.

A few students still worked at the long tables. One had spread mechanical drawings over half the nearest table. Another sat behind a wall of books with a mug pressed between both hands. Nobody looked particularly surprised to see me.

I found *Nine Nights at the Pole* in the section on regional customs. The book was enormous, bound in cracked red leather, and contained more illustrations than text. I carried it to the far end of a reading table where the ceiling above me was reassuringly free of mistletoe.

Most of the book seemed to deal with the history of the tradition in South America, but the chapter Paloma had mentioned was about how it had been adapted at the North Pole. It described the nine doors and the feast that followed. A folded map showed the old procession route through the village. I traced it from the Hearth Guild to the Toymakers' Hall, Flight House, the Hall of Lists, and six other buildings I hadn't visited yet.

The next chapter began with a woodcut of a horned figure beside a sleigh. Chains hung from one hand and a bundle of switches filled the other. A sack bulged over his shoulder. The caption beneath it read, *Krampus, Keeper of the Switch, companion to the first Santa.*

I leaned closer.

"They don't tell candidates about *him* anymore."

Rin's whisper tickled my ear.

I jerked around. She sat in the chair beside mine, although it had been empty a second earlier. Her black hair was slightly rumpled, and ink marked the side of one hand. Her dark eyes moved from the picture to my face.

“How long have you been there?” I whispered.

Rin leaned over the book, ignoring my question. “You shouldn’t worry about Krampus yet. He hasn’t been seen at the Pole in a very long time.”

“That isn’t actually that reassuring,” I said. “What is he, biding his time?”

“Would you like me to reassure you, baby?” Her fingers settled on my thigh beneath the table. “I could make you forget every thought in your head.”

I caught her wrist. “Rin.”

She looked up at the bare ceiling above us. “Don’t worry. See? There’s no mistletoe. Even if I kissed you, there wouldn’t be a Bond. I’m not breaking your rule. I’m a good girl. But I don’t just want to kiss you, Cole… I want to get my hands on your big, fat cock.”

“Jesus, Rin,” I groaned. “We’re in a library.”

“That’s right. You’ll have to try to be quiet.”

Her hand moved an inch higher and for some reason I didn’t stop her. I wanted what she was offering, as crazy as it sounded. There were other students in the room, and Rin was still the most alarming person I’d met at the Pole. Unfortunately, she was also beautiful, her fingers were warm, and I was already hard.

Britta had spent a week groping me during Flight lessons without giving me anything more. Liesl had left me painfully aroused before the sleigh investigation interrupted us. And then there was Paloma's juicy ass to contend with. For days, I had been teased within an inch of my life, and that day had been the worst of all.

Rin wasn't asking me to Bond with her. She seemed to be offering exactly what I needed without demanding anything in return.

"Come on," she whispered. "Just a little touch. I need to feel you for myself."

"Only your hand," I said. "No kiss, and no trying to drag me under any mistletoe afterward."

"Only my hand," she agreed. "I'll be so good. So filthy good, baby. May I?"

I released her wrist.

Rin dropped from the chair and slipped beneath the table.

My pulse jumped. The long table concealed most of her, but anyone walking past would see her kneeling between my legs. I started to pull back.

She pressed one finger to her lips, then opened my trousers.

Her ink-stained hand closed around my cock.

I clenched my jaw to keep from making a sound. Rin watched my face as she drew me free and stroked slowly from base to tip. Her palm was soft and hot. Her thumb spread the moisture gathering at the head, then followed the sensitive ridge beneath it.

“You’re so hard,” she whispered. “I’ve dreamed of doing this since the moment I saw you. This is so hot I could scream!”

“You need to be quieter.”

“So do you.”

She locked down on me and stroked faster.

I opened the Posada book in front of me and tried to look like a man studying old Christmas customs. Rin’s other hand cupped my balls. Her fingers worked them gently while her fist moved along my shaft.

Words blurred on the page.

“Doesn’t it feel good?” she whispered. “I would worship this cock if you let me, baby. You like the way my hand feels, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Say it. Very quietly. Say you love it.”

“It feels fucking incredible, okay?”

Rin shivered beneath the table. Her knees shifted across the rug, and she squeezed her thighs together.

“I’m going to jerk you off right onto my face.” She moaned and brought her lips teasingly close. I could feel her breath on my shaft and my hips bucked, bringing me dangerously close to her mouth. “Right onto my tongue. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? I know you like it dirty.”

Her thumb circled the head. The pressure was exact, as if watching me for years had somehow taught her exactly what I liked. While that idea had freaked me out at first, suddenly I found it hot as fuck.

“You don’t mind vanilla sex,” she crooned as she stroked me. “You’re a man. You’ll fuck any way that gets your dick wet. But what you really like is when it gets filthy. And I like that, too, Cole. I was made for you. I made myself for you.”

I pushed deeper into her hand. Rin released a faint whimper and leaned closer. Her breath tickled against my skin above her fist.

“Please let me kiss it,” she whispered.

“No.” I managed to grind the word out. “Hand only. Like we agreed.”

“Oh, but you could change your mind,” she said. “I would be so good. I’d take you so deep.”

“Hand, Rin.”

Her tongue appeared between her lips, but she kept it to herself. “Yes, Cole.”

She obeyed. That made it harder to remember why I shouldn’t be doing this with her. Rin increased her pace. The faint wet movement of her hand sounded much too loud in the library. I kept one hand flat on the open book while the other gripped the edge of my chair.

A page turned across the table.

I looked up.

The woman behind the wall of books had lowered one volume. She stared directly at me. Her gaze moved down to the table, where the top of Rin's black hair and one pointed ear were visible beside my knee.

Then she looked back at my face.

We held eye contact while Rin stroked my exposed cock beneath the table.

The other student's eyes widened. Mine probably did too.

She knew. There was no possible innocent explanation for Rin kneeling between my legs while I sat rigid in my chair with sweat gathering along my hairline.

This was completely wrong. I was letting a woman give me a handjob in the Academy library while another student watched me pretend to read about the Posadas.

Rin squeezed harder.

My hips moved before I could stop them.

The student raised her book and hid behind it again, blushing furiously.

"She knows what I'm doing," Rin whispered. She sounded delighted. "She likes it. She's a little slut, just like all of them. You should moan so she can hear you."

I reached beneath the table and caught the back of Rin's neck. "Finish me."

Her eyes opened wider. She worked me faster, using both hands. One stroked my length while the other rolled my balls in her palm. Pleasure tightened through my stomach and spread down my thighs.

Rin watched every reaction. She bit her lower lip whenever my breath caught and changed her grip each time I thrust into her fist.

“That’s it,” she whispered. “Use me, baby. I’ve waited so long to feel you in my hands. Please come for me, Cole. Let me have your essence.”

I glanced across the table. The other student’s book hadn’t moved, but I could see her eyes above the top edge. I could no longer pretend to be reading.

Rin brought her face close and her thumb pressed beneath the head again.

I came hard, spraying across her grinning lips, her chin, and dripping into her waiting palm.

My hand tensed around the back of her neck. I held my breath until the strongest pulse passed, then released it slowly through my nose. Rin continued stroking me through every contraction and caught everything without spilling a drop onto the rug.

When I finally let go of her, she sat back on her heels. Rin crouched beneath the table with my semen on her face and cupped in her palm, staring at it in wonder. Her pupils filled most of her dark eyes.

“Mmmm, so perfect,” she whispered. “I just need a taste… May I?”

I stared at her, then nodded slowly.

She dragged one finger through the mess and sucked it clean. Her eyelids fluttered. Then she bent over her palm and licked it in quick, greedy strokes. She chased every smear across her skin, making small pleased noises in her throat. A streak remained at the corner of her mouth when she finished. She caught it with her tongue and smiled up at me, delighted with herself.

I no longer gave any shits that she was a nutcase. It was so fucking hot, watching her lick my cum off her fingers like some beautiful little cave goblin, I was almost hard again. Rin was right, my tastes had always leaned a little to the filthy side. And she'd given me exactly what I needed.

Across the table, a chair scraped backward. The other student gathered her books without looking at us and moved to the opposite side of the library.

Rin wiped her hand on a handkerchief, tucked me back into my trousers, and fastened them neatly. She crawled out from beneath the table and resumed her seat as if she had only dropped a pen.

I closed the book. "You knew she could see you."

"I wanted her to," she said. "I'd have let you fuck me in front of her. I'd let you fuck me in front of everyone."

"Oh, God." I rubbed a hand over my face. "What have I gotten myself into?"

Rin rested her cheek against my shoulder. "You liked it. I know you did."

I had, which was a problem I was going to have to deal with after I got some sleep.

"You don't want to Bond with me yet," she said. "But I would do anything for you. You know that, right? Every dirty little thought in your head, I'll make it come true."

I closed my eyes, trying to come up with some way to change the subject. I needed to get the blood pumping back into my brain, or I was going to drag Rin to one of those mistletoes myself, just to see how kinky she really was.

“What do you know about Krampus?” I asked.

Her eyes moved to the horned figure on the page. For the first time since she’d appeared, her smile weakened. “Why?”

“For fuck’s sake, Rin,” I laughed. “Help me out here. I’m trying to… trying to do the right thing.”

She cocked her head to the side and eyed me curiously. Then she nodded.

“The old panes turn dark when I try to look for him,” she said. “The Sight doesn’t like to go where he used to be.”

That answer pushed some of the pleasure from my body.

“Can you show me?”

“Sometime, maybe.” Rin closed the book over the picture. “But you should sleep, Cole. You’ve been entered in the Sleigh Sprint at first bell. If you’re too tired to perform, Britta might kill you.”

I looked toward the tall windows. The courtyard lamps still burned their dim night-red.

“How long until first bell?”

“Five hours.” Rin kissed two ink-stained fingers and pressed them to my cheek. She had technically obeyed the no-kissing rule. “Sleep tight, baby.”

She disappeared between the shelves before I could ask how the hell she knew what my first bell schedule was.

I was so tired, I could have slept right there in the library. But I managed to drag myself back to my tower and passed out in my bed. I didn't bother getting changed, even though my boxers were sticky from the mess Rin had made.

I liked it. Fucking sue me.

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Chapter 8



Pounding on the tower's outer door woke me. The sound carried up the stairwell and dragged me out of what felt like the first decent minute of sleep I'd had all night.

I stumbled down two flights and opened the door.

Britta stood outside with a folded set of blue training clothes under one arm. She had silver goggles resting on her forehead. "You need to be at the Straightaway before first bell."

"I need to wash."

"Hurry up, then. You have five minutes." She handed me the clothes and walked away.

I washed quickly, changed, and took one of Paloma's wrapped buns from the sitting-room table. Britta was waiting at the end of the corridor when I caught up with her.

“You entered me in a flying race without asking,” I said as we crossed the courtyard. “Is this one of the Reindeer Games?”

“The Sleigh Sprint. It runs in paired heats. Every student has to complete one, but only two teams race at a time. Fennick grades each of us on the job we’re assigned, and the fastest team after all the heats wins.”

“And you put us in the first heat.”

“I didn’t want to wait.”

“But I’ve never even flown.”

“Then it will be a good opportunity for me to see how you perform under pressure,” she said with a wink. “Don’t worry. You won’t be driving. I will.”

She kept walking toward the Flight House while I ate. Despite her reassurances, I was, in fact, worried. Not worried enough to affect my appetite, apparently, but definitely a little concerned.

The Flight House stood near the outer wall of the Workshop building. Beyond it, a broad stretch of ice extended across the snow toward a line of red-and-gold marker posts. Evergreen garlands wrapped the starting rails. Long pennants streamed from the posts farther down the Straightaway, showing the direction of the wind at different heights.

Students crowded behind snow barriers on both sides of the course. Most wore House colors over their winter clothes. The reindeer games were apparently important enough to bring the entire Academy outside before breakfast.

Two racing sleighs waited at the starting line.

I recognized Britta's immediately. Its dark blue body sat low over the polished runners. A team of reindeer stood harnessed in front of it while Flight students checked the traces. The animals stamped against the ice and tossed their antlers, impatient to run.

The other sleigh was silver with red trim. A woman in Passage House red stood beside the driver's bench. She was shorter and stockier than Britta, with a compact, powerful build, broad hips, and thick thighs filling her fitted racing trousers. Golden curls framed a pretty, mature face, and her warm brown eyes carried the confidence of someone who expected to win. Her jacket fit snugly over full breasts and narrowed at her waist. She looked a little older than Britta and every bit as athletic, but where Britta was long and lean, this woman was solid curves and muscle.

Bea stood beside her.

Her black hair had been pulled into a tight knot. She wore a red Passage House coat over her racing clothes and a safety harness similar to the one waiting for me. She was examining a strip of symbols attached to the side of the sleigh.

"I thought you said Bea didn't know anything about Flight."

"She can't drive worth a reindeer fart," Britta said. "Sigrid is driving for Passage House, and she's damned good. Should have been a Flight student, if you ask me, but her family is all Passage House as a matter of pride. As her second, Bea will read the wind markers, watch the opposing sleigh, and keep their load balanced. She can also channel Cheer through the brace and into the reins, giving Sigrid more speed."

"So, she's good at everything *except* controlling the sleigh."

"She knows the rules and performs exactly what she's practiced. That keeps her grades near the top despite her lack of physical skill in Flight."

So, Bea had found the position where studying hard and following rules could compensate for poor instincts.

“And what am I supposed to do?” I asked.

“The same job without the Cheer.”

“Oh good,” I said. “That sounds fair.”

“It isn’t.” Britta stopped beside her sleigh. “But I’m good enough to compensate for your inexperience. Trust me. The team will have to supply the Flight magic. You need to read the course and manage our balance while under intense pressure. Consider this a test.”

“It is a test,” I said. “Isn’t that the whole point of these Reindeer Games?”

“Yes,” she said. “But that isn’t what I was referring to. *I* will also be taking your measure out there, Cole. Don’t disappoint me.”

I finally realized what being chosen as Britta’s second meant. She thought I was good enough to ride in her sleigh. If I did well today, I’d earn the kiss she’d been dangling in front of my nose like a carrot in front of Burly Ben’s. I was not going to screw this up. I had learned the basics of reading the wind and how to signal course corrections from our Flight classes, but this would be my first practical application of the skills. Talk about getting thrown into the deep end.

Fennick had laid my new safety harness across the rear seat. The leather straps were wider and more complicated than I had expected. While I’d been thoroughly measured for the thing, this was the first time I’d be wearing it.

Britta held it open. “Step in.”

I put my feet through the leg straps. She drew the harness up my body, buckled it around my waist and chest, then tightened each section until the leather fit snugly. Her hands moved between my thighs without any of the teasing she had employed during the fitting. Today she was completely focused on the work.

She checked every buckle twice before clipping the line at my back to the rail behind the second seat.

“If we overturn, the harness keeps you with the sleigh,” she said. “If I tell you to release, pull this buckle and jump clear.”

She placed my hand on a flat metal grip beside the seat. A line of small glass windows ran down its center.

“This is the brace. The windows tell you what the sleigh is doing. Green means our load is centered. If one side turns red, move your weight the other way.”

Two squat cargo boxes had been strapped behind the seats, one above each runner.

“Ballast?” I asked.

“The Sprint requires us to carry a delivery load. Each box has a release beside your knee. Don’t touch either one unless I tell you or we’re already crashing.”

“And the wind markers?”

“Call the color and direction as we pass them. I’ll be watching the team.”

Sigrid approached while Britta finished checking my harness. She carried her goggles in one hand and looked me over with open interest.

“So, this is Cole,” she said. “Fennick told me you hadn’t flown yet.”

“Nope,” I said. “Fresh meat.”

Her gaze lingered on my chest beneath the harness. “I asked to take you up for your first run. Looks like Britta filed her entry first. Either that or Fennick is playing favorites with his Flight House students.”

“Cole trains with me,” Britta said. “I have first claim on him as my second.”

Sigrid’s attention remained on me. “If she makes you regret agreeing to this, you can come find me. I’ll be sure to take good care of you.”

Britta stepped between us and checked the buckle across my chest again, although it hadn’t moved.

“You should get back to your sleigh,” she said.

Sigrid smiled. “Try to keep both runners attached today.”

She returned to the silver sleigh.

I looked at Britta. “Friendly rivalry?”

“She’s been racing longer than I have.”

“And you’ve been beating her.”

“Not often enough.”

That was all the explanation Britta intended to give me. She pulled down her goggles and climbed into the driver's position.

I settled into the narrow seat behind her. There was barely enough room for my knees on either side of her hips. Britta clipped my harness line to a second anchor point, then handed me a smaller pair of goggles.

Bea climbed into the rear seat of Sigrid's sleigh. She picked up the brace, and red light appeared beneath her fingers. A matching glow spread along Sigrid's reins.

Mine remained dark when I gripped it.

Britta looked back at me. "Don't worry about it. You don't need magic to tell left from right."

"No. I learned that at a very good school."

"Then listen carefully and do exactly what I say."

Fennick walked between the two teams, checking each trace and buckle himself. He ran his hands over the padded harness around Britta's lead reindeer, tugged the straps, then moved down the rest of the team. I felt Bea's eyes on us as the old elf did his inspection, but she looked away when I tried to catch her at it.

When Fennick finished with both sleighs, he stepped away from the course and raised a red flag.

The reindeer lowered their heads.

Britta wrapped the reins around her gloved hands. Every muscle in her back tensed.

“Brace,” she said.

I locked both hands around the metal grip.

The flag dropped and the reindeer lunged forward. My harness snapped tight and dragged me against the seat. The runners shrieked over the ice as both sleighs accelerated.

Britta’s team gathered speed with every stride. Snow streamed past on both sides. The first marker post rushed toward us.

“Wind left,” I shouted. “Gold!”

Britta pulled the right rein half an inch. The team changed direction together and met the gust at an angle.

Beside us, Bea leaned close to Sigrid and called into her ear. Red light pulsed through the brace beneath her hands. The silver sleigh surged ahead.

The second set of pennants stood straight out from their posts.

“Hard right!”

Britta adjusted the reins. The reindeer jumped. For one sickening moment, the runners remained against the ice while the rest of the sleigh tried to leave without them. Then the entire frame lifted.

The Straightaway dropped away beneath us.

Cold air tore at my face and forced its way through every gap in my clothes. The reindeer ran on empty air, their legs moving in a steady rhythm. I was no science whiz, but it made no fucking sense whatsoever. Silver sparks

flashed beneath their hooves. The runners no longer scraped against anything, but the sleigh continued accelerating with no regard for physics.

My stomach had been left somewhere near the starting line. Every instinct I possessed told me that a vehicle this heavy had no business floating so high above the ground. But holy shit was it cool. I loved it!

The Academy streamed past in a blur of colored coats and raised arms as the crowd cheered. Beyond the course, the village spread across the snow beneath us. Chimneys released ribbons of smoke. Lanterns still burned along the streets. I suddenly understood why someone would spend centuries learning to do this. Flying was badass.

Britta crouched over the reins. She changed our height and direction through movements so small I barely saw them. The reindeer responded immediately. She obviously belonged in the driver's seat. It was like she was a part of the sleigh, a part of the team, controlling it as easily as she breathed. It was incredibly sexy.

"Blue ahead," I called. "Wind dropping."

She lowered the sleigh into a faster current.

We were gaining on Sigrid, now. The silver sleigh still had half a length on us, but Britta's team was closing the distance. Bea glanced across at us, calculated our position, and bent close to Sigrid again.

The light along their reins intensified.

Britta pulled more speed from our team without any borrowed Cheer. The gap continued shrinking.

A patch of white appeared on the lead reindeer's harness, catching my attention.

At first, I thought it was snow. Then frost spread across the padded leather and covered the nearest buckle. I was suddenly reminded of the runner on the sabotaged sleigh.

“Britta, the harness!”

The lead reindeer stumbled in the air.

Its body dropped below the rest of the team. The traces snapped tight behind it. The animals on either side collided, and the entire formation folded inward.

Britta hauled on the reins. “Hold!”

The front of the sleigh dropped.

My harness caught me across the chest. The Straightaway tilted up in front of us as we plunged toward it.

Britta shouted to the team and pulled the outer reindeer apart. They fought their way back into formation, but the lead animal hung low between the traces. Frost covered most of its harness now.

The left runner struck the ice, jolting the whole sleigh. Metal screamed beneath us. The impact threw me against the side of the sleigh. The left support bent backward and tore free. The broken runner spun away across the course.

Britta kept hold of the reins. She pulled the team upward, and the remaining runner lifted from the ice.

The sleigh rolled toward its missing side.

The glass on the brace burned red beneath my left hand.

“Right!” Britta shouted.

I threw my weight over the intact runner. The sleigh resisted for a second, then rolled back far enough to keep the side rail from striking the ice.

But we were still dropping. The injured lead reindeer couldn’t carry its share, and the rest of the team fought against the weight behind them.

The left ballast box pulled us toward the broken side.

I found the release beside my knee and yanked it.

The box fell away and burst across the ice behind us. The sleigh rolled sharply right. I shifted farther over the intact runner and held the position with my shoulder pressed against the side.

Britta leveled us with the reins.

The second ballast box remained strapped behind me. We didn’t need balance anymore. We needed less weight.

I pulled the other release.

The box dropped. The team rose several feet, and the sleigh steadied.

Britta turned them away from the center of the course. Sigrid’s silver sleigh had already crossed the finish line, but she was banking around to return.

“Landing!” Britta shouted.

The intact runner struck the ice.

Britta braced her left hand against the side of the sleigh while keeping the reins in her right. The runner bounced once, then struck again. Her arm buckled beneath her with a sound I heard over the grinding metal. But she didn’t make a sound.

The sleigh skidded sideways. I leaned over the remaining runner and held our weight above it. “Jesus, Britta, are you okay?”

Britta kept the team moving until the sleigh straightened. Then she eased the reins and brought us to a stop near the outer barrier.

The lead reindeer collapsed.

She released my harness line before I could reach it. “Get him out of the traces.”

She was cradling her arm, but her eyes were fixed on the injured animal rather than herself. I jumped from the sleigh. The impact jarred my knees, but I stayed upright and ran forward.

Flight House handlers were already crossing the ice. Fennick reached the lead animal first. He released the main trace while two students unfastened the lines connecting it to the rest of the team.

The reindeer lay on its side. Its legs trembled, and its breath emerged in thin, weak clouds.

Britta dropped beside it.

She kept her left arm tight against her stomach. The forearm had already begun swelling above her wrist, but she reached for the reindeer with her

good hand.

“Easy,” she whispered. “You’re safe. We’ve got you.”

Paloma hurried through the handlers and knelt on the animal’s other side. She pressed both hands to its neck. Warm gold light spread beneath her palms.

“He’s so cold,” she said. “It’s like there’s ice in his veins. Help me get this harness off.”

Fennick drew an iron knife from his belt and cut through the frozen straps. The leather cracked instead of bending. As soon as the harness loosened, the reindeer drew a deeper breath.

Paloma kept one hand against its neck. The trembling gradually eased.

Britta tried to stand, but her face froze. The color drained from her cheeks, and her knees gave out beneath her.

I caught her around the waist.

“My arm,” she said through clenched teeth.

“I know,” I said. “It’s broken, Britta. Try not to move. I’ll help you up.”

I put one arm beneath her knees and lifted her against my chest, keeping the injured arm clear.

“I can walk.”

“I know you’re tough,” I said. “That doesn’t mean you need to be stupid.”

She glared at me, but she stopped arguing. Obviously because she knew I was right. Her good hand closed around the front of my harness while I carried her toward the barn.

Students crowded near the course barriers, but Fennick ordered them back. Sigrid stood beside the silver sleigh with her goggles pushed onto her forehead. Bea remained in the second seat while a Flight student unhooked her safety line.

Sigrid looked from Britta’s arm to the wrecked sleigh.

“What failed?” she asked.

“The lead harness,” Fennick said. “Clear the course and take your team inside.”

“This is reindeer shit,” Sigrid cursed. “I wanted to beat you properly!”

Bea’s attention settled on the iced harness in Fennick’s hands. Her expression was as frozen as the leather.

Paloma followed us into the reindeer barn. The handlers brought the injured animal through another entrance on a low sled and moved it into an empty stall.

I set Britta on a bench beside the grooming area. Paloma came over and examined her arm, then sent one of the students for her medical case.

“You fractured it,” she said. “I’ll need to straighten the bone before I splint it.”

Britta’s jaw flexed. “Do it.”

“You may want something for the pain.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just do it.”

Paloma looked at me. “Hold her shoulder. Don’t let her move.”

I stood behind the bench and braced Britta against my chest. Her body remained rigid while Paloma took her wrist and elbow.

“This will hurt,” Paloma said.

“It already hurts. Just fix it, for Christmas’s sake.”

Paloma pulled.

Britta’s good hand locked around my forearm. Her nails dug through my sleeve. She made one low sound in her throat but held still until Paloma finished aligning the break.

Warm light spread through Paloma’s fingers. The swelling eased enough for her to wrap the arm and secure it inside a wooden splint.

“You’ve started knitting already,” Paloma said. “Keep it supported and it will be mostly healed in a few hours. But you must stay out of a sleigh for at least several days. It won’t be as strong as normal until it’s fully healed.”

Fennick carried the frozen reindeer harness to the worktable. Dame Agathe entered the barn behind him and ordered everyone except Britta, me, Paloma, Fennick, and the handlers to leave.

Sigrid stopped near the door. “Don’t you need my account of the crash?”

“Later,” Agathe said. “Take your team back to Flight House.”

Bea followed Sigrid out without speaking.

Once the doors closed, Fennick placed the harness on the table. Frost still covered the lead section. He used his iron knife to cut through the outer layer of leather and peeled it away from the padding beneath.

Gray crystals spilled across the wood.

They resembled coarse salt. Wherever they touched the harness, the leather stiffened and the nearest metal buckle whitened with frost.

Paloma looked up from Britta’s splint. “What is that?”

“I don’t know.” Fennick used the flat of his knife to spread the crystals without touching them. “It was packed between the padding and the enchanted channel. I inspected every buckle and strap before the race, but there was no way to see this without cutting the harness apart.”

“The harness was normal when you checked it,” Britta said. “One of us would have noticed if it was iced up like that.”

Paloma looked toward the injured reindeer. “It consumed the Cheer while he was flying. That’s why he felt so cold to my magic.”

The air above the crystals stung my skin.

“The fitting on my training sleigh felt the same,” I said.

Agathe examined the opened seam. “Could this have happened accidentally?”

“No,” Fennick said. “Someone knew exactly where to put it.”

Agathe ordered an unenchanted iron box brought from the storage room. Fennick placed the harness and every loose crystal inside.

“Lock it beside the damaged fitting,” she said. “No one is to have access to either one without my permission.”

She turned to Britta and me. “The students witnessed an equipment failure. Until we know who did this, that is all they need to hear.”

Agathe left with Fennick and the evidence box.

Paloma checked the injured reindeer. It had stopped trembling and raised its head when she touched its neck.

“He’ll recover,” she said. “He just needs warmth and rest.”

Britta released a slow breath.

“The same applies to you,” Paloma told her. “Go back to your room.”

“I will,” she said. “In a minute.”

Paloma looked at me.

“I’ll make sure she rests,” I said.

She didn’t appear convinced, but she returned to the injured animal and pulled the stall door partly closed behind her.

Britta stood. She steadied herself with her good hand against my chest, then curled her fingers around one of the straps of my harness.

“You released the ballast without waiting for me,” she said.

I felt a flare of defensiveness. Was she blaming me for what had happened? “The first box was pulling us toward the broken side,” I explained. “After that, the team needed less weight. I thought—”

“Most beginners would have grabbed the reins.”

“You told me not to,” I said. “You had control of the team, didn’t you?”

Britta studied me for a moment. “I did. And you trusted me.”

Her fingers tightened around the strap and she tugged me forward, a hungry glint in her eye.

“Come with me,” she said.

Okay, maybe she wasn’t mad at me after all.



Britta led me through Flight House and up the stairs to the senior dormitory. The halls were nearly empty. Most of the students were still outside at the

Straightaway or helping return the racing teams to their stalls.

Her room stood at the end of the upper corridor. She unlocked the door, ushered me inside, and locked it again behind us.

The room was small and orderly. Racing ribbons hung above a narrow desk, and a course map covered most of one wall. Her bed had been made tightly enough that the blanket didn't have a wrinkle in it. A tall wardrobe stood beside a washbasin near the window.

"You're supposed to rest," I said.

"I'm cold, wet, and covered in snow. I'm changing first." Britta opened the wardrobe. "Turn around."

I faced the door and removed the racing harness while she stripped out of her wet clothes. Wet fabric struck the floor behind me. I heard the wardrobe open again, followed by the rustle of dry clothing.

Something green hung above the door. A sprig of mistletoe had been tied to the lintel with blue ribbon. It wasn't part of a garland or any larger decoration. I raised an eyebrow, wondering if it had been placed there recently or if she always kept it there just in case.

"You can turn around now," she said.

Britta had changed into the Academy uniform. It was actually the first time I'd seen her out of her training gear. Her white blouse fit snugly across her breasts and tucked into a red-and-green plaid skirt. The skirt looked even shorter on her long legs than it did on the other students. White stockings reached above her knees, leaving several inches of bare thigh beneath the hem.

Her left forearm remained wrapped and supported by a narrow splint, although she could move her hand again. Paloma's magic had already reduced the swelling.

I looked from the uniform to the mistletoe.

"When did you hang this?"

"A long time ago." Britta crossed the room. "I didn't know if I would ever use it. But, now that you're here…"

She planted her good hand against my chest and pushed me backward until I stood beneath it. Then she pressed her body against mine.

"If you don't want this, tell me now."

"Are you kidding me?" I put my hands on her waist. "I've wanted you since the first day."

"That's the right answer." Britta caught the back of my neck and pulled me down to her.

Her mouth struck mine hard. There was no hesitation in her kiss. Her tongue pushed between my lips while she gripped my shirt and dragged my body against hers.

The mistletoe warmed above us.

A sharp pulse opened in my core, just like it had when I'd kissed Liesl. Only this time, cold wind rushed through my chest. It didn't freeze or hurt. It filled my lungs and lifted something inside me. I felt speed, open air, and the empty space beneath a sleigh after the runners left the ground.

Britta shuddered against me. Her newly opened Bond wound around the one I already shared with Liesl. The two Gifts remained distinct. Craft rested warm and steady inside me. Flight rushed through every gap it could find.

Britta tore open my coat and shoved it from my shoulders. She dragged my shirt out of my trousers with her good hand, then used the fingers of her injured one to open the buttons.

I caught her wrapped wrist. “Slow down. Paloma told you to rest that arm.”

Britta flexed her fingers inside my grip. “She set the bone and used enough Hearth magic to begin healing it. It aches, but I can use my hand.”

“That doesn’t mean you should be tearing my clothes off with it.”

She pulled free and planted her good hand against my chest. Then she shoved me hard enough that my back struck the door.

“You’re still holding back,” she said.

“I’m trying not to hurt you.”

“I’m not worried about getting hurt, Cole. I’m going to tell you exactly what I want.”

Britta stepped closer and took hold of my belt.

“And what is that?” I asked.

“I want you to overpower me.”

I searched her face to make sure I understood her. “What, like… take you by force?”

“Take control. I’ll fight you for it, but I don’t want you to let me win.”

She pulled my belt free and dropped it on the floor.

“Britta, you’ve spent the entire time I’ve known you pushing *me* around,” I said. “I thought you liked that.”

“Is that why you’ve spent the entire time letting me get away with it?” Her eyes moved over my body. “I’ve wanted you since the morning I made you strip. You’re big and strong and you’re sexy as hell, Cole. But by the Gifts, I kept wondering what it would feel like if you stopped being so cooperative and stood up to me.”

Britta opened my trousers and reached inside. Her hand closed around my shaft, gripping me hard enough to make my hips tense.

“If you want me, take me,” she said. “Now.”

“Your arm, though. Britta, I’m serious. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’ll tell you if I want you to stop. If I don’t, I expect you to keep going.”

I caught her chin and made her look at me. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.” Her fist gripped my cock. “Stop asking me and prove you can do it.”

Britta kissed me again.

She tried to push me against the door, but this time I didn’t let her. I caught her around the waist, lifted her off the floor, and carried her toward the bed.

Britta twisted in my arms. She hooked one leg behind mine and tried to throw me off balance. I held her tighter and dropped her facedown across the blanket.

She rolled immediately. I caught her good wrist before she could shove me away and turned her onto her stomach again. Then I folded her arm behind her back and pinned it there with one hand.

Her wrapped arm remained extended safely beside her head.

Britta struggled beneath me. Her powerful legs kicked against the edge of the bed, and her hips twisted beneath my weight. She could have told me to stop. Instead, she fought harder.

I bent close to her ear. “Are you sure?”

“Did I tell you to stop?”

“Not that I could hear.”

“Then don’t,” she hissed. “Take me, Cole. Do it hard.”

I shoved her plaid skirt over her hips.

Red lace stretched across her backside. The panties were almost transparent, sheer enough that I could see the pale skin beneath them and the damp outline of her pussy between her thighs. The fabric had darkened where she was already soaking through it.

I squeezed one cheek hard enough to make her gasp. Britta twisted beneath me and bucked. I tightened my hold on the wrist pinned behind her back.

I hooked my fingers into the waistband and drew the lace slowly down over the firm curves. Britta didn't lift her hips or give me any room to work. She pressed herself against the mattress and continued struggling while I exposed her inch by inch.

The panties caught beneath her.

"Move your hips," I said.

"Make me."

I pulled harder. The lace tore along one side with a sharp rip.

Britta shuddered beneath me.

I tore through the other side and dragged the ruined lace down around her thighs. Her thighs clamped together immediately, hiding the wet pussy I had glimpsed through the lace.

Keeping her good arm pinned, I forced one knee between hers. Britta fought me for every inch, squeezing her legs against mine while I worked them apart. I used my weight to hold one thigh against the mattress, then pushed the other aside with my free hand.

Her pussy opened beneath me, flushed and glistening. A thin strip of pale-blond curls centered her mound, but her lips were otherwise bare. Wetness coated her swollen folds and shone along the insides of her thighs.

I took a moment to admire what I had uncovered while Britta fought my hold.

Then I slid my fingers between her legs.

She was soaked with excitement. Her fluids coated my fingertips as soon as I touched her. Her body tensed beneath mine, and a tremor passed through the arm I held behind her back.

“So this is what you’ve been dreaming about?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I pushed one finger inside her.

Britta moaned into the blanket. Her hips drove backward, taking me deeper. The Bond flared with her pleasure. For an instant, my body became light enough that I barely felt the bed beneath my knees.

I added another finger and worked them slowly inside her. Her passage gripped me tightly. Britta pushed back against my hand, trying to force a faster rhythm.

“Harder,” she said.

I curled my fingers.

Her thighs shook. She strained against the hand holding her wrist, unable to free herself. Each failed attempt to throw me off made her wetter.

She had teased me mercilessly from the beginning, wanting to see how long I would tolerate it. Now I had her pinned beneath me with her skirt around her waist and her panties in shreds.

The relief of finally having her made me dizzy.

I removed my fingers and guided my cock between her thighs.

Britta raised her hips toward me.

I pressed the head against her opening. She was so tight that I stopped after the first inch.

Her breath caught as I pushed deeper. Her body resisted me. She turned her face against the blanket and released a strained moan. The tension in her passage and the way she trembled beneath me made me certain that she had never done this before.

Britta looked back at me over her shoulder. Her blue eyes were bright with frustration and desire. “Don’t you dare stop now. I want it, Cole. I want you. Hard.”

I tightened my grip on her wrist and sank deeper into her pussy. She writhed beneath me but didn’t ask me to stop. The Bond spread wider with every inch I penetrated. Cold wind curled around my body, and the bed seemed to shift beneath us as Flight tried to lift us both.

Britta pushed back.

I sank fully inside her.

She cried out and clenched around me. I held still while her body adjusted, although every pulse of her passage dragged at my control.

“Move,” she begged.

I withdrew slowly and thrust back into her.

The fingers of her wrapped hand curled against the blanket. I forced her legs farther apart as I pressed between them. As strong as she was, she couldn’t stop me. I took her again, harder this time, and the bedframe rocked loudly.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Like that.”

I settled my weight over her hips and gave her what she wanted.

Each thrust forced her deeper into the mattress. Her firm ass struck my pelvis while I held her wrist behind her back. Britta continued struggling, testing my grip and trying to buck me off, but she couldn’t move far enough to escape the pace I set.

The more she struggled, the more I wanted to show her it was futile. She wanted me to feel every attempt. She wanted me to know that I was holding her there because I was stronger. I had fucked plenty of women, and some of them had liked it rough. But there was something about dominating Britta that turned me into an animal. My balls ached as I punished her pussy with my thrusts. Her moans and whimpers only drove me to take her harder.

The Bond burned cold beneath my breastbone. Every time Britta clenched around me, Flight surged through my body. The curtains lifted away from the closed window. Her racing ribbons streamed out from the wall. The mistletoe above the door glowed with pale silver light.

Britta twisted beneath me and tried to roll us.

I pressed her harder into the bed.

She moaned and pushed back to meet my next thrust.

“Fuck, it hurts so good, Cole. Don’t stop.”

I released the last of my restraint.

The bed slammed against the wall. Britta cried out each time I thrust into her. Her tight passage clung to my cock, hot and wet in sharp contrast to the cold magic rushing through me.

Her need reached me through the Bond now. It filled my chest alongside my own, urgent and demanding. The magic carried each movement between us until I couldn’t tell where my pleasure ended and hers began.

Britta’s struggles lost their rhythm. Her body stiffened beneath me, and her cries broke apart.

I kept her pinned.

Her climax struck the Bond before it reached the rest of her. Flight magic exploded through my chest. Britta convulsed beneath me, clenching so hard around my cock that I couldn’t hold back.

I buried myself inside her and came.

The Bond sealed.

For several seconds, the room disappeared.

Cold air filled my lungs. The sky opened around me, vast and clear, with the whole North Pole village far below. I felt every current moving through it and knew exactly which one would carry me higher and which would drive me forward.

There was no fear of falling. The ground had no hold on me. Power surged through my body, and speed waited for the slightest command. I could

climb above the mountains, outrun a storm, and cross the world before anything caught me.

I understood why Britta was never content to stand still. Flight wasn't merely controlling a sleigh or keeping reindeer in the air.

It was freedom.

For that moment, I felt powerful, fast, and completely unstoppable.

The room settled around us again. The curtains dropped, and her racing ribbons rested against the wall. But Flight remained inside me. I could sense the wind pressing against the window and the open sky waiting beyond the roof.

I released Britta's wrist and lowered myself carefully over her. Her wrapped arm remained untouched beside her head.

For a while, neither of us moved.

Then Britta shifted beneath me and tested her good arm. I rolled onto my side. She turned toward me and pulled her skirt down without bothering with the torn panties still caught around her thighs.

"Everything okay?" I asked. "That was pretty intense."

"Perfect." She snuggled up against my chest. "You can fuck me like that any time."

"Does that mean you're going to move into my tower with me?" I asked. "It's lonely in there."

She shook her head. “We have to wait. Your Bonds can’t move in with you until after you pass the Trial.”

“But you can visit, right?”

“Or you can come here.”

I sighed deeply. “God, that was good. You’re amazing, you know that?”

She massaged my chest with her hand. “I’m not your first Bond, though,” she said. “Am I? You’ve had Liesl, too? I sensed another magic in you.”

“We’ve kissed,” I admitted. “But we haven’t sealed the Bond yet. Is… is that okay? Maybe we should have talked about it first?”

“She’s strong,” Britta said. “I approve of your choice. And… if I got to be your first sealed Bond, I’m still happy. I still feel like I won.”

I chuckled. “Is winning that important to you?”

She looked at me, suddenly very serious. “It is when it means survival, Cole. Now, when I win, you’re going to win with me.”

A current of cold air moved past the window. I could feel where it rose along the Flight House wall and swept across the roof.

Britta followed my attention. “You feel it.”

“The wind. The lift inside it.” I looked at her. “I can feel what each current will do. I don’t know how to control it yet, but I know it’s there.”

A satisfied smile appeared on her face.

“Good,” she said. “Next time, you’re driving.”

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Chapter 9



By the time I left Flight House, Agathe had excused me from the rest of the day’s classes and sent word that I was to report to Liesl’s shop. She wanted us to trace every material used in the lead reindeer’s harness and determine whether the records could show how the crystals reached it.

She had provided the tack-room ledger, the Flight House maintenance book, and the supply manifests for every shipment connected to the harness. The tack-room ledger should record when the harness was repaired and which materials were installed. The maintenance book should contain the original work request. The manifests should identify where those materials came from, how much arrived, and who accepted them.

If the records matched, we could follow the crystals from the supplier to the harness. If they didn’t, the gaps might show us where someone had concealed them.

The moment I entered the shop, Liesl’s green eyes narrowed and the warm Craft connection between us stirred. I passed her the note Agathe had sent with me.

“You sealed Flight,” she whispered. “Was it Britta?”

“I’m as surprised as you are,” I said. “Apparently she doesn’t have a lot of patience once she gets an idea in her head.”

“No.” Liesl kissed my cheek. “She doesn’t. But she’s a good choice for you. Very strong. And I’m glad to hear she’s all right after the crash.”

She unfolded the note, and I read it over her shoulder. Agathe instructed us to examine the records without discussing the crystals, the crash, or the word sabotage with anyone else.

“I wonder if we should be insulted that she felt we were stupid enough she needed to underline that section twice?”

I laughed. “Let’s just assume she’s being extra cautious.”

We spread the records across her largest table. Tools, gears, and half-finished projects occupied every other surface in the shop.

The records were handwritten, but I was familiar with systems like this from my old job. Fortunately, most of the paperwork seemed to form a complete chain.

Leather from the Tanners’ Guild arrived in counted rolls. Brass buckles came from a Workshop forge with a maker’s stamp and a receiving signature. Flight House drew both against numbered maintenance requests.

Liesl traced the tack-room entries until she found the lead racing harness. Her red hair hung in a thick braid over one shoulder, and a dark streak of grease marked her jaw.

“Here,” she said. “The harness was removed from the tack room the day before the race for an enchanted-channel repair. It was returned that afternoon.”

“Who requested the repair?”

She held the page open while I searched the Flight House maintenance book. The requests had been recorded in order. Each gave the date, the equipment number, a description of the problem, and the name of the person assigned to inspect it.

There was nothing for the racing harness.

“Fennick said he inspected it before the race,” I said. “He didn’t say anything about a recent repair.”

“He would have told us if he knew someone had opened the enchanted channel.” Liesl tapped the tack-room entry. “This repair should *not* have happened without a request from him.”

“So, someone added it to the tack-room ledger without his permission.”

The materials listed beneath the repair included new stitching thread, a strip of channel lining, and a small quantity of enchantment compound. The first two entries had ordinary inventory numbers.

But the compound referred us to a crate number instead of an ordinary stores number. And we found the crate in the register for materials brought in from Earth.

Its contents were listed only as ‘repair compound.’ Vague. There was no supplier, place of origin, or itemized quantity. Whoever completed the entry had recorded one sealed crate without saying how much compound it contained, and the space for the receiving signature was empty.

A red stamp showed that the shipment had been approved through the Bursar's office.

I recognized it. Tobiah had refused to release a single spring reel until Liesl accounted for its maker, purpose, and recipient. Yet his office had approved an unidentified crate without any of those things? That didn't make any sense.

"Doesn't seem like him," I said.

"No," Liesl agreed. "It doesn't."

She tapped the paper. "Could the compound have contained the crystals?"

"There's no way to tell." I moved the import record beside the tack-room ledger. The same crate number appeared on both pages. "But it looks like someone brought an unidentified crate into the Academy's supply warehouse. Then someone else recorded material from that crate as part of a repair Flight House never requested."

"Could be the same person both times," Liesl said. "In any case, the repair gave them a reason to open the harness."

"It gave them a reason on paper, at least," I said. "I doubt any 'repair' was actually done. And we don't have the original document showing where the crate came from or who sent it."

Liesl placed her finger beside the words 'enchanted channel.' "But we know where they claimed the material was used."

"The same place Fennick found the crystals."

The false repair connected the unidentified crate to the sabotaged harness, but none of the records identified who had handled either one.

“My feeling is, we take both pages to Agathe,” I said. “It’s not a good idea to talk to Tobiah first.”

“You’re right, he may be involved.”

“He could just as easily have approved a false manifest without knowing it,” I said, wanting to give the guy the benefit of the doubt. “But if we reveal our suspicions there’s a good chance that whoever used the crate will know we found it.”

Liesl copied the relevant entries, then returned the ledgers and manifest to Agathe’s document case. I checked the crate number once more before closing it. Agathe would have to determine who had handled the crate after it entered the Academy supply warehouse.

Liesl touched the back of my hand before I could lift the document case. Her fingers rested there lightly at first. Then she turned my hand over and stroked her thumb across the calluses on my palm.

“We should take this to Agathe,” she said. “But there are other things we need to discuss… you know, before we finish what we started.”

She stepped closer. Her eyes dropped to my mouth, and the open Craft Bond surged inside me. Her thumb continued moving over my palm while her other hand settled against my chest.

I knew she wasn’t talking about the investigation. My cock began to harden as I remembered her trapped in the cargo webbing and what she had promised me afterward.

“Agathe emphasized the importance of secrecy,” I said. “But… she didn’t say anything about speed.”

Liesl bit her lip, but she couldn’t hide her smile. “With how much I want this, Cole, I don’t think it will take long.”

I wasn’t sure about that. The idea of edging the sexy redhead along when she was feeling extra horny was making me even harder.

Liesl crossed to the back of the shop. Workbenches filled the room, crowded with unfinished mechanisms she had set aside to make space for our route work. A canvas sheet covered something tall beside the rear wall.

Liesl pulled away the sheet.

Two upright metal rails rose from a wide base. A padded support had been mounted between them, with separate cuffs positioned for wrists and ankles. Each cuff had its own adjustable anchor and release. A master lever on the side would open all four at once. The support could tilt backward on a geared pivot and lock at different angles.

I looked from the frame to Liesl. “You built this?”

“From the cargo restraint… or rather, everything that was wrong with the cargo restraint.” She opened one of the cuffs and showed me the padding inside it. “These are wide enough that they won’t cut into me if I pull against them. The anchors turn with my wrists and ankles, so the straps can’t twist. You can release each cuff separately or use this lever to open all of them.”

I pushed the main release. All four cuffs opened.

“It works,” I said.

“I tested the pivot and the lower stops under load this morning,” she said. “It’s finished.”

I reset the catches and pulled against each cuff. The anchors moved freely without loosening. Every part of the frame was built to hold someone securely without depending on magic to release them.

“How much weight can it take?” I asked.

“More than three times yours.” Color spread beneath her freckles. “Accounting for thrust and momentum… I-I wanted it to survive anything you might do to me while I’m strapped in.”

Blood rushed so quickly from my head to my raging erection that I felt momentarily dizzy. “Sounds… uh… pretty intense.”

Liesl’s gaze dropped to the front of my trousers. A pleased smile spread across her face. “I was hoping you’d like the sound of that.”

“More than you can probably imagine, yeah.”

“So, you’ll use it on me?” She took my hand and pressed my palm against one of the padded cuffs. “As I built it, I imagined you fastening it around me. Cinching it all up so that I’m so tight I can’t move. Completely at your mercy.”

My pants seemed to be shrinking by the second. “Do you have any idea how amazing that sounds?”

Her eyes dipped again. “I have some evidence.”

The Craft Bond flickered between us and spread into the frame. Every fitted joint became clear to me: the springs behind the releases, the anchors

turning inside their sockets, and the geared pivot supporting the padded platform. The mechanism was complete. If anything jammed, one pull of the main lever would open all four restraints.

Liesl took my hand from the cuff and placed it on her waist. “I know you just sealed Flight with Britta. Maybe you aren’t as hungry for this as I am. But I was the first woman to open a Bond with you, and… I don’t want to leave ours unfinished.”

“Now?”

“Yes, Cole. I want you to strip me and strap me into the frame and… and after that, it’s up to you how you want to use me.”

I tightened my grip on her waist. “That sounds pretty open-ended.”

“That’s part of the appeal.” Liesl looked at the cuffs. “Complete and total submission to your desire, Cole. That’s what I want. There’s just one thing we need to agree on before you fasten me into them.”

“What?”

She leaned close and whispered into my ear. “Monkey wrench.”

I pulled back far enough to see her face. “Monkey wrench?”

“It’s my safe word.”

“Why do you need a safe word? If you want me to stop, all you have to do is tell me.”

Her confidence faltered. Color spread across her cheeks.

“I might tell you to stop when I don’t actually want you to,” she said.

I had some experience with kinky ladies in my past. But none of them had built custom bondage machines for me. I wanted to hear her version of this fantasy before I committed. “Go on.”

Liesl glanced at the frame. “I want to struggle against the restraints. I want to know I can’t get free, no matter how hard I fight. And I might… want to say no or beg you to stop while you’re using me.”

My dick was throbbing now. “But when you say no, you won’t actually want me to stop.”

She shook her head. “I want to feel helpless. I want you to keep going because I gave you control and you know the difference between what I’m pretending to want and what I truly need.”

“And if you truly want me to stop?”

“I’ll say my safe word.”

Liesl watched my face, nervously, waiting for my answer. Like she was the only woman in the world who’d had these dirty thoughts and now she was afraid of rejection. It was sweet how innocent she was, which only made this secret kinky streak all the more enticing. I wondered just how far she’d let me push before she threw a monkey wrench into the gears. It was going to be a hell of a lot of fun to find out.

I slid my hand around to the small of her back and pulled her against me. “If that’s what you want, I will be happy to oblige.”

The tension left her shoulders. Her breasts pressed against my chest, and she released a soft breath against my mouth.

“I knew I could trust you,” she whispered.

She caught the front of my shirt and drew me down toward her mouth. I kissed her before she could say anything else.

Liesl opened her lips beneath mine. Her hands moved over my chest, then around my waist as she dragged my body firmly against hers. My erection pressed into her stomach, and she rubbed herself against it with a quiet moan.

I gripped her ass through her skirt. Liesl rose onto her toes and pushed her hips against mine. The Craft Bond pulsed with every movement of her body, warming as her excitement fed into mine.

Her fingers found my belt.

I caught one of her wrists. “If I’m putting you in that frame, I’m the one undressing you.”

Liesl’s eyes brightened. She released my belt and raised both hands away from it.

“Yes, Cole.”

I kissed her again while I untied the apron behind her waist. The fabric loosened, and I pulled it over her head before dropping it beside the workbench.

My hands returned to her body. I cupped both breasts through her blouse and stroked my thumbs across her nipples. They hardened beneath the cloth. Liesl arched into my hands, then caught my lower lip between her teeth.

“Your hands feel so good,” she whimpered. “So strong.”

I opened the first button of her blouse.

Liesl held still beneath my hands, but her breathing quickened as I worked on the next one. The blouse parted enough for me to slide my fingers against the warm skin between her breasts.

A shrill bell rang across the village, making me wince. “What the hell?”

The first clang had barely faded when another followed. The alarm repeated in a rapid pattern that was nothing like the Academy’s class bells.

Liesl pulled away from me. “That’s the Naughty Alarm.”

“What does it mean?”

“There’s an imbalance between the Lists.” She buttoned her shirt quickly. “The Naughty List is growing too fast.”

“Do you think that was us?” I asked, glancing at the frame. “I mean… the things I was thinking were pretty—”

“Oh, don’t tell me that! It’s bad enough that we got interrupted,” she groaned. “No, the Naughty Alarm is triggered on Earth. Not when a candidate is about to seal a Bond in an… um… unorthodox way.”

She grabbed Agathe’s document case and headed for the door. “Come on. Hurry! Agathe will go to the Hall of Lists. We can meet her there.”

We left the shop and crossed the village toward the Workshop. Other elves had stopped in the roads to listen. Those wearing the dark uniform of Sight House were running in the same direction we were.

The alarm grew louder as we entered the Hall of Lists.

Rows of desks faced the tall panes of Sight glass. Two ledgers lay open on each desk. Names were disappearing from the Nice volumes and appearing in red ink on the Naughty pages while the List-Keepers tried to record the changes.

Rin stood on a desk at the center of the hall and turned between several panes. Her black hair swung across her face as she changed the view in each one.

“They’re all in the same district,” a List-Keeper called.

“Someone’s being naughty…” Rin said in a creepy sing-song voice. “Won’t somebody think of the children?” Her tone dropped ominously. “Find out what they did.”

The panes around Rin flickered to life. A woman unloaded groceries onto a kitchen table while her son watched. Sunlight filled the glass beside it as two girls chased each other through a backyard, and farther along the row, shoppers crowded around a family pushing a full cart. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Dame Agathe stood with the senior List-Keepers near the front of the hall. When Liesl lifted the case, Agathe raised one finger and ordered us to wait.

Rin moved from pane to pane. “Look! There are so many! And it started everywhere all at once. Children all over the district became crazy and demanding at the same time. It’s completely crazy! I should know.”

Another block of names moved into a Naughty ledger.

“Names move between the Lists every day,” one of the Keepers said. “Most children move back once they calm down and make better choices. We’ve

never seen this many change in one district at the same time."

"There has to be a shared cause," another said.

"There is," Rin replied playfully. "But it isn't their behavior… That's just a symptom. This place is sick!"

Agathe gave her an irritated look. "Would you speak plainly?"

"It *shouldn't* be possible for so many children to become Naughty at once." Rin pressed her ink-stained fingers to the frame of the nearest pane. "But lots of things that *shouldn't* be, are. But… every name that changed leads back to the same place. And… oops! My Sight won't let me look directly at it. Pretty strange…"

The glass changed to an overhead view of a town. Rin pulled the image lower and followed the roads toward a commercial district. A dark patch formed near the center of the pane. Each time she tried to bring it into focus, the view shifted to one side.

"It's like the Sight magic is moving around it," Agathe said. "Like there's a force field or…"

"Something in there wants to hide." Rin moved to another pane. "Just like the other place you asked me to check!"

Agathe glared at the black-haired elf. "What did I tell you about that request?"

"Top secret!" Rin zipped her lips.

Dame Agathe motioned Liesl and me over to a quiet corner and muttered under her breath. "Did you discover anything? I made the mistake of asking

Rin for her assistance, in case her Sight could reveal what had happened with the reindeer harness. But I fear that was a grave error."

"But she couldn't see anything?" I asked. "Like she can't see the area where this problem is happening?"

I remembered something else Rin had said about her obstructed Sight.

The old panes turn dark when I try to look for him. The Sight doesn't like to go where he used to be.

She'd said those words in the library.

"Rin told me something similar about Krampus," I said to Dame Agathe. "Do you think there's a connection?"

Agathe winced at the name, but she quickly turned toward Rin. "Come here, girl. And for the love of Christmas, behave."

When Rin sidled up toward us, she gave me a long up-and-down look. "Hello, handsome. Did you come to see me?"

"Rin," Agathe interrupted. "Is this the same effect you described to Cole? Is this the same effect you encounter when you try to find Krampus?"

She lowered her voice when she said the final word, as if saying it out loud might summon him.

Rin studied the swirling dark pane. "Yes."

Agathe's expression remained controlled, but her attention returned to the document case in Liesl's hand. "Show me what you found," she said. "And Rin, if you stay here, I expect you to keep your fool mouth shut about it."

Rin giggled. “Don’t worry, Dame Agathe. That’s one of the benefits of being crazy. Even if you tell the truth, no one believes you.”

Liesl opened the case, and laid the Earthside import record in front of Agathe while I summarized what we had found. She compared the false repair with the crate number, then examined the missing source information and Tobiah’s approval stamp.

The records did not prove that the crystals had arrived in the crate, but they did prove someone had invented a reason to open the harness and charged material from an unaccounted shipment to the work.

Agathe agreed that we’d done the right thing bringing the matter to her rather than approaching Tobiah to get more details. She wanted him watched quietly until they learned who had received the contents of the crate.

Rin had lost interest in the conversation and had wandered back to the Sight panes. Her face scrunched as she attempted to shift the black cloud around the screen, like she was trying to peel back a bit of wrapping paper to peek at a present.

“There!” she shouted so loudly that one of the List-Keepers next to her shrieked and almost fell off her chair. The other elf scrambled away from Rin, giving her a dirty look. But Rin didn’t notice. She looked proudly at me over her shoulder. “I found a clue!”

She had returned to the affected district. Darkness still covered the center of the commercial area, but she had shifted the view far enough to expose a parking lot and the front of a large store.

A red banner stretched above the entrance. CHRISTMAS IN JULY filled the center in white letters, with the Northstar logo at both ends.

I moved closer to the glass as Agathe asked the nearest List-Keeper to identify the district. The elf checked the heading in her ledger. But I knew the answer before she spoke.

“Cedar Falls, Minnesota.”

“That’s my hometown,” I said.

Another group of children appeared on the Naughty List.

Whatever was changing their names was centered on a Northstar store in Cedar Falls.

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Chapter 10



The Naughty Alarm stopped ringing as Kris and Marta entered the hall. Names continued to move between the open ledgers, but the frantic flood had slowed enough for the List-Keepers to keep pace with it.

Agathe took Kris, Marta, Liesl, and me into the senior List-Keeper's office and locked the door. She quickly gave Kris a complete account of what had happened and explained what our evidence proved.

When she finished, Agathe handed Liesl a key. "Take the documents to my office and place them in the locked cabinet behind my desk. Then wait for me there. We're securing every record connected to that crate tonight."

Kris opened the office door. "Cole, walk with us."

He followed Marta and Agathe into the hall. Liesl caught my hand before I could join them and pulled me back into the office. She slipped her hand beneath the back of my coat. Her palm settled against my waist, and she leaned close enough that her breath warmed my neck.

“All this excitement is really getting in the way of our alone time,” she whispered. “I can be patient if I have to, but…”

Her fingers moved beneath the hem of my shirt. I remembered the open buttons of her blouse and the warm skin between her breasts.

“I’ll be ready for you as soon as you have time,” she continued. “All I can think about is how good it’s going to feel when you close the cuffs around me.”

I turned toward her. “If it’s up to me, we won’t be waiting long.”

Liesl pressed her body against my side. “Good. I’ve already soaked through these panties, and it’s starting to get uncomfortable.”

I considered ripping the offending garments off with my teeth right then and there, but Agathe called my name from the hall before I got myself in trouble. Liesl removed her hand and picked up the document case.

“Hold that thought,” she said, as her gaze dropped to the front of my trousers. “I’ll be waiting.”

The flash of her red braid was the last thing I saw as she slipped out through the office’s side door.

When I stepped out into the hall, Kris and Marta waited for me outside the office, with Agathe a little to the side. All of them seemed to be trying a little too hard to look like they hadn’t been listening for me to actually believe it. But if Kris had made twelve Bonds, too, he knew exactly what I was going for. And even if Marta did look like a sweet little grandmother now, I’d seen the twinkle in her eye that suggested she still had passion for her husband. I wasn’t sure what Agathe thought. She had an expression on her face like this was just something she had to bear, not something she enjoyed.

Rin remained on top of the central desk with her legs folded beneath her. A Sight pane filled the air in front of her. It showed the Northstar parking lot from high above. As I followed the others toward the door, she looked past the glass and fixed her dark eyes on me.

I waved.

Her smile spread slowly. She raised one ink-stained finger to her lips and kept watching until the doors closed between us.

Kris led us away from the Hall of Lists. He kept to a broad village street with Marta beside him, while Agathe walked close enough to make certain I didn’t fall behind. None of them spoke about what we’d seen inside. Elves still crowded the road after the alarm, and every doorway seemed to contain someone trying to learn what had happened.

A little girl burst from a narrow house and ran straight into the arms of an elf waiting beside the gate. He lifted her high enough that her boots cleared his shoulders. She laughed and grabbed both of his pointed ears.

I slowed. Until then, almost every elf I’d met had been a student or worked in one of the guild Houses. “There are families here.”

“Of course there are,” Marta said. “Where did you think the Academy students came from?”

“I hadn’t thought about it. I guess I assumed elves just appeared whenever Christmas needed more of them.”

The little girl’s father put her down and took her hand. She skipped beside him as they started home.

“Elves are born here and grow up here,” Marta said. “They have families just as humans do, and their Gifts influence the lives they build. The

Academy is only one part of the village."

We passed a low schoolhouse just as its doors opened. Small elves in red and green coats poured into the yard with slate boards under their arms. One boy dragged his feet until a teacher steered him toward the waiting adults with a hand between his shoulders.

"That's their primary school?" I asked.

"Yes," Marta said. "Every elf attends until their Gift begins to show. Older children continue at the secondary school, where they learn how their magic works and which work suits them."

The road curved around a playground enclosed by a painted fence. A miniature reindeer trotted along the inside rail with a wooden sleigh behind it. The child holding the reins shouted with delight each time the sleigh bounced over a mound of packed snow.

"So, what makes the Academy different?" I asked.

"It is a specialized college," Agathe said. "As I'm sure you noticed, we only accept adult female students with strong Gifts who intend to serve close to Santa. All carry some hope of becoming Bonded to a successful candidate, but many attend with the primary goal of commanding positions within their Guilds. The Academy Houses each correspond to a Professional Guild, and students are organized into them based on their strongest Gift. While this can change over time, with training, most students start and end their time in the same House, and graduate to work in the associated Guild. Of course, neither ambition guarantees admission, and admission guarantees nothing beyond difficult work."

I was beginning to understand what being an Academy student actually meant. Many of these women had spent several human lifetimes mastering

their Gifts, and even the youngest had earned places here as some of the most magically gifted adults at the Pole.

“What about the elves who don’t get admitted to the Academy?” I asked.

“There are a variety of Guild-sponsored colleges and trade schools for them,” she said. “Female elves still outnumber males by a significant degree, as they are much more likely to carry strong magic in their blood, but the demographic of these smaller colleges is much more evenly mixed.”

The smell of hot sugar reached us from the next building. A gingerbread man stood behind the bakery window. He was almost as tall as I was. White icing outlined his vest, and one of his gumdrop buttons flashed green when he turned a tray inside the display.

I looked at Kris. He gave the baker an apologetic wave. “That’s Clement. Try not to stare. He’s a bit self-conscious since one of his recipes backfired and it turned him into a cookie.”

Clement’s icing eyes narrowed as he caught me looking at him through the window.

I quickly faced forward. “Understood.”

At the end of the street, Agathe unlocked a gate set into the village’s outer wall. A narrow passage rose through the packed snow between heavy wooden supports. Kris waited until all four of us had entered before he closed the gate behind him.

The stairs ended inside an enclosed inspection walk. Thick panes of clear ice formed the wall facing the village. Far below us, the primary-school children crossed the road with their families, but their voices didn’t reach us through the ice. The opposite wall was solid timber. No doors interrupted it until the passage ended at another locked gate several hundred feet away.

Agathe tested the second gate, then returned the key to the chain at her waist. “No one can enter from either end without my key or Kris’s. We may speak freely here.”

I turned to her. “Is this level of secrecy really necessary?”

“If you knew what the evidence is pointing to, you wouldn’t need to ask,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

Kris stopped beside one of the ice panes, his arm around Marta. “Agathe has identified the crystals inside the harness. The disturbance in Cedar Falls is being caused by the same substance.”

I raised my eyebrows and waited.

“Hollow,” Agathe said. “It is a counterfeit form of Cheer that consumes the real magic wherever it touches. It can be concentrated, often into a crystallized form, and a sufficient amount will interfere with the Sight.”

I turned to her. “Have you known all along? You must have recognized it in the barn.”

“Yes. I kept that knowledge to myself because the person who put it there may have been listening. Most elves do not have first-hand experience with Hollow and wouldn’t know what it was, but…”

“It’s all right, Agathe,” Marta said softly. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

Dame Agathe shook herself, and pressed her lips into a thin line. “I suspected that was what the salt-like crystals were. And now, Rin has confirmed that the tack room and the Northstar store are hidden by the same

kind of interference. That's why I sent for Kris. This is beyond the scope of the Academy alone. This affects all of Christmas."

"How do you know so much about it?"

"The answer to that question is personal, Cole," Marta said, firmly but not unkindly. "I assure you it has no bearing on—"

"It's all right, Marta." Agathe held up a hand. She took a deep breath and stared through the ice wall. "The truth is, young man, I… I was once Bonded to a man who was supposed to become the next Santa Claus. But it didn't work out."

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said immediately. It was obviously an old wound, but it clearly still pained the silver-haired elf.

"Oh, he didn't die," she said. "But… I lost him all the same. Hollow corrupted the man I loved, and he became unrecognizable. Even to me."

Kris turned away from the ice wall. "Do you remember when you first arrived and I mentioned demons?"

"Yeah," I said. "And then you ignored me when I asked for details. Hard to forget."

"I was talking about Krampus," Kris said. "Are you familiar with that name?"

"Sure. We've got movies about him too. He's some old European folk monster that comes out around Christmas, right? Mean-looking bastard with horns and goatlegs."

“That’s the simplified version,” Kris said. “The stories come mainly from Austria and the neighboring mountain regions. Krampus is supposed to appear on the night before the Feast of Saint Nicholas. Nicholas visits the children who have behaved well and gives them small presents. Krampus deals with the ones who haven’t.”

“What does ‘deals with’ mean?”

“In the milder stories, he frightens them and leaves a birch switch as a warning. Older versions say he beats the children or puts the worst offenders into a sack and carries them away. He was originally treated as Saint Nicholas’s companion, responsible for the punishment Nicholas would not perform himself.”

“So, evil Santa.”

“More like Santa’s terrifying disciplinary assistant,” Kris said. “But the distinction has faded. Modern books and films usually separate him from Saint Nicholas and turn him into a Christmas demon who attacks anyone lacking sufficient holiday spirit.”

“That’s Hollywood for you,” I said. “Why go for subtlety when a bloodbath will do?”

“What those stories don’t tell you is that Krampus was once a man,” Kris said. “He was a good friend of the first Santa Claus and the original candidate chosen to succeed him.”

I looked at Agathe. She still faced the ice wall, but one hand had closed around the piece of coal pinned to her sash.

“The man you were Bonded to,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied. “Before anyone associated his name with a monster.”

Outside the ice wall, an animated snowman swept the school steps with a twig broom. A gust covered the bottom step again. He shook his head and returned to work. Marta covered her mouth and smiled as she watched, though there was sadness in her expression. She didn't interrupt her husband and Agathe's story.

"The tales you know developed after he had already begun to change," Kris continued. "His original work was very different. The first Santa believed his successor needed to understand why children moved onto the Naughty List instead of merely accepting the judgment. He sent his candidate to visit those children before the Big Night."

"What was he supposed to do?"

"Explain which choice had moved their name and give them an opportunity to repair the harm. If they changed their behavior, the List changed with them."

Agathe touched the piece of coal pinned to her sash. "My Gift is Coal. I accompanied him on those visits. A piece of coal served as a warning that the child's name had moved, but Christmas had not arrived yet. There was still time to put things right."

"Many of the children he visited were surrounded by anger or misery at home," Kris said. "Their own behavior was wrong, but it hadn't appeared from nowhere. Hollow gathered around those households because fear and obligation had replaced the things Christmas was meant to encourage."

"Krampus wanted to help them," Agathe said. "He discovered that he could draw some of the Hollow away from a child and contain it within himself. Their minds cleared once it was gone, and many of their names returned to the Nice List. We believed he had found a way to protect them."

"What went wrong?"

“No human can hold Hollow without being changed by it,” Kris said. “Krampus kept taking more because the method appeared to work. He refused to admit what it was doing to him, even after he began using the Hollow as magic.”

Agathe lowered her hand from the coal. “He became impatient with the children he had once wanted to help. Eventually, he decided frightening them was easier than teaching them to make better choices.”

“That was when the switch and the sack became part of his work,” Kris said. “He began creating fear instead of removing it because fear produced more Hollow for him to use. The folk stories are full of the demonic creature who visited cruelty upon the children. But they’ve since forgotten the man who first went there to help them.”

“It got worse and worse,” Kris said. “A vicious cycle. The more Hollow he used, the more he changed. When the first Santa saw what was happening, he refused to give him the coat.”

“Why didn’t that kill him?” I asked. “You said failing the Trials means I die.”

“The current Trials were created after his failure,” Kris explained. “The first Santa had chosen him while the succession rules were still being formed. Losing the coat did not release him back into a dying body, as will happen to you if you fail your Trial. Krampus never entered the Long Night by dying. It formed around him and the original Santa Claus as their power was growing. And we haven’t been able to rid ourselves of him since.”

“And he’s still around?”

Kris nodded and stroked his long, white beard. “He was a part of the magic that formed Christmas, and people believed in the Keeper of the Switch just as much as they did Santa Claus. There was nothing that could be done.

Saint Nicholas, the first Santa, even allowed him to continue handling consequences while another successor trained. I believe he hoped Krampus could still be brought back from what the Hollow was doing to him."

Agathe's expression hardened. "So did I. But it only embittered him."

Kris gave her a moment before continuing. "Seeking to weaken his influence, Santa cultivated a Guild from those with a Coal gift, and trained them to take over the useful part of Krampus's work, handling serious wrongdoing without frightening children for the sake of it."

"Krampus believed Santa had stolen his purpose," Agathe said. "He had already lost the coat. When the Coalers replaced him, he decided we had taken everything else as well. By then, he couldn't even look at me without hatred in his eyes."

"He left the Pole and devoted himself entirely to Hollow," Kris said. "It changed his body along with his magic."

"A demon," I said with a shudder.

I remembered sitting across from Agathe on my first day and wondering whether she carried a broken Bond. Now I understood why she had been so blunt about what the women who chose me would risk. She had survived the same loss herself, though in a much worse way.

"And you think it's this… Hollow magic causing the problem now?" I asked. "Why would it be affecting Cedar Falls?"

"We don't know yet," Agathe said. "The obstruction in the Sight is centered on the Northstar store in your hometown. That tells us a large concentration of Hollow formed there, but it doesn't tell us what created it."

I thought about the banner stretched across the front of the store. The Christmas in July sale had opened that morning.

Then the timing caught up with me. “Wait. Back on the mountain, I haven’t even finished hitting that tree. How is the sale already open? How are kids in Cedar Falls moving between the Lists right now if Earth’s clock is stopped?”

“Earth’s clock is stopped for you,” Agathe said. “Not for the Sight. The Pole stands outside Earth’s time, so the List-Keepers can look in on whatever moment the Lists are reading. Rin was watching Cedar Falls this summer, not the mountainside where your body is lying.”

“And Christmas Eve?”

“Christmas Eve touches every year at once,” Kris said. “That is the moment the sleigh flies into. By the time your Trial comes, the Lists will have carried Cedar Falls all the way to Christmas.”

Marta had warned me not to think about it too hard. I took her advice.

“There’s nothing quite as hostile to the Christmas spirit as Christmas shopping,” I said. “Northstar decided there was no reason to wait until December to start making people miserable.”

Kris looked at me. “What do you mean?”

“There’s this sales initiative the marketing execs have been all fired up about. Christmas in July. It’s a big push to start buying Christmas décor and gifts in the middle of summer. They run sales and put up big festive displays and they mark popular items as limited, even when another shipment is already on the way, making people feel like they have to buy now. Customers think they have one chance to get whatever hot new toy their kids want, so they rush to the store and fight over what’s left.” I had

spent years making sure the next shipment arrived without allowing the urgency to disappear. “The whole point is to convince them that waiting will ruin Christmas.”

“That would definitely produce Hollow,” Marta said. “Christmas creates Cheer when people give because they care about someone. It creates Hollow when giving becomes fraught with anxiety and resentment.”

“So, this year’s sale produced enough of it to affect the surrounding district,” I said. “I bet management is thrilled.”

“That is a very likely explanation, as a matter of fact,” Agathe replied. “Adults carry the agitation home after fighting over things the store has deliberately made scarce. Their children absorbed the same urgency and began demanding purchases their families could not afford. When their parents refused, some of those children behaved badly enough for their names to move.”

Outside the ice wall, a teacher held the school gate open while the last child hurried through it. The kid seemed so sweet and happy. I could hardly imagine anything worse than the frenzy of Christmas toy commercials in this place that was so full of the genuine love of the holiday.

“I always said Northstar ruined Christmas for me,” I said. “I didn’t realize it was ruining Christmas for everyone. Those poor kids.”

“Once the children are away from the disturbance and calm down, most will correct their behavior,” Marta said with a gentle smile. “Have no fear, their names will return to the Nice List.”

“What if the disturbance never goes away?” I asked. “What if it gets worse from here? The marketing team is always trying to find new ways to get in people’s faces about the holidays.”

“If the children remain exposed, the corruption of Hollow can become habitual,” Agathe said. “We’ll keep an eye on it. Rin is monitoring them.”

I looked through the ice toward the village, but I pictured the crowded Northstar store instead. I had approved the additional inventory and arranged the trucks that kept the sale supplied. The company had created the pressure. I had made certain it could reach as many customers as possible.

“Holy shit,” I said. “All these years, and I’ve basically been working for the Christmas Devil?”

“Northstar is not secretly run by Krampus, as far as we know,” Kris said. “It doesn’t have to be. The company creates the conditions he needs on its own. He gathers what it produces and uses it to consume real Cheer. Krampus can also concentrate Hollow into the crystals that were placed inside the harness, so that he doesn’t have to be physically present to do his dirty work.”

“I guess that’s how they hid whatever went on in the tack room from Rin?”

Agathe nodded. “Prepared Hollow interferes with Sight magic much more so than regular Hollow. Krampus can conceal himself inside it, and the Perchten are very good at placing it wherever it will do the most damage.”

“Who are the Perchten?”

“His followers,” Kris said. “Creatures that come from the old winter traditions of Austria and the neighboring mountain regions. When they show themselves, they wear carved masks and horns. Some very powerful ones are said to be able to wear a glamour that hides their true form, but it has been many generations since we’ve seen one like that. The last of those was Frau Perchta, queen of the Perchten. But she has been dead for many years.”

“But why would they want to kill candidates?” I asked. “If Krampus hates what Christmas has become, why does he care who replaces you?”

Kris faced me across the narrow walk. “The first Santa made certain that Christmas could never be left without someone holding its magic. When a Santa can no longer carry the Hearth and no trained successor is ready, the oldest surviving claimant to the office can take control. Krampus helped create that office. His claim has never disappeared.”

“So, if you die or become unable to do the job before I earn the coat, it goes to him.”

Kris nodded. “If he can prove he holds enough Christmas magic to sustain it. He has spent eighty years storing Hollow so that he can. Once he controls the Hearth, he can force Hollow through every part of Christmas that now carries Cheer. The season would be destroyed.”

I felt a chill growing in my belly. “How many of the failed candidates died at his hands?”

“I don’t know.” Kris rubbed his hand over his beard. “Many failed honest Trials or ignored instructions during training. Others died in equipment failures. We have sometimes suspected interference, but it has never been proven. The failed harness gives us the first physical evidence that someone deliberately tried to kill a candidate with Hollow.”

“They tried to kill me,” I said. “Twice, if my training sleigh was also sabotaged by them.”

“Yes,” he said. “Which is alarming enough on its own. But more so because the person responsible clearly has access to the Academy.”

I returned to the window. The red Northstar banner filled my mind instead of the village below.

When the Cedar Falls district wanted longer delivery windows, I arranged them. I had treated the sale as another complicated problem and taken pride in making it work.

Northstar had done the same thing to my parents' farm. Its temporary tree lots sold below cost until independent farms couldn't compete. Customers who'd bought trees from us for years followed the lower prices into town. Dad held on until the bank stopped extending credit. Then the farm closed, and I took a job on the loading dock at Northstar because I needed money.

I had spent the last eleven years becoming very good at helping the company expand, doing Krampus's dirty work for him.

"I can't get over that I helped them," I said. "Even after they were the reason my parents lost Crispin Tree Farm. I helped that bastard company do the same thing in other towns, too. But what was I supposed to do? They were one of the only places hiring back then."

"No one blames you," Marta said, shaking her head. "That is how Krampus works best. But your experience with Northstar may be exactly what we need. You know the company well enough to help us fight back."

I looked at Kris. "What are we going to do?"

"I suggest, for now, that Agathe keep Tobiah under quiet watch," he said. "If the Bursar is involved, arresting him now would warn the person receiving his shipments. We need to follow the records far enough to identify that person."

Agathe continued the plan. "Liesl will help secure the documents tonight. Tomorrow, you will resume the audit under the excuse that you're studying the Academy's material routes. You will speak to no one about the Perchten and bring all evidence directly to me."

Kris placed both hands on the railing beneath the window. “You also keep training. Krampus has spent decades making sure no candidate reaches the coat. The only permanent answer is for you to succeed where the others have failed.”

“Sure,” I said. “No pressure, right?”

“No pressure,” said Kris with a grim smile.

As Agathe unlocked the far gate and led us down into the village, I was aware of the one opened Bond and the one sealed Bond I had already claimed, their magic swirling within me. I had been chosen by two powerful elves already, which had to be a good sign.

I was surprised to find that I didn’t feel under pressure. I felt hungry for success. After all the years of Northstar ruining what was important to me, I was finally going to get revenge.



Agathe returned to the Academy, while Kris and Marta took the road toward the Claus house. But before the Dame left, she informed me in no uncertain terms that Liesl would be busy for the rest of the night and that I wasn’t to bother her. I tried not to groan out loud with my frustration.

I didn’t feel ready to go back to my room, though, so I climbed the exterior stairs beside the Hearth Guild hall and sat on the roof near a warm chimney.

The village looked different now. A lamp burned behind the curtains of the house where the little girl had greeted her father. I had a new appreciation for what life must be like at the North Pole, outside the Academy. And they all relied on the success of a strong candidate to keep them safe and happy. If Krampus were allowed to gain control of the Long Night, he would poison their Hearth and destroy everything these people lived for.

The roof hatch opened behind me, and I jumped, half expecting the horn-headed demon himself. But it was Paloma who climbed out with a covered tin held in both hands. Her thick hair had been tied back for work, and flour dusted one side of her apron.

“I looked for you at the Hall of Lists,” she said. “Rin told me where you were.”

“Oh, good,” I said. “Always good to know when I’m being stalked.”

At least this time Rin had used the information helpfully.

Paloma sat beside me and placed the tin between us. “I finished these before the alarm. I almost waited until tomorrow, but they’re best fresh. And from the worried looks on everyone’s faces, I thought you might need them tonight.”

She lifted the lid. A sugar cookie shaped like a Christmas tree rested on top. Thick white icing covered its branches, and red candies marked the tips.

“Oh, wow,” I said, my heart immediately lifting at the sight. “For me? Really? They look amazing!”

“I promised, didn’t I?”

I took the cookie and bit into it. It was magical. My mother’s cookies had been thinner and much sweeter. Paloma’s had more of a buttery richness to

them, and a more sophisticated flavor. There was vanilla there, but… something else, too.

“It’s good,” I said. “Really good. What else is in there?”

Paloma’s shoulders tensed. “Bergamot and lavender. I hoped it would be subtle. But… maybe I should have stuck to a more traditional recipe.”

“No, these are really good.” I took another bite. “You couldn’t have made the same cookies as my mom did without a recipe. And I wouldn’t want you to. These taste like yours. They’re kind of grown up. Which, I am too, I guess.”

She smiled and folded her hands over her apron. We sat together while I finished the cookie. And then another one. And maybe one more. I kind of loved that she didn’t judge me for gorging myself on her baking, because damn, they were good.

Heat from the chimney warmed my back, and the open air kept the roof cold enough that Paloma edged closer to me. I considered putting my arm around her, but I wasn’t sure if that was moving too fast.

“Do you know what caused the alarm?” she asked. “Everyone looked so busy, I didn’t want to bother anyone with questions.”

“Well…” I wasn’t supposed to say most of what I knew, but the alarm itself wasn’t a secret, since it had blared out across the entire village.

So, I told her as much as I could without exposing the investigation. The disturbance had centered on my hometown, and actually might have something to do with where I used to work before I drove myself into a tree on the side of a mountain.

She listened without interrupting, and I ended up telling her about the family farm going under, and my taking a job with the ‘enemy’ to make ends meet. I hadn’t understood why working for a Christmas-focused company had ruined my love of the holiday, but now I realized I was a fool to expect anything else. Northstar stood for the exact opposite of holiday spirit, exploiting customers and maximizing company profits. What the hell had I expected?

Paloma’s dark eyes watched me the whole time I talked, her pretty lips pursed thoughtfully. When I finished, she looked down at her hands. “Sometimes it’s hard to see what’s right in front of you.”

“That’s no excuse,” I said, shaking my head. “But I’m going to try to make up for my part in it, if I can.”

Paloma reached into the tin and chose another cookie. When she handed it to me, her fingers remained against mine. “I believe in you.”

I took the cookie, and her fingers went self-consciously to her ear. There was a small sprig of mistletoe tucked into her hair. She blushed when she saw me looking at it, and I felt my pulse pick up.

I wasn’t always the smartest guy around, but even I could pick up a hint like that. The shy girl might not know how to ask for what she wanted like Britta and Liesl did, but she knew how to show me, which was just as important.

I set the cookie back in the tin and held out my hand. She hesitated, then placed her hand in mine. I drew her to her feet and put my hands on her shoulders. Her breathing had quickened, and she kept her gaze fixed on the open collar of my coat.

I touched her cheek. “Look at me.”

Her brown eyes lifted to mine.

“I want to kiss you,” I said. “Is that all right?”

Her fingers tightened around my coat. “I want you to. But… I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll show you.” I lowered my mouth to hers.

Paloma released a shaky breath into the kiss. Her knees softened, and most of her weight settled against me. I put one arm around her waist and held her close while her lips parted beneath mine.

A warm glow from the mistletoe washed over us.

Hearth magic opened deep inside my chest. The new Bond spread gradually through my torso, warmer than Craft and gentler than the force of Flight. Paloma gave a soft sound and pressed her breasts against me. Her hands moved up my chest until she could hold on to my shoulders.

I kissed her until the trembling in her body eased. When I lifted my head, she stayed against me and hid her face near my neck.

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me,” she said.

“Have you seen you?” I said with a laugh. “I was worried I was going to scare you off if I showed you how attractive I found you.”

Paloma leaned back enough to search my face. “Really? But… why?”

“Again,” I said. “Have you seen you? Not to mention the fact that you’re sweet, a good listener, and you want a family. I figured it might take you a while to warm up to me, but I was willing to put in the work.”

She blushed again.

“I’ve spent most of my time outside class working in the guild kitchens,” she said. “When a candidate arrived, the younger students would fill the Academy common room so he would see them first. They were beautiful and confident, and they knew how to hold his attention. I preferred to volunteer for extra kitchen shifts and stay out of the way.”

She looked toward the tin of cookies.

“I wasn’t interested in any of those men,” she continued. “I didn’t *want* them to choose me. But after enough candidates passed me without noticing, I guess… I kind of thought there was nothing special for anyone to notice. When you came into the kitchen, for the first time, I really wanted someone to see me.”

“I saw you.” I slid both hands around her and drew her full body against mine. “I nearly kissed you when you walked me to the door, you know that? I’ve thought about your mouth every time I’ve seen you since.”

Her eyes widened. “O-only my mouth?”

“No.” I let my gaze move down over the heavy curves beneath her apron. “Definitely not *only* your mouth.”

Paloma blushed, but she didn’t hide her face again. Her hands pressed behind my neck.

“Kiss me again,” she whispered. “Please?”

She rose onto her toes and pulled me closer while I lowered my lips to hers. Hearth magic beat like a heartbeat between us, steady and warm. Sweet Paloma kissed me until both of us needed air.

When we separated, she remained in my arms. The tin of sugar cookies sat open beside the chimney, waiting for us.

“Do you have plans for the night?” she said. “You don’t have to spend the rest of your mother’s birthday alone.”

“I’d like to spend it with you.”

Paloma smiled. She took my hand and brought me back to the warm place beside the chimney.

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Chapter 11



Four days had passed since the Naughty Alarm. Agathe had kept Liesl and me busy tracing the Academy's material routes while her people watched Tobiah. We still hadn't found the name of whoever received the Hollow, but we'd learned a great deal about how supplies moved between the Houses, warehouses, and sleigh works.

I'd spent a lot of that time thinking about Krampus and the ways he could sabotage me. The thing I kept coming back to was Professor Bell's precious route. It had followed the same basic schedule for hundreds of years, which meant Krampus probably knew exactly where the sleigh would be during every part of the Big Night. He would know which Craft gates were opening, which batches were moving, and which part of the world I was supposed to be flying over. If he wanted to set another trap, the official route told him where and when to put it.

Changing the route would be a nightmare. I understood that much after seeing the sugar-plum fairies' warehouses. Every change affected the order in which gifts were staged, the timing of the Craft gates, the receiving compartments, and the balance of the sleigh. But if we could build a new schedule and keep it quiet until the Big Night, Krampus and whoever was helping him inside the Academy would have less time to prepare for it.

Once I explained the idea to Kris, I asked him to retrieve the laptop and charger from my hotel room. He authorized a Passage courier to visit the lodge in Austria, and the bag had arrived that morning with everything exactly where I'd left it. The laptop still had most of its charge, and its offline copy of Northstar's routing program could test thousands of changes much faster than Liesl and I could work them out with chalk.

Now my laptop looked out of place on Liesl's workbench beside a brass gear assembly. Across the shop, the restraint she wanted me to fasten her into waited against the rear wall.

Liesl stood beside me with one hand on my shoulder while the Northstar routing program opened. Her thumb moved absently along the back of my neck. The Craft Bond surged at the contact, and I tried not to look toward the empty restraint.

We hadn't been alone long enough to use it. Whenever the audit released us, I had Flight practice, classes, or another meeting with Agathe. Liesl had her own work waiting, along with every repair request that had accumulated while she helped me.

There had been opportunities if we were willing to neglect something important. Before learning about Krampus, I probably would have considered that a reasonable trade. Now I knew someone inside the Academy was trying to kill me and that every woman who Bonded with me would be scarred if they succeeded. It was harder to justify setting the work aside for sex, even when Liesl leaned over me and pressed her breasts against my arm.

She studied the program's opening screen. "This is what Northstar uses to plan its deliveries?"

"A simplified copy of it. I helped build the testing version, so I kept it on my laptop for demonstrations. It can't contact Northstar from here, but we don't need it to. We just need to give it the right information."

My mind was humming along the same way it was when I'd had a difficult problem to solve at Northstar. There was no chance I could replace the entire route before Christmas. Every region had its own delivery windows, Passage points, warehouse schedules, and local conditions that had to be entered into the calculation. Gathering and inputting that much information would take an insane amount of time. If I tried to rebuild the whole system by myself, it might take years.

Someday, Liesl and I might be able to create a magical version of the routing program and have an elf from every regional line feed its local information into the system at the same time. That could produce a genuinely new route. But my First Trial was coming fast, and I had to come up with something that would work in the time that I had.

Fortunately, I didn't need to change everything. A few substantial alterations at carefully chosen points would make the old schedule unreliable. If Krampus couldn't be certain where I would be or when I would arrive, setting a trap became a lot harder.

Even those limited changes would be a challenge. Professor Bell and generations of Flight instructors had spent centuries refining the current system, and I was trying to alter it before Christmas.

Liesl's braid slid over my shoulder as she bent closer. "I don't understand any of it," she said. "But I love how you look when you concentrate like that."

"Funny, because when you lean over me like that, it becomes much harder to concentrate."

She laughed softly and straightened. Her fingers trailed across my shoulder before she returned to the stack of notes beside the laptop.

We had already translated most of the Pole’s system into terms the program could understand. The main warehouses became distribution centers. Craft gates became loading points, while the sleigh’s receiving compartments stood in for trucks with limited capacity. Sleep windows became delivery deadlines. Cheer currents and Passage points were route restrictions the software wasn’t allowed to violate.

The program couldn’t understand magic. But it did understand that a particular thing had to happen at a particular place and time, which was close enough for what I needed it to do.

I loaded our test route and started the simulation.

A map filled the screen. The official route appeared in blue, crossing the same regions repeatedly as it followed the schedule the Academy had used for generations. Our proposed route formed a second line in red. It cut out several return trips and shortened the total flight considerably.

Liesl squeezed my shoulder. “It worked.”

“Maybe,” I said.

The route continued through northern Europe. A warning flashed beside one of the warehouse entries.

Liesl leaned close again. “What does that mean?”

“The next shipment missed its delivery window.”

“It isn’t late,” she said. “The program is trying to send it too soon. We would still be delivering the previous batch when the next Craft gate opened.”

I checked the schedule. The software had found the shortest route, but it hadn’t allowed enough time for us to empty the compartment assigned to that gate. According to the new schedule, the next load would arrive while some of the previous gifts were still inside it.

“And this is why we test it,” I said.

“If we used this schedule with a real sleigh,” Liesl said, “the gate would try to send another load into an occupied compartment.”

“Wouldn’t it stay closed?”

“It should.”

“That isn’t the same as *would*.”

“The gates have safeguards, but no one has deliberately instructed one to send two loads into the same compartment before.”

I cancelled the simulation. “Let’s continue not trying it, for now. We’ve got other stuff to get through first.”

We added the receiver’s movement and reset time to the restrictions. Liesl dictated the sequence while I created another rule, and each time she leaned over to check the screen, her body settled against mine. Her hand remained on my forearm after we finished. I turned my wrist beneath hers and ran my thumb across her palm.

Liesl looked toward the restraint. “We could lock the door for an hour.”

“You think I’ll be done with you in an hour? Not likely once I have you tied up and at my mercy.”

“Two?” she suggested.

I pulled her between my knees. She placed her hands on my shoulders, and I slid mine beneath her apron to hold her waist. Then I kissed her.

Liesl opened her mouth beneath mine and pressed closer. Her fingers moved into my hair while the Craft Bond heated between us. I drew her against me, then let one hand move down over her skirt.

She made a soft sound when I slipped beneath the hem. Her thighs parted to give me room. I found the edge of her panties, pulled them aside, and ran my fingers between her legs. She was deliciously wet. Her hips followed my hand when I stroked her, and the sound she made against my mouth nearly ended the argument.

The frame stood across the shop. It would have been easy to take her over there, fasten her into it, and give both of us what we wanted.

Then I remembered what failure would do to her, not to mention Britta and Paloma. Krampus wasn’t only threatening my life. If he killed me during the Trial, every woman Bonded to me would have her Gift scarred. I couldn’t ask them to accept that risk and then neglect the work that might keep it from happening.

I kissed her once more before withdrawing my hand and lowering her skirt. “I want to. But I want enough time to do this properly, and we need a route that won’t kill us first.”

“Then we’ll finish the route,” she said. “But you’re going to have to fuck me very thoroughly to make up for this horrible teasing.”

She had no idea how right she was. When she stepped back from between my knees, it took every ounce of self-restraint not to bend her over the

worktable immediately. But I knew the stakes of our mission, and I couldn’t afford to screw up.

The next simulation ran farther before finding a problem. We adjusted the timing again, then made another attempt. The red line finally reached the end of the test section without missing a dispatch or putting more weight into the sleigh than its compartments could safely balance.

It wasn’t a complete solution, obviously. But the success proved we could build a different schedule without working everything out on a wall with chalk, which was a significant improvement.

“This program of yours is very cool, Cole,” Liesl said. “Even if it only saves time, it’s worth doing.”

“It does more than that. The saboteur knows the official route and schedule. If we keep the working version between us, Agathe, and whoever has to approve the final changes, we can inspect the gates and compartments in the new sequence without giving anyone time to plan around it. That’s a hell of an advantage if they want something to fail on the Big Night.”

Liesl looked at the two lines on the screen. “A new schedule would certainly give them less time to prepare. But Bell will never approve a route produced by a human machine.”

“Then we need to prove the program works somewhere he can’t prevent us from testing it.”

Liesl glanced toward a broad sheet pinned beside her tool cabinet. It showed a cluster of rooftops, ladders, doors, and numbered chimneys.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“The Practice Village. Passage House uses it to teach rooftop movement and delivery through chimneys, locked doors, and other barriers. The next Reindeer Game will be held there.”

“Is that the one with the chimneys?” I asked. “I think I heard Bea talking about it. Specifically how she was going to beat my ass so badly that I died of shame, I think.”

Liesl rolled her eyes. “She’s such a bitch. But yeah, that would be the Chimney Run, and she does win it pretty much every year. It starts tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I cursed under my breath. “How the hell did I miss that? Bell must have told the class about it after he kicked me out.”

“It’s on your schedule, isn’t it?”

Oh yeah, I did have a schedule Dame Agathe had given me. I just hadn’t looked at it in… forever.

“I hope it’s not something I was supposed to study for.”

“You’ll be fine,” she assured me. “Each competitor carries a sack of numbered gifts through the village. You have to deliver the correct gift to the hearth inside every building. The course is the same for everyone, but each competitor chooses the order of the deliveries and how to reach them.”

“Passage House must have a hell of an advantage.”

“Those with a strong Passage Gift can move directly through the chimneys and locked doors. The rest of us have to use the ladders, windows, roof hatches, or any chimney large enough to climb through. Passage House almost always wins.”

I studied the map again. “But the time still depends on choosing the right delivery order.”

She smiled broadly at me. “Now you’re getting it.”

“We can enter the course into the program and use it to plan my run. If the route saves enough time to keep me competitive without Passage magic, Bell can’t claim the program is useless.”

“He doesn’t oversee the Games,” Liesl said. “He can complain, but he can’t stop you from choosing your own route.”

“Then I’m running for Craft House.”

Liesl gave me a sexy wink. “I was hoping you’d say that. The rules require non-Passage competitors to wear climbing equipment. I finished your harness yesterday.”



The Practice Village filled most of a training hall behind Passage House. Painted wooden buildings crowded narrow lanes beneath a ceiling high enough to hold artificial clouds. The roofs rose at different heights and slopes. Some had ladders or drainpipes attached. Others could only be reached from neighboring buildings.

The buildings were full-sized training shells rather than complete houses. Their roofs, chimneys, doors, and windows were intact, but the walls facing the observation lanes had been left open to expose the rooms and hearths inside. That allowed the instructors to confirm each delivery and reach anyone who fell or became trapped.

Passage students moved across the rooftops with weighted sacks on their backs. One stepped into a narrow chimney and disappeared as her first boot crossed the rim. Through the open wall below, I watched her emerge from the fireplace and place a wooden practice gift on the hearth. She stepped back into the fireplace and vanished. A second later, her head appeared above the chimney again.

“Neat trick,” I said. “I can see how that would be an advantage. But how is anyone without Passage supposed to fit through those chimneys?”

Liesl adjusted the climbing harness she had fitted around my waist. “With chimney compression. Anyone who can channel enough Cheer can temporarily reduce herself and whatever she’s carrying enough to fit through an open flue.”

“Can I do that through the Flight Bond?”

“Yes, but compression takes concentration and consumes much more Cheer than Passage. You also have to climb through the actual chimney. It won’t carry you through a cap, a blockage, or a solid wall.”

I looked at the student who had already returned to the roof. “While she can step in at full size and skip everything between the roof and the fireplace.”

“That’s what Passage does. It lets the user cross through an existing opening even when it’s locked, sealed, blocked, or too small. She can enter a chimney, doorway, window, or hatch and emerge from the other end with

whatever she can hold inside the magic. She can’t pass through an unbroken wall or roof.”

“But I’ll still be able to use the narrow chimneys,” I confirmed. “I’ll just be slower.”

“Much slower,” Liesl said. “You’ll need to decide where compression saves more time than finding another entrance.”

“And whatever you’re carrying goes with you?”

“As long as you can hold it within the magic. That’s why they’re training with full sacks.”

On the highest roof, Bea walked toward a chimney with a sack over one shoulder. It was easily twice the size of the ones the other students carried.

She didn’t slow down. She stepped onto the chimney opening and disappeared before her boot touched the inside of the flue. A moment later, she emerged through the fireplace below and placed a practice gift on the hearth. She crossed the room, touched the glass of the sealed window, and stepped through it onto the street.

I hated admitting it, but she was impressive.

I would eventually need a Passage Bond if I survived long enough to reach the later Trials. Bea had power, control, and enough confidence for both of us. She was also beautiful, which mattered when a Bond required more than professional cooperation. Unfortunately, she could barely stand to be in the same room with me. And I wasn’t particularly impressed by her attitude either.

Her eyes settled on my harness. “Which House will you be losing for, human?”

“I thought I’d compete for Passage House, actually,” I said, feigning innocence.

Liesl snorted behind me. “That’s not a bad idea. You’ll either win, or you’ll bring Bea’s House points down. Either way seems like a victory.”

“Impossible,” Bea snapped. “I am representing Passage House, as I always do. I presume since *she’s* here, you’re racing for Craft. A pity. For them. You don’t stand a chance.”

Most students represented the House where they trained. Since Santa candidates didn’t belong to a single House, they were allowed to choose who to represent for each of the Reindeer Games. Liesl had built my equipment, and she was helping me prove the value of a better route, so racing for Craft House made sense, even if Flight was the only Bond I’d sealed so far.

“It’s insulting that you would expect a harness and some route organization to compensate for your lack of Passage training,” she said. “But your overconfidence will only make it more satisfying to beat you.”

“If you think it’s going to be so easy to beat me, why are you worried about anything I do?”

“I’m not worried.” She dropped her enormous sack beside a row of others. “What I *am* is looking forward to humiliating you.”

She walked away to speak to the course marshal.

“Wow,” I said. “She really doesn’t like me. Ever since the first day, she’s looked at me like a piece of reindeer crap on her shoe.”

Liesl tugged the strap at my hip. “Even if she doesn’t think you’re a good candidate, I don’t see why she has to behave that way. But don’t take it

personally. She hates all the candidates. I doubt she'll ever Bond with anyone because the only person she cares about is herself."

"Well, she's not going to get another opportunity after me," I said. "Because I'm going to earn that coat. If she wants a good dicking, she'll have to beg for a place as one of my side pieces."

Kris's wives were his original twelve bonds, but he had girlfriends too. I guess if you're going to live for hundreds of years, there's plenty of time to pursue meaningful relationships with as many women as you have the appetite for.

Liesl shivered. "I'd really like to see you teach her a lesson," she giggled. "I bet she'd look very sexy, begging. She is cute even if she is a bitch."

"Yeah, and she's good, too," I said. "There's no denying that."

"She is," Liesl agreed. "Passage House hasn't lost this event in years, and Bea has the best control I've seen. If you want to beat her, we'd better choose your route carefully."

Professor Bell had mentioned that Bea's line kept one of the oldest alpine routes when she demonstrated her skills in Route Planning. Despite the fact that she was so hard to like, she might actually make a very valuable ally. Bea had probably spent most of her life studying the customs connected to the routes she monitored, and Kris had said Krampus's traditions had started in the Alpine regions of Austria.

She might know more about Krampus than anyone else at the Academy who hadn't been part of the first Santa's court. Getting her to talk about it would be difficult when she refused to even use my name. But if she was determined to compete with me, I might be able to use that. If I won the Chimney Run, or at least didn't horribly embarrass myself, maybe I could convince her I wasn't a total waste of space.

I unfolded the course map. “Okay, show me where the competitors are allowed to start. We need to make a plan.”



The Chimney Run wasn’t the only thing I had to practice for, either. Reindeer Handling was getting more challenging every day, and now that I actually had a practice sleigh that wasn’t trying to kill me, I was trying to learn how to drive.

I might still die trying to fly, but that would be due to my own incompetence rather than demonic sabotage.

The practice sleigh jumped forward when I pulled the reins. “Holy shit!”

I had intended to ease the team into motion, but two reindeer in my team apparently disagreed with my methods. They charged between the starting flags and dragged the runners hard enough across the ice to throw a spray of snow over Fennick.

“Less rein!” Britta shouted from the seat behind me.

I loosened my grip. The team slowed, but I pulled farther than I meant to and nearly stopped them in the middle of the course.

Fennick wiggled a finger in his ear to get the snow out of the tufts of hair growing there. His expression promised that if I damaged the sleigh,

Krampus would have to wait his turn to murder me.

Britta reached around me and adjusted my hands. Her left arm had been free of the splint for two days, although Paloma had wrapped her wrist before allowing her back onto the course.

“You’re fighting them,” she said. “The reins carry your intention through the harness. You don’t need to drag their heads around.”

“You could have mentioned that before they tried to launch us into the wall.”

“I did, several times. You were probably staring at my boobs or something.”

“You did leave your shirt unbuttoned,” I said. “And I keep thinking about pinning you to the bed again…”

She squeezed one arm across my ribs. “Drive.”

I pressed the reins lightly against the lead reindeer’s right side. The team turned. Our sealed Flight Bond opened my awareness to the air moving across the practice ground. I could sense a rising current beyond the next set of flags and the uneven pull where the left reindeer wanted to accelerate before its partner.

Knowing those things didn’t tell me what to do about them. Britta corrected my grip again and told me when to give the team more freedom. We made the first turn too wide, but I brought the sleigh back between the markers without hitting anything.

“Better,” she said.

I guided the reindeer toward the low rise at the end of the ice. Their hooves left the ground. The runners followed a moment later, and the sleigh lifted high enough for cold air to pass beneath my boots.

Every part of me stiffened. Britta’s arm held me against the seat.

“Don’t pull back,” she said. “They know how to fly. Let them climb.”

The wind pressed against my face. Through Flight, I could feel the current holding the sleigh. I eased the team toward it and the shaking beneath the runners stopped.

“There,” Britta said. “Now turn them before we reach the barrier.”

I pulled too firmly on the left rein. The team banked, and the sleigh followed at a steeper angle than I wanted. Britta shifted her weight behind me. I leaned with her, relaxed my grip, and brought the runners level.

We crossed the practice ground in a broad circle. By the time we reached the landing strip, I was beginning to understand how little pressure the harness required.

The runners struck the ice and bounced once. But I kept the team straight until the sleigh settled, then slowed them before Fennick had to dive out of our path.

He approached with snow still clinging to his beard. “Your landing was better than your takeoff. And the part in between wasn’t as useless as it could have been.”

“I’ll take it.” I grinned.

Britta climbed down and flexed her left hand. “He definitely needs another run. But he’s improving.”

“He needs several hundred,” Fennick said. “And he’d have to be, or I’d suspect him of being a lump of coal in disguise.”

The old elf stalked off along the left side of the team and checked every trace between the sleigh and the lead pair. I stayed in the driver’s seat while Britta watched him move away.

“Do you have plans after classes?” she asked.

“Liesl and I are still working. It’ll probably take all evening.”

Britta waited until Fennick crouched beside the lead reindeer. Then she stepped close to the sleigh and slipped one hand beneath the open front of my coat. Her palm moved slowly over my chest.

“That’s disappointing,” she said. “My arm feels much better. I thought you might want to see if you could pin me again now that I can fight properly.”

My body responded immediately. “I most definitely do.”

“Is what you’re doing with Liesl really that important?” Her fingers slid lower over my ribs.

I sighed. “Only if I want to survive the First Trial. We’re testing a new route.”

“The one that has Bell threatening to resign?”

“He hasn’t seen our version yet. But if we can change the schedule, whoever sabotaged the harness won’t know the exact order or timing we’ll

use on the Big Night."

Her hand continued lower over my stomach. "Sounds promising… but they'll still have opportunities."

"Fewer than they have now. Everyone in the Academy knows the existing route."

"Strong and clever." Her fingers curled against my side. "This is why I like you. If you like, I'll help you test the Flight sections."

"Really?"

"I'm not letting you get yourself killed on a bad turn over the Pacific," she said. "Besides, the sooner we finish, the sooner you'll have time to wrestle with me again."

Fennick straightened and started back toward the sleigh. Britta quickly pulled her hand from my coat and climbed into the second seat before he reached us.

"Good to go?" she asked, as if she hadn't just been cock-teasing me within an inch of my life.

"The team is ready," he said. He pointed toward the starting flags. "Again."

"Come on, Cole," Britta purred seductively in my ear. "Show me what you've got."

I doubted my performance would improve now that the sexy blonde elf had redirected most of the blood away from my brain, but I turned the team before Fennick could change his mind.

As much as I wanted to take Britta up on her teasing, fucking would have to wait. But now that she was excited, the pulse of her magic through my body felt hotter and far more stimulating than it had before. I could hear her breathing heavily behind me, and knew she could feel it too.

As the reindeer charged toward the flags, I wondered how hard we'd have to fly, and how fast, before I felt her come through our Bond. Was that possible? We had a few more laps to figure it out.

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Chapter 12



Watching Bea run made me reconsider how much confidence I wanted to display before my own turn.

She crossed the Practice Village without slowing for any of the barriers designed to stop her. Locked doors and shuttered windows carried her through as easily as open ones. She stepped into chimneys without changing size, vanished as soon as her boot crossed the opening, and emerged at the hearth below. The weighted sack on her back disappeared with her and returned still firmly attached.

Every room was visible through the open sides of the training buildings. Bea appeared beside one hearth, dropped the correct wooden gift onto it, and stepped through a shuttered rear window before the gift stopped moving.

Students and instructors crowded the observation lanes around the village. House colors filled the raised platforms, and every successful delivery added another mark beside Bea’s name on the large scoring board. The clock beneath it kept moving, but she was well ahead of the pace set by the earlier runners.

Bea crossed the highest section of roof and reached the broad chimney at the center of the village. She dropped into it without breaking stride. A moment later, she appeared in the room below and placed another gift on the hearth.

She finished the last buildings almost as quickly. When she crossed the line, the course marshal stopped the clock and announced a new best time for the year.

Passage House erupted into cheers and hollers.

Bea removed her sack and handed it to an attendant. Her breathing was faster, but otherwise she looked ready to run the course again. She found me waiting beside the starting platform and gave me a satisfied smile.

“You may withdraw before your turn,” she said. “Craft House would probably appreciate it.”

“I’d hate to disappoint everyone who came to watch me die of shame.”

“You’re right,” she sneered. “That would be much more entertaining.”

Liesl crouched in front of me and pulled one of the straps tighter around my thigh. “Ignore her.”

“I’m trying, but she keeps talking.”

Bea walked away with a smug expression on her face, like she’d already won.

Truth be told, I didn’t expect to win the Chimney Run. But I did want to have a strong enough showing that the optimized route planning was obvious to the instructors. Most importantly, Professor Bell.

Bea was going to be a tough act to follow, though, and I was up next.

Every non-Passage runner had to wear a climbing harness, but thanks to Liesl's engineering, mine had considerably more equipment than the standard version. Straps crossed my shoulders, waist, and thighs, all connected by the same enchanted channels Liesl used in sleigh restraints. Two narrow cables ran from reels at my hips to hooks that could be attached to the safety rails along the roofs.

After my sleigh driving practice the day before, Liesl and I had taken some time away from the route simulations to practice chimney compression here in the Practice Village. I had been slowly getting better at channeling Cheer. Before that, I hadn't attempted anything more complicated than lighting the candle in Holly Kringle's class, but I could do that with relative ease. Even so, I was surprised to find that my control over the compression was actually pretty decent. Now that I could draw Cheer through my sealed Flight Bond, I had a lot more magic to work with, too.

With Liesl's help, I had figured out how to compress myself and a practice sack enough to descend the flues safely, but every attempt required most of my concentration and far too much time. The enchanted channels in my safety harness were Liesl's attempt to make the technique faster and less wasteful.

She pressed her fingers against the channel over my chest. A green glow traveled through the straps and down both legs.

"Okay, the channel is clear," she said. "When you use compression wearing the harness, it will spread the Cheer through your whole body instead of forcing you to control every part separately."

"Thanks," I said, "I hope it works well enough that I don't embarrass myself for Bea's amusement."

She tugged both cables from their reels and let them retract. “The brakes are mechanical. If you fall, they’ll lock even if you lose your grip on the magic. Keep one line attached whenever you’re above the street.”

“You built it. I trust it.”

Her lips curved. She placed one hand against my chest and kissed me.

The Craft Bond flared to life. For a few seconds, I could sense the tension in every strap and the springs waiting inside the reels. Then Liesl stepped away and the awareness faded.

“You’ll do great, Cole,” she said. “I know you will.”

The course attendants placed my sack on the starting platform. The sacks worked with a similar magic to Santa’s sleigh, so Liesl and I had packed the numbered practice gifts in the order produced by the routing program. If the plan worked, the next gift I needed would always be on top.

I pulled the sack onto my shoulders. The marshal raised one arm, waited until the course cleared, and dropped it.

I ran past the nearest building.

Several people shouted that I had missed it. That was fine. Our route brought me back past it on the way to the finish, so stopping there now would only make me cross the same section of the course twice.

I traversed the first lane and climbed through an open window. The correct gift sat at the top of my sack. Success! The small win surged through my chest as I dropped it onto the hearth, vaulted through the opposite window, and caught the ladder bolted to the next building.

My route took me upward before it brought me back down. I climbed onto the roof, hooked one safety line to the rail, and ran across the slope. When the rail ended, I attached my second line to the next section before releasing the first.

The reels kept both cables tight without restricting my movement. The standard harnesses required competitors to manage loose climbing ropes. Liesl's clever design gave me one less thing to trip over, for which I was suddenly very grateful. It was difficult to keep track of everything when I was running as fast as I could.

I crossed two roofs and dropped through an open hatch. The next house had locked windows and a narrow chimney. Going around to the rear door would cost more time than compression.

I climbed onto the chimney cap and drew on the Flight Bond. Britta's Gift entered the channels in my harness and spread across my body. The opening widened around me as the magic compressed me, my clothing, and the sack.

My boots struck the inside wall. I braced them against the bricks and descended through the flue. It was slower than Bea's Passage magic, but the harness kept the compression even. I didn't have to fight to keep the sack or my legs within the magic.

I reached the fireplace, released the Gift, and returned to my normal size. The wooden present landed on the hearth before I climbed through a side window and continued.

My route looked ridiculous from the observation lanes. Confused shouts and laughter followed me across the roofs. But I was committed to the plan. I doubled back across one street, ignored two obvious doors, and climbed a drainpipe to reach a roof I had already crossed. Each move put me in position for several later deliveries. I never had to climb the same wall twice, and every gift I pulled from the sack belonged to the next hearth.

The scoring board filled beside my name. By the time I reached the central section, the clock showed that I was running faster than the program's estimate. That was pretty sweet. I wasn't going to match Bea's speed through a locked door, but I might beat her with out-of-the-box route planning.

The largest chimney in the village stood on the central building. Its doors were barred for the Run, and the lower windows were covered by wooden shutters. Reaching an entrance at the rear would require me to drop to the street and climb again after I had already passed the highest point on the course.

The chimney was faster. The building had no roof hatch, so Bea had used it too, and it opened directly above the hearth.

I hooked both lines to the safety rail and climbed onto the broad stone cap. The flue was wider than the first one, but I still needed compression to fit through it with the sack.

Flight flowed into the harness. My body tightened within the magic, and I lowered myself into the chimney.

Cold stabbed through the soles of my boots as they dropped below the roofline. My toes cramped and quickly lost feeling. The pain climbed through my ankles and calves until my bones ached, and my next breath smoked in the narrow flue.

What in the shit was going on?

The green channels in Liesl's harness pulsed once and dimmed. The pressure holding my body in its compressed form began to loosen. I reached through the Flight Bond and forced more Cheer down my legs, but the magic drained away as soon as it touched the bricks.

Frost spread across the mortar beside my knees. Gray crystals glittered inside one of the seams.

Hollow. It was the same damned cold I'd felt on the sabotaged sleigh. But recognizing what the problem was didn't save me.

The compression failed. My body began returning to its full size inside the narrow chimney. My boots wedged against the walls, the sack caught behind my shoulders, and the bricks slammed into both sides of my chest hard enough to force the air from my lungs.

Fuck. Was this how I died? Stuffed inside a chimney like the girl's dad from the *Gremlins* movie? I suddenly felt bad for laughing at that scene. Maybe this was karma.

Mortar cracked beside my head. I reached for the upper edge, but the brick beneath my hand broke loose. The entire side of the chimney shifted.

I pushed away from it. The movement tore more bricks free, and the shaft collapsed around me.

Both cables pulled tight. A falling brick struck the reel on my left and jammed it, but the one on my right locked hard enough to drive the straps into my thighs and waist. I stopped falling above the hearth while bricks crashed through the room below. I managed to cover my head and waited for the crashing to stop.

Part of the chimney struck my shoulder. Another piece hit the sack and tore it open. Wooden gifts scattered across the floor beneath me.

The roof rail groaned, but the cable held.

When the debris stopped falling, I grabbed the right-hand line with both hands and pulled myself upward. The left reel remained pinned beneath a

broken brick, so I released it from my harness and continued climbing on the line that remained. My boots scraped against the broken wall until I reached the roof.

Two roof spotters caught my arms and hauled me over the edge. The remaining section of chimney shifted behind me, sending another stream of broken mortar down the flue.

“Get him onto the west platform,” the course marshal ordered. “Keep everyone away from the chimney.”

The spotters helped me across the roof to a section supported by the next building. Once I was clear of the damaged masonry, I sat with my back against the safety rail.

Pain spread through my left shoulder, but I could still move the arm. The harness had squeezed hard enough to leave bruises around my waist and thighs. Still, nothing felt broken.

Holly Kringle reached me from the roof stairs and crouched beside me. “Where are you hurt?”

“My left shoulder took a brick, but I can still move it. The Hollow was the bigger problem.”

Her attention shifted toward the damaged chimney. “Hollow?”

“There were gray crystals packed into the mortar. I felt cold as soon as I entered the flue, and then… it was like something drained the Cheer out of my compression.”

“Did any of the crystals touch you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Can you still reach the Flight Bond?”

I drew cautiously on Britta’s Gift. A weak pulse of Flight entered the harness before the lingering cold smothered it. “Barely.”

“That’s enough. Don’t try again.” Holly addressed the course marshal. “Keep everyone away from that chimney until we can inspect it. If there is Hollow in the masonry, channeling more Cheer near it will only give it more magic to consume.”

Liesl arrived from the observation platform. The course marshal moved to block her, but Holly explained that she had built my harness and waved her through.

“Shattered bells!” Liesl cursed as she crouched on my other side and quickly looked me over. “Please tell me you’re all right, Cole. I felt the drain in my Gift just before the chimney collapsed. I thought…”

“I’ll be okay,” I told her. “My shoulder hurts, but the harness caught me.”

She checked the shoulder strap before moving down the rest of the harness. One of the safety lines had jammed, and a falling brick had cut partway through the webbing at my hip. The other reel remained locked.

The Craft Bond warmed when her fingers touched it. For a moment, I sensed the brake clamped around the cable and the full strain running from the roof anchor through the harness.

“Thank the Hearth, the second brake caught you,” Liesl said. “If you’d been using a standard climbing line, you would have fallen when you lost the compression.”

Her hands were shaking. I covered one of them with mine. “You saved my life.”

A sharp crack sounded behind us. More mortar broke from the damaged chimney, exposing a seam covered in frost.

Professor Bell flew closer to inspect it. The light around his tiny body reflected from gray crystals embedded between the bricks.

“DO NOT TOUCH THE MASONRY,” he called.

Liesl turned toward the chimney. “Those are the same crystals Fennick found inside the racing harness.”

Professor Bell rose above the roof and addressed the course marshal. “CLOSE THE COURSE. CLEAR THE HALL AND SEND FOR DAME AGATHE. NO ONE IS TO HANDLE THE RUBBLE UNTIL SHE ARRIVES.”

The marshal repeated the evacuation order. Instructors moved the spectators toward the exits while the roof spotters blocked every route into the damaged section. Holly helped me stand, and Liesl supported my uninjured side as we descended to the observation platform.

Bea stood with the Passage students across the hall. Her attention remained fixed on me until one of the instructors directed her toward the exit. Unlike literally everyone else present, she looked less than thrilled that I was all right.

“She used that chimney immediately before I did,” I said quietly.

“I know,” Liesl replied.

“If the Hollow was planted during the competition, she had the last opportunity.”

“It could have been placed there earlier. Every Passage student has trained on this course, and other people would have access when the hall was empty. But it does look bad.”

“I’m not accusing her,” I said. “Yet. But she’d better have a good reason for why the Hollow didn’t affect her.”

“Her Passage magic would have carried her between the ends of the chimney without making her travel through the flue.”

I sighed. “Which means she could have passed them without touching the Hollow. Then again, she could have planted it knowing she’d be safe, too.”

Liesl looked back at the crystals. “We need to tell Agathe right away.”

“I know,” I said. “We’ll let her decide who else needs to know. If Bea did this, I don’t want her finding out that we’re watching her.”

The clock had stopped when the chimney collapsed, but the scoring board still showed how many deliveries I had completed and how much time I had used. The aborted Run couldn’t count as an official result. Even so, Bell and the rest of the Academy had seen that my unconventional route through the village kept me close to Bea’s pace despite my lack of Passage. I hoped that would be enough evidence to help convince them of the potential an upgraded route could offer.

But as I limped away from the Practice Village, I couldn’t get as excited about that possibility as I otherwise would have. For the moment, all I wanted to do was sleep.



Dame Agathe didn’t care that I wanted to sleep, of course.

My clothes and Liesl’s harness were sealed inside iron containers for inspection. We were scrubbed, checked for Hollow, and given clean clothes. Paloma examined my shoulder and determined that it was bruised rather than broken. She applied a healing salve that reduced the pain enough for me to move normally, though the shoulder remained tender.

Once the cleansing was complete, the cold released its grip on my Flight Bond. I could draw on Britta’s Gift normally again, and no trace of Hollow remained in either of us.

Agathe released Liesl once the examination was finished, but she kept me behind. I described the collapse again, starting with Bea’s run and continuing through every detail I could remember about the cold, the crystals, and the failure of my compression. Then Agathe took me through it all again to see if I remembered anything else. After explaining my route and the condition of the chimney for what felt like the umpteenth time, all I wanted was a hot shower and several hours of unconsciousness.

I was climbing the stairs to my room when a Craft student hurried after me with a folded note. She handed it to me and said Liesl needed to see me immediately, then headed back down the stairs.

I unfolded the note on the landing.

Come to my shop. It's important. Right away.

Liesl had underlined *important* twice.

I forgot about sleep and headed back down the stairs. If Liesl had found out something else about the reindeer harness or discovered how the Hollow had been placed inside the chimney, Agathe needed to know immediately. And then she could be the one getting grilled until midnight.

The village had quieted while we were being questioned, and as I made my way to Liesl's shop most of the surrounding windows were dark. Light shone beneath Liesl's door, though. I knocked once and entered when she called my name. I expected to find her hunched over some new discovery with a screwdriver in her hair.

I stopped inside the doorway. Liesl was naked and waiting for me in the restraint frame. I had seen her breasts and slipped my hand beneath her skirt, but this was the first time I had seen all of her.

The padded platform had been lowered until it was almost horizontal. She lay on her back with her wrists and ankles resting inside the open cuffs. Her legs were spread, and loose straps crossed her waist and thighs without holding her down yet. She had positioned everything so that all I needed to do was tighten it.

Her red hair had been braided and pinned safely away from the gears. Without her clothes and apron, the curves I had spent weeks admiring were completely exposed. Her full breasts rose with each rapid breath, their dark pink nipples already hard. Freckles covered her chest, softened across her stomach, and continued over the wide curve of her hips.

My gaze moved between her thighs. Her mound was freshly shaved, leaving nothing to conceal her puffy lips. She had already soaked the padding beneath her.

All the exhaustion I had carried into the shop disappeared. My cock hardened so quickly that the front of my trousers became uncomfortable.

“Lock the door, Cole,” she said.

The note crackled in my fist. I’d forgotten I was holding it, and now I tossed it onto the ground. I closed the door and turned the lock.

A deep blush covered her cheeks and throat. Her fingers curled inside the open cuffs. She held my gaze and waited.

I hung back, though, just staring.

“Here I thought you’d found more Hollow,” I said. “I admit this is much, much better.”

“I’m sorry… I knew you’d come faster if you thought it was about the investigation.”

I approached the frame slowly. Liesl shifted beneath the loose straps as she followed me with her eyes. Her breathing quickened with every step, and the open cuffs tapped against the platform when her hands trembled.

I stopped beside her and placed one hand on the inside of her thigh. Her muscles tensed beneath my palm. I pushed her legs farther apart and looked directly between them. I took my time over everything she had deliberately displayed for me.

Then I let my gaze travel upward. I followed the curves of her thighs and hips, the softness of her stomach, and the freckles scattered over her full breasts. By the time I reached her face, her blush had deepened.

“All this is for me?”

Liesl caught her lower lip between her teeth and nodded. A tremor moved through her body, and her thighs opened a little farther beneath my hand.

The Craft Bond prickled at the contact. Its awareness spread into the frame, briefly revealing the fitted joints and release mechanisms before fading again.

She drew an unsteady breath. “I don’t want to wait anymore. If we’d sealed our Bond already, you would have had more Cheer to protect you today.”

“You’re very convincing when you’re looking up at me like that.”

“Please, Cole… Leaving our Bond unfinished isn’t protecting me. If you die now, my Gift will still be scarred anyway. Completing it can only give you a better chance of surviving.”

My thumb moved slowly over her bare thigh. “I can’t say I’m opposed to the idea. You’re sure you’re ready?”

“I’ve been ready since we opened our Bond,” she panted. “So ready I can hardly sleep at night for dreaming of you, just like this…”

I slid my hand higher. Liesl’s breath caught when my fingers reached the crease below her hip. “Like this?”

“Ohhh, Christmas…” she moaned.

“Give me a rundown on how this all works,” I said. “I don’t want to pull the wrong strap and drop you on your backside.”

“The platform is balanced on the central pivot,” she said. Her voice shook. “The lever beside my left hand releases everything at once. Tighten the

waist and shoulder supports before you turn me. The cuffs can be as tight as you want, as long as you can still fit one finger beneath them."

"As tight as I want, huh?" I grinned. "And if you want me to stop…?"

"I'll use my safe word. Anything else I say while I'm restrained is part of the game we already discussed."

I bent over her and kissed her. Liesl opened her mouth immediately. Her tongue met mine while I cupped one breast and squeezed it.

When I drew back, her eyes were bright and her lips swollen.

"Last opportunity to reconsider," I said.

"Tighten the straps, Cole."

I started with her ankles. Each padded cuff wrapped completely around the joint and fastened with a short leather strap. I pulled the first one snug, checked it with my finger, then tightened it another notch when Liesl asked me to.

Her wrists came next. She tested each restraint as soon as I fastened it. The frame barely moved beneath her effort.

Two padded straps crossed the tops of her thighs. I tightened them enough to keep her legs aligned with the lower supports. I checked that the edges didn't pinch the sensitive skin near her groin.

The shoulder support fastened across her upper chest, above her breasts. I drew it snug and checked that I could still fit my fingers beneath it. When Liesl strained against the cuffs again, the support prevented her from sliding along the platform.

I tightened the support across her waist, then drew the broad padded band into place beneath her breasts. Two narrower straps rose from it, each one dividing to circle the base of a breast before fastening above it. Liesl had shown me the marks that indicated how far I could safely tighten them.

I worked on the left one first. The padded loop contracted around the base of her breast. It lifted the flesh and forced it forward through the open center of the harness. Liesl inhaled sharply. Her breaths came quick and shallow while I tightened the strap to the mark. The support beneath her breasts sat clear of her ribs.

Her breast looked fuller inside the loop. The skin had already begun to flush. Her nipple hardened as I ran my thumb across it.

I secured the second loop just as slowly. By the time I reached its mark, both breasts were lifted and held apart for me, their weight supported while the straps kept the blood gathered inside them. Her nipples stood hard and dark against the swelling flesh.

Liesl pulled against all four cuffs. Her body shifted inside the frame, but none of the restraints gave. Her breasts trembled inside their fitted loops without slipping free.

A low sound escaped her when I cupped them. I squeezed them slowly. The straps held their bases in place, and the more I handled them, the warmer and heavier they grew in my palms.

“Harder,” she whispered.

I compressed both breasts until her back arched against the support. Her breath broke into a moan. When I relaxed my grip, the harness held the sensation in them.

I squeezed again, kneading her more roughly. Liesl twisted her wrists inside the cuffs and tried to press her chest farther into my hands. I caught one nipple between my thumb and forefinger, rolled it until she began to shake, then pulled it slowly away from her breast.

“Oh, Christmas.” Her voice rose as I increased the tension. “Cole, please.”

I released it. The peak contracted. Before she could recover, I pinched the other one and gave it a sharp tug.

She cried out and fought the restraints. “Stop. Please, that’s too much.”

We had already agreed on the word that meant I stopped without question. She didn’t say *monkey wrench*. Instead, she thrust her breasts toward me as far as the supports allowed and begged again when I twisted her nipple between my fingers.

I caught both nipples and pulled them toward me at the same time. Liesl’s entire body strained inside the frame. Her legs trembled. Her breath came in short, desperate gasps, and the Craft Bond grew hotter between us.

By the time I eased my grip, Liesl was panting. Her nipples remained swollen and hard, and her breasts quivered inside the straps with every breath. I kept one hand cupped around her while I took a moment to appreciate the frame she had built.

It gave me access to every part of her without allowing her to cover herself. She was, as she had wanted to be, completely at my mercy.

I pushed her knees wider until the thigh straps stopped them from moving any farther apart.

I reached between her legs. My fingers slid easily through her wet folds, and her hips lifted at once to follow my touch. The waist support held her

against the platform.

I rubbed her clit with two fingers until it swelled beneath them. Then I caught it gently between my thumb and forefinger.

Liesl gasped. Her legs strained inward against the ankle cuffs as I rolled the sensitive flesh between my wet fingers. I increased the pressure a little at a time. Her body tightened with each pass. When I tugged, her head pressed back against the frame and another burst of Craft magic spread through me.

Her reaction made me do it again, harder.

A broken moan escaped her. “Stop… stop, Cole, please!”

Those were not the magic words. She pulled against every restraint at once while her pussy grew wetter beneath my hand. The Bond burned hotter. Her excitement poured straight into my chest.

I slid one finger inside her without releasing her clit. Her body closed tightly around me. I drove the finger deep, drew it almost all the way out, then pushed it back inside while my thumb pressed down on the nervy bundle above it.

Liesl’s hips jerked against the support. I added a second finger and spread them inside her. Her pussy resisted before yielding around the extra width. She made a desperate sound and thrust herself toward my hand, taking both fingers as deeply as the restraints allowed.

I began fucking her with them. Each rough stroke made her breasts shake in the harness.

“No,” she gasped. “I can’t take it anymore. Cole, stop!”

I curled my fingers inside her and increased the pace. Her muscles clamped around them. Her pleasure built through the Craft Bond, as plain to me as the grip of her pussy around my hand.

Her legs trembled inside the restraints. She was already close, and the knowledge made it difficult not to keep going until she came around my fingers. Instead, I withdrew them and bent between her spread thighs.

Liesl moaned before my mouth touched her. I dragged my tongue through the wetness I had worked from her, then closed my lips around her clit. She bucked against the waist support when I sucked.

I pushed two fingers back inside her and worked them roughly while my tongue circled her clit. My other hand found her breast again. I pulled her nipple whenever her body began to relax.

She couldn’t escape any part of it. The harness kept her breasts lifted into my hand, her legs spread around my shoulders, and her pussy pressed toward my mouth. Every struggle only tightened the restraints and sent another wave of pleasure through our Bond.

“Please, Cole,” she gasped.

I held her open with both hands and sucked hard. My tongue pushed into her slit, then dragged upward. Her thighs twitched against the restraints with every stroke. Her clit swelled beneath my mouth.

Liesl cried out and pulled against the cuffs. The frame absorbed every movement. Her body began to shake. She was getting close much faster than I wanted.

I lifted my head and stopped moving my fingers.

“No,” she gasped. “Please don’t stop now.”

“Now you don’t want me to stop?” I grinned. “What happened to ‘it’s too much?’”

She groaned in frustration. I pulled off my shirt, wiped my mouth with it, and tossed it aside. An idea had occurred to me.

I reached for the pivot controls. “You said the platform can turn completely over?”

Liesl’s eyes widened. “Yes.”

I made sure the shoulder support was tight, then released the pivot lock and pulled the control lever. Gears clicked beneath us. Liesl rotated slowly until her head lowered and her hips rose above mine.

She laughed breathlessly until the frame continued past the angle she expected. Her breasts shifted against the support strap, hanging against her chin, and her legs opened wider under their own weight.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Improving the arrangement.”

I opened my trousers and freed my cock. Liesl stared at it from her inverted position.

Her mouth opened.

I stepped close enough for the head to touch her lips. She extended her tongue and licked away the moisture already gathered there.

“That’s a good start.”

Liesl took the head into her mouth. I pushed forward until her lips stretched around my shaft, then held still while she adjusted to the angle. She sucked eagerly and tried to pull me deeper.

The shoulder support kept her from sliding while the platform held her head at the right height. I gripped the frame beside her and eased farther into her mouth.

Her throat pulsed around the head of my cock when I reached the back of her mouth. The sudden constriction squeezed me hard enough to stop my thrust. She gagged softly, and the muscles worked around me in helpless contractions that sent a sharp rush of pleasure through my body.

I withdrew until she could swallow and draw several breaths through her nose. Saliva coated my cock and shone across her lips. Once her throat relaxed, I pushed over her tongue again. The tight ring at the back of her mouth gave way, then closed around my shaft as she accepted more of me.

Liesl’s eyes watered, but she kept her mouth open and pulled against the restraints instead of turning away. I began to thrust slowly. Each stroke slid deeper into the tight heat of her throat and produced a wet, muffled sound. Her gag reflex squeezed me whenever I pushed too far, and the slick pressure made it difficult to keep my movements controlled.

I reached between her raised thighs and slid two fingers into her pussy again. She moaned around my cock. The vibration nearly made me forget that I didn’t intend to come yet.

Her body remained on the edge of the climax I had denied her. I curled my fingers against the tight front wall of her pussy and rubbed her clit with my thumb.

Liesl tried to cry out with her mouth full. Her hips jerked against the frame. I pushed my cock into her throat and held it there while my hand moved

faster.

Her orgasm struck hard. Her pussy clamped around my fingers, and every muscle in her body strained against the restraints. She gagged, but I withdrew before she lost control of her breathing.

She gasped and coughed as I stepped back.

Her face was flushed and wet with tears. A line of saliva connected her puffy lips to my cock before it broke across her chin.

I was close, but I hadn’t come.

Liesl was still shuddering when I pulled the pivot lever again. The platform rotated past horizontal and stopped with Liesl facedown. The padded support beneath her pelvis lifted her hips above her torso, and the lower section angled her restrained legs toward the floor. Her thighs remained spread, leaving her ass raised at my waist and her pussy exposed beneath it.

Her thighs were already shaking. The aftershocks from her orgasm fluttered her pussy in small, visible contractions, and fresh moisture slipped between her folds. She tried to twist her hips away when I stepped behind her, but the supports allowed only a few inches of movement.

“Wait,” she panted. “Cole, I’m still too sensitive.”

I spread her ass with both hands. Her entire body tensed in anticipation. When I dragged two fingers through her wetness, she jerked against the restraints and begged me to stop.

I pushed both fingers into her.

Liesl cried out. Her pussy clenched around them, still pulsing from her climax. I held them deep while the contractions squeezed my knuckles, then drew them back and thrust into her again.

She writhed away from my hand, but the padded support kept her hips raised and prevented her from escaping more than a few inches. I gripped one side of her ass and pulled her back onto my fingers. The next thrust pushed them fully inside her.

The Craft Bond surged through me when I held her still and fucked her with my hand.

I increased the pace. My palm struck her wet pussy at the end of every thrust. Her thighs shook harder, and she twisted helplessly inside the restraints while her body squeezed my fingers.

“Slow down,” she sobbed. “Cole, please.”

I pumped into her faster. Every time she tried to pull away, the frame returned her hips to the same exposed position, and I pushed my fingers back into her slit before the pleasure could fade.

Her wetness ran down my hand. I spread my fingers inside her, stretching her while I worked them in and out. She clenched around the pressure, then pushed back despite her pleading.

I added a third finger.

Liesl screamed. I held steady until her body relaxed around the added width. Then I pressed all three fingers deeper and opened them inside her.

Her breasts hung beneath her, the padded loops tight around their bases. They kept the flesh swollen and separated while her hard nipples pointed toward the floor. Each thrust made her breasts swing inside the fitted straps.

I reached beneath her with my free hand and caught one. The engorged flesh filled my palm. I squeezed until her moan sharpened, then found the nipple and pinched it between my fingers.

Our Bond pulsed so violently that my own pleasure rose with hers.

I kept three fingers moving inside her while I pulled her nipple downward. Liesl yelped and tried to wrench her breast from my grip, but the loop around its base held it exposed. I tightened my grasp, kneaded the sensitive flesh, and tugged the nipple again.

Her pussy contracted around my fingers. She was still trembling from the first orgasm, but another was already building. It showed in the rapid tightening of her muscles and the frantic surges of Craft magic passing between us.

“Please stop. Please, I can’t—”

I thrust harder and curled my fingers inside her. Her words dissolved into a cry.

She tried to crawl forward, but the wrist restraints stopped her. I followed the movement with my hand and continued fucking her until she sagged against the supports. Her thighs still shook, and her hips continued jerking toward my fingers despite every plea for me to stop.

I released her breast and drew my fingers out of her pussy. Liesl hung limp in her bonds and panted.

I rotated her onto her back again and lowered her until her hips were level with mine. The ankle supports kept her legs spread.

Her pussy remained open from my fingers. Her clit was hard and dark above the slick entrance. I moved between her legs and slapped my cock

against it.

Liesl jumped. “Oh!”

I did it again. The wet impact echoed through the shop.

Then I dragged the shaft through her juices. Her clit rubbed against the underside each time I moved. Liesl followed the motion as far as the restraints allowed, desperate for more pressure.

I continued until her body started trembling again.

“You’re going to come again before I even put it inside,” I said.

“Please, Cole,” she moaned. “Please…”

I positioned the head at her entrance.

Her pussy resisted when I pushed forward. I held her hips steady and sank through the tight opening in one hard thrust.

Liesl wailed as her body stretched around me, hot and slick but still painfully tight. I remained deep inside her while she fought the restraints and adjusted to my size.

“Too much,” she cried. “You’re too big. Unnngh, please… Stop! Pull it out!”

I drew back until only the head remained inside her, then thrust to the base again.

The angle of the platform lifted her hips enough that my body struck her swollen clit at the end of every stroke. Liesl's cries grew louder as I established a hard rhythm.

She begged me to stop. Tears ran from the corners of her eyes, but she never said *monkey wrench*. Every pulse of the Craft Bond ran hotter each time I hammered into her.

I gripped her waist and fucked her harder.

Her breasts shook beneath my hands. I pinched both nipples and pulled while my hips continued striking hers. Liesl screamed again, but her pussy pulsed greedily around my cock.

She was approaching another orgasm. Her legs shook inside the cuffs, and her body clenched around me in rapid pulses.

I slid one hand beneath her hips and pressed a wet finger against her ass.

"No," she sobbed. "Please don't."

I pushed it inside her.

Her back arched. The added pressure tightened and squeezed. I worked the finger deeper, then added a second.

Liesl's cries broke into incoherent sounds. She was completely filled, with my cock driving into her pussy and two fingers stretching her ass. Her face and throat burned red. Magic flared between us as I fucked her through the last of her resistance.

Liesl came with a ragged cry. Her pussy contracted so violently around me that I lost my rhythm. Her ass clenched around my fingers, drawing them

deeper while her entire body fought the restraints.

I thrust into her once more and burst inside her. The contractions gradually slowed, and my cock began to soften while her pussy continued pulsing around me.

The Bond sealed.

The shop fell away. Every crafted item around me opened at once. I knew the gears inside the frame and the springs behind each release. I knew the hinges on the door, the joints in the workbenches, and the half-finished mechanisms waiting on every shelf. I knew the load each carried and the place it would fail. And I knew how to repair those failures.

Nothing was too broken to mend. Nothing was built so well that it couldn’t be made better.

That was Liesl’s Gift. It wasn’t only fixing things. It was knowing how every piece fit.

Then the newly sealed Craft Bond rippled through my body. Liesl’s pleasure flooded into me, restoring my erection before the first climax had fully faded. I hardened inside her again, so sensitive that every contraction of her pussy pushed me closer to another release.

The second climax built too quickly for me to control. I pulled out and closed my hand around my slick cock. The first pulse spilled across her pussy. I stroked myself over her mound as the rest followed. It covered her clit and mixed with the wetness already coating her.

Liesl lay trembling beneath me, streaked with sweat and tears. I removed my fingers from her ass and reached for the main release.

One pull opened every cuff and loosened the support straps, just as she'd said it would. Liesl's arms dropped, but she didn't have the strength to lift herself from the platform.

I gathered her into my arms. My bruised shoulder ached when I lifted her, but it held.

Liesl pressed her face against my chest while I carried her to the padded bench beside the worktable. Her arms circled my neck, but they were shaking too badly for her to hold on securely. I sat with her curled across my lap and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and legs.

She lifted her face when I touched her cheek. Tears still clung to her lashes, and saliva shone at one corner of her lips. I wiped both away with my thumb, then bent and kissed her.

The kiss was slow and gentle. Liesl made a weak sound against my mouth and leaned into me. Her lips moved beneath mine without any of the urgency from earlier. Her eyelids drooped, but she kept kissing me as I held her closer.

"So good," she whispered. "It was so… I didn't know it could…" The rest dissolved into a quiet murmur against my lips.

I kissed her again before she could struggle to explain. Her body continued trembling beneath the blanket. The shaking had eased in her arms, but her thighs still twitched across my lap, and small aftershocks shook her against me.

I kept one arm around her back while my other hand moved slowly over her body. The cuffs had left red bands around her wrists, so I massaged each one with my thumb before rubbing along her forearms. Liesl watched my hand through half-closed eyes. Whenever I reached a tender place, she sighed and pressed closer.

The waist support had marked the skin across her stomach and hips. I slipped my hand beneath the blanket and worked my fingers gently over each line, rubbing the places where the padding had pressed hardest. Her muscles relaxed a little at a time.

I kissed her temple, her cheek, and the corner of her mouth. She turned her head until our lips met again. Her breathing remained uneven, but each kiss drew a softer sound from her.

My hand traveled down one thigh. The ankle and leg restraints had rubbed the sensitive skin near her groin, and her muscles jumped when I touched the marks. I slowed my movements and massaged them with my fingertips until the tension eased.

“Perfect,” she muttered, and hid her face against my neck.

The fitted breast loops had left narrow red circles around the bases of her breasts. I opened the blanket enough to reach them, then cupped one breast without squeezing. It remained swollen and sensitive from the harness. Liesl inhaled sharply when I ran my thumb over the marked skin beneath it.

She relaxed across my lap. Her fingers curled against my chest while I kissed her again. I moved to the other breast and gave it the same attention, rubbing the compressed skin until the redness began to fade.

The sealed Craft Bond remained open between us. Her Gift spread through my awareness with the warmth of padded supports, balanced mechanisms, and restraints designed to hold without causing harm. Each careful touch strengthened that warmth.

Liesl’s breathing quickened again.

I kissed along her jaw while my fingertips continued circling the sensitive skin beneath her breast. She squirmed across my lap, but the movement

lacked any attempt to escape. Her thighs pressed together, and a low moan vibrated against my throat.

“Cole,” she whispered.

I stroked down her ribs to the curve of her hip. She trembled harder. When I returned to her breast and brushed my thumb over the sensitive skin beside her nipple, her back arched in my arms.

I kissed her mouth. Liesl clung to me and kissed me back with sudden desperation. Her thighs spread across my lap, and her hips curled toward my body. I kept the touch gentle. My palms smoothed over every place the restraints had held her, and her breathing broke into short gasps.

The climax began as a deep shudder. Liesl moaned into my mouth and pressed her whole body against me. Her pussy pulsed against my thigh beneath the blanket, but I never touched her there. The soft pressure of my hands, the kisses, and the security of my arms were enough.

I held her through it. My hands continued moving over her shaking body while the pleasure spread through her. The climax lasted longer than I expected, building each time I kissed her or rubbed another tender mark.

Craft surged through me more powerfully than it had while she was restrained.

Liesl had loved being helpless in the frame. She had loved the roughness and the loss of control. But her Gift responded most strongly now, while I cradled her, praised her, and cared for every place the restraints had touched.

This was the part she loved best.

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Chapter 13



Liesl rested her head against my right shoulder while we waited outside Agathe's office. She had braided her hair for work, and there was a pencil tucked behind her ear. Her eyes kept drifting shut. Every few minutes she squeezed my hand to reassure herself that I was still beside her.

I rubbed my thumb across her knuckles. "I wish we could have spent the night together."

"We spent as much as we could together."

School rules required every student to be in their Houses by midnight, so I'd had to carry Liesl back to her dorm after she'd recovered. It was after midnight when I returned to my tower, but candidates did not seem to be monitored in the same way the elves were.

"I meant all of it. I wanted to fall asleep with you and still have you there this morning."

Liesl lifted her head. The tenderness in her expression made me want to forget the meeting, take her somewhere warm, and hold her until both of us had slept for a day.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “You’ll pass your Trial soon. Then we can spend every night together forevermore.”

She said it with complete confidence. To me, *forever* had always meant a promise people made without thinking about the length of it. Liesl had already lived for centuries. She knew exactly what she was offering.

I kissed her forehead. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

“Good.” She settled against me again. “Because I’m way too tired to argue.”

The office door opened. Agathe looked from Liesl to our joined hands, then stepped aside. “Come in. This will not take long.”

Her desk had been cleared except for the Chimney Run scoring sheet. Liesl and I sat together in front of it. She kept her hand in mine beneath the edge of the desk.

Agathe picked up the sheet. “I’ve been given the results of your Chimney Run, Mr. Crispin. And I must say, I have some questions.”

“I’m disappointed too,” I said. “If I’d been able to finish, I think—”

“Let me finish,” she interrupted. “I am not the only one who noticed, either. The course marshal compared your progress with Miss Bea’s at each completed delivery. Your Run ended before an official time could be recorded, but the partial result was much stronger than I understood yesterday.”

I waited. There was nothing useful I could add until I knew what she wanted.

“Miss Bea can enter a building through almost any existing opening without slowing down,” Agathe continued. “You had to climb, open doors, and use chimney compression. Even with those disadvantages, you remained competitive with her. Explain how.”

Ah. She wasn’t disappointed in me. She was impressed. The worst part of the failed run the day before, besides almost being crushed by a chimney, had been the fact that I hadn’t been able to prove the superiority of my route planning. I’d thought I was going to have to find a new way to demonstrate my skill. But apparently, it hadn’t all been in vain.

“I entered the Practice Village into the routing program on my laptop,” I said. “Every house became a required stop, and I added the available doors, windows, ladders, roof rails, and chimneys, and my speed traversing different terrain. Then the program tested different orders until it found one that reduced the number of times I had to cross the same street or climb the same building. We packed the gifts in that order, so I didn’t have to search the sack at each hearth.”

“Did the program account for your slower chimney descents?”

“Yes. Liesl and I tested the run a few times the day before so we had accurate numbers for various types of terrain.”

Agathe looked at Liesl. “And the harness?”

“The compression channels reduced how much control Cole needed inside the flues,” Liesl said. Her tiredness disappeared from her voice once Agathe asked about her work. “I designed the safety reels to be separate from the enchanted system, as well. Each cable had its own mechanical brake, so

losing Cheer wouldn’t release either one. And I added an emergency release to each hip in case a reel jammed.”

Agathe placed the scoring sheet on her desk. “Your design provided protections the Academy’s standard harness does not, Liesl. I can’t help but think that is the reason he is still with us.”

Liesl sat straighter.

“Once Course Safety finishes examining the damaged harness, I want you to provide them with the plans,” Agathe continued. “If the design can be reproduced reliably, independent mechanical reels will become standard equipment on every Chimney Run harness.”

Liesl blinked several times. “Yes, Dame Agathe. Of course. I’ll give them everything they need.”

Agathe nodded brusquely.

Liesl’s fingers tightened around mine, and she grinned.

Agathe turned back to me. “Professor Bell has agreed to examine your routing method under controlled conditions.”

“Agreed *willingly*?”

“He has agreed,” she repeated, her mouth tightening slightly at the sides with what might have been a smile or a grimace. “That is sufficient.”

I wondered how hard she’d had to lean on him to get his agreement, but decided not to test her.

“He will meet you in Miss Liesl’s shop this afternoon,” Agathe said. “He has been instructed to provide the information required for a meaningful test. You will show him exactly what your program does, including its failures. I am interested in whether your result in the Practice Village can be repeated under the restrictions of the Big Night.”

“That’s what I want to find out.”

“Good. Miss Liesl, you have several hours before then. Use them to rest.”

Liesl opened her mouth.

“It is not negotiable,” Agathe said. “I don’t know what you got up to last night, and I don’t want to know. But you do not look like you will be of much use to anyone until you get some sleep. Now go.”

“Yes, Dame Agathe.”

Outside the office, Liesl wrapped both arms around me. She held on without speaking, her cheek against my chest.

“Look at you, making a difference for the whole school with your designs,” I said. “I’m so proud of you.”

Liesl practically squealed. “I’ve been waiting years for this kind of acknowledgement, Cole! I’m always just… the girl who fixes stuff. But maybe they’ll finally see me as someone who can make stuff, too.”

“Now,” I said. “Off to bed. Dame Agathe’s orders.”

“Do you think you could come with me?”

“You know I would if I could,” I said. “But I have more work to do. If Bell is actually going to let me test this system, I need to make sure it’s perfect.”

She groaned, but took my hand and let me walk her back to Craft House. Once at her room, I tucked her beneath the blankets and kissed her until her eyes closed. She was asleep before I reached the door.



Paloma had asked me to report to the first-aid room on the ground floor of Hearth House after my meeting so she could check on my injuries from the chimney incident. I found her arranging jars on a narrow counter beside a padded examination table. A covered plate and a pot of coffee waited on the other side of the room.

Her thick dark hair was tied back, and she wore a clean white apron over her Academy uniform.

“How much does it hurt this morning?” she asked, the worry in her eyes obvious.

“Less than yesterday. The salve helped.”

A flicker of relief crossed her face. “Take off your sweater and shirt. I need to see whether there is any swelling.”

I removed the sweater carefully. Pulling the shirt over my head made the bruised muscles complain, but I managed without help.

Paloma stopped with one hand on an open jar.

Her gaze moved from my shoulder across my bare chest. A blush rose into her cheeks when she reached my stomach, and she quickly returned her attention to the jar.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No. I… need to examine you.” She rubbed a little salve between her fingers. “Sit down, please.”

I sat on the edge of the table. Paloma stepped between my knees and touched the bruise on my shoulder. Her fingers were warm and careful. Hearth magic followed them through the sore muscle, easing the ache as she checked the edge of the swelling.

“Tell me if this hurts.”

She pressed below my collarbone, then along the top of my arm. I answered each time. Her examination moved down the left side of my chest and over my ribs, where smaller bruises had surfaced beneath the harness straps.

Her fingertips lingered when they reached the center of my chest.

Paloma drew her hand back. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t hurt me.”

“No, I… I wasn’t checking the bruise anymore,” she said. “That was very unprofessional of me. It’s just… you’re so…”

The admission left her even more flushed. She stared at her hands, but she didn’t move away.

I took one of them and placed it against my chest again. Her palm settled over my heartbeat.

“You can touch me because you want to,” I said. “You don’t need an excuse. We’ve opened a Bond, Paloma. We should get to know each other. I’ll stay still, and you can decide what you’re comfortable with.”

Her eyes lifted to mine. “You won’t think I’m being foolish?”

“No.”

Paloma spread her fingers over my chest. She traced the muscle beneath my collarbone, avoiding the dark bruise, then moved slowly toward my shoulder. Her other hand joined the first. Both trembled as she explored my arms, chest, and ribs.

The open Hearth Bond tingled wherever she touched. When her fingertips crossed my stomach, the last soreness beneath the harness marks softened. She followed one of the red lines toward my waist, then stopped above the top of my trousers.

Her breath had quickened. So had mine.

“You’re very warm,” she said.

“That might be you.”

She smiled without looking up. Her hands returned to my chest, more confident now. She ran both palms over me and used her thumbs to follow the muscles beneath my skin. I wanted to touch her, but moving before she

asked might turn her exploration into something she was doing for me. I kept my hands against the edge of the table.

Paloma stepped closer. The front of her skirt brushed my knees. She studied my body for another moment, then picked up my right hand.

I thought she had reached the limit of what she wanted and was just going to hold my hand as something that felt safer to her. Instead, she pressed my palm against her breast. “You should get to know me, too,” she whispered. “Shouldn’t you?”

The full curve filled my hand even through her blouse and apron. Paloma inhaled sharply, but she kept my hand in place.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “We can move more slowly if you like.”

“Yes… er, no. I mean, yes, I’m sure, and no, I don’t want to move more slowly.” She cleared her throat. “Cole, I’ve been thinking about this and I want it very much. I… I want to know what it feels like to have you touch me… more intimately.”

I curved my fingers around her. Her breast was heavy and soft, and her nipple stiffened beneath the fabric when my thumb passed over it. Paloma’s eyes closed. She pressed closer, and more of her weight settled into my palm.

“That feels… nice.”

I placed my other hand at her waist and drew her between my legs. She tilted her head for me to kiss her. Her mouth met mine carefully at first, then opened when I stroked her breast again.

The Hearth Bond spread through my chest. Its warmth deepened with every kiss and each slow movement of my hand. Paloma held my face, her

thumbs brushing my cheeks while she learned how to move against my mouth.

When we separated, she looked at my hand on her breast. Then she untied her apron and dropped it over the back of a chair.

Her fingers shook as she opened the first button of her blouse. I didn’t help. She took a breath, opened the next one, and continued until the fabric loosened over her chest. A cream-colored bra covered her breasts beneath it.

Paloma drew the blouse apart. She reached behind her back and released the bra. The straps slipped down her arms with the blouse, and her breasts settled free.

I had known she was full-figured, but her clothes had hidden how generous her body really was. Her breasts were large and round, with deep brown nipples already tight from my touch. She watched my face while I looked at her.

“You’re beautiful,” I said.

Her shoulders relaxed. “Touch me again.”

I cupped both breasts. Their weight filled my hands, soft enough that my fingers sank into them. Paloma released a breath and placed her hands over mine. She showed me how firmly she wanted to be held, then let me continue on my own.

I massaged her slowly and brushed both nipples with my thumbs. Her hips moved closer. She kissed me again, less cautiously now, and made a soft sound into my mouth when I circled one sensitive peak.

I bent and kissed the upper curve of her breast. Paloma held the back of my head. Her breathing quickened as I moved lower, and when I took one

nipple into my mouth, her fingers twisted in my hair.

“Cole…”

I looked up at her. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No… Please… keep going.”

I drew the nipple between my lips again and stroked the other breast with my hand. Hearth magic pulsed through both of us. Paloma’s body softened against mine, but her grip on me strengthened. She guided me from one breast to the other when she wanted the same attention there.

I stood and gathered her against me. Her bare breasts pressed to my chest as I kissed her. She explored my back and shoulders while I held her waist, careful of the treatment jars behind us.

After several minutes, Paloma slowed the kiss and rested her forehead against mine. Her breathing was unsteady, but she smiled.

“I want to stop here today,” she said.

“All right.”

I kept my hands at her waist until she stepped back. Paloma dressed without rushing. She fastened her bra, buttoned her blouse, and tied the apron around her again.

“I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to tell you when I wanted something,” she said. “Or when I wanted to stop.”

“You don’t ever have to be scared with me, Paloma.”

Her smile returned. “I know. It was easier than I expected. That makes me feel better about… later.”

She covered the salve jar and inspected my shoulder one last time. This time her hand was steady.

“The bruise is healing normally,” she said. “You can put your shirt back on, but no climbing today.”

“I don’t have climbing scheduled.”

“Good. Then you can eat.”

She uncovered the plate. Eggs, thick bread, and roasted potatoes filled it. Apparently touching her breasts hadn’t changed her opinion that I was in immediate danger of starvation.

Dutifully, I ate everything.



Liesl looked more rested when I returned to her shop that afternoon, although she had replaced the braid with a loose knot and stuck her favorite screwdriver through it again. It was an adorable habit, and I didn’t want to point it out in case it made her feel self-conscious. But it made me smile. She stood beside my laptop and studied the stack of ledgers occupying most of her workbench.

Professor Bell hovered above the opposite side. Purple light surrounded his small body, and three more books floated open behind him. Rolled maps filled a leather case on the floor.

“Mr. Crispin,” he said. “Dame Agathe has informed me that the performance I witnessed yesterday was produced by a *machine*.”

He said the word like it was some kind of filthy sex act, which made me want to burst out laughing. But I managed to hold in my mirth.

“Well,” I said, “technically. Liesl and I gave it the course rules so it could test various routes for us. I ran the most efficient one it produced.”

Bell’s expression suggested that distinction had not improved his opinion. “The Practice Village contains a fixed group of buildings, fixed entry points, and practice gifts of equal weight. The Big Night will contain none of those conveniences.”

“I know,” I said. “It will be far more difficult. Agathe said you brought the information for a real test, though, and I’m very eager to try, Professor Bell.”

Bell lowered the first ledger onto the workbench. “Regional delivery windows for the opening portion of the current route.”

A second book settled beside it. “Craft gate schedules and receiver assignments.”

He added two more. “Sleigh compartment capacities, approved Passage transfer points, known Cheer currents, local observances, and every restriction that forces one delivery to occur before another. These are *simplified* training records, you understand, Mr. Crispin. And they are *still* considerably more complex than your obstacle course.”

I opened the first ledger. Rows of locations and times covered both pages, with colored marks linking them to other books. I gave a low whistle. He wasn’t kidding.

“Thank you, Professor,” I said. “This is exactly what I needed.”

He pursed his lips in a scowl. “You sound pleased.”

“Well, I can’t test the program with rules I don’t have,” I said. “And I like a challenge.”

Bell flew closer to the laptop. “I remain doubtful. Some *machine* cannot understand why a Craft gate must remain closed until a receiving compartment is ready. It is foolish to think so. Machines and magic do not mix, young man.”

“It doesn’t need to understand the magic,” I explained. “I can give it a rule that says the gate can’t open before a certain time or while its assigned compartment is occupied. If we find another restriction, I add that too.”

“And when it fails?”

“We figure out why. If the failure can happen again, I turn the cause into a rule and run the test again.”

Bell’s purple light brightened. “You intend to learn centuries of route planning by allowing the machine to make *mistakes*?”

The word ‘mistake’ was obviously even more perverse in Bell’s mind than ‘machine.’ And honestly, if I had been responsible for a shipping route as enormous as this one for hundreds of years, I’d probably feel the same way. I tried to keep my answer as gentle as possible.

“I intend to let it make mistakes *here*, where nobody is flying the route. That’s why we test before we change anything. So that we avoid mistakes on the Big Night.”

Liesl moved the brass sleigh model from a shelf and placed it beside Bell’s records.

“The schedule tells us when each warehouse sends its load,” she said. “Cole’s program also needs to know how long the sleigh takes to rotate an empty receiving compartment into place before the next gate opens. We can use the model to work through those limits.”

Four receiving compartments surrounded the central gate mechanism. Liesl turned the first one into position and pointed to the gears beneath it.

Bell pointed to two adjacent compartments. “Enter simultaneous transfers into those receivers.”

I reached for the schedule, but my other hand remained on the model. Craft magic warmed inside my chest as awareness spread through the brass frame and followed the load paths into the central brace.

Both compartments could rotate toward the gate. When I pictured them moving together, pressure gathered in the brace they shared. The joint would take the weight from both loads at once.

“Something’s wrong with the shared support,” I said. “It can’t carry both compartments while they’re turning.”

Liesl touched the same brace. The Craft Bond sharpened my sense of the fitted pieces beneath her fingers.

“The outer receivers share a locking shaft,” she explained. “One compartment has to settle and engage its brake before the next one can

rotate. If both move together, the shaft twists and the gates may misalign."

"So paired receivers can't have overlapping transfers, even if both are empty."

"Right. They need a complete brake cycle between them."

Bell regarded me for several seconds. "You didn't know such things, even a few days ago."

"I still needed Liesl to explain what I was sensing."

"But you detected the strain." His gaze moved to our hands on the model. "You have sealed the Craft Bond."

"Yes."

"A wise choice," Professor Bell said, though he looked like he had a stewed plum stuck in his throat. "Perhaps you are marginally less likely to destroy a sleigh through ignorance."

Liesl frowned at him. "That was *almost* a compliment."

"It is a revised risk assessment." Bell tapped the receiver schedule. "Add the restriction. The fact of the matter is, the Bonds that a candidate chooses for his First Trial will drastically affect his chances of success. I understand you have sealed Flight as well. Those two are among the three best choices."

I glanced at Liesl, but she shrugged. "I didn't know that."

"What's the third?" I wondered.

“I am not at liberty to say,” Professor Bell responded in a clipped tone. “Such a distinction would be useless if we just told every candidate how to do the job. The entire point of the Academy is to discover strong candidates who can solve such problems for themselves.”

I didn’t really want to admit that I hadn’t exactly been strategizing when I’d chosen my Bonds. I’d just gravitated toward the women I was most attracted to.

Professor Bell seemed to see what I was thinking, and he rolled his eyes. “I’m sure you’ve noticed, Mr. Crispin, that all of the elves are attractive. So do not discount the reason that particular elves are attractive *to you*.”

I frowned. I had made Bonds with three particularly powerful elves. Britta was a young protégé, Liesl was older and much more experienced, Paloma wasn’t as versatile but had a very powerful Gift. Flight, Craft, and Hearth were all very central Gifts, too, compared to something like Coal or Passage which were much more specific and less likely to be broadly useful on the Big Night. The idea that this wasn’t a coincidence made me feel more confident, and I was suddenly eager to finish our demonstration for Professor Bell.

I created a rule linking each pair of compartments and entered the required brake cycle. The program rejected three of the transfers in the official training schedule until I added their established order. Once every condition was represented, the errors cleared.

Bell checked the screen against his ledger. “Interesting. Now optimize the section.”

I started the calculation. The first result exposed a delivery-window rule I had entered too broadly. Bell explained that the restriction applied to each settlement separately, so I divided the regional window into local ones. The next result stayed within the compartment capacities but placed too much weight at the rear of the sleigh. Liesl showed me which loads had to move

forward, and I added a balance requirement. Each failure eliminated a bad option before it reached a real sleigh.

After the fourth test, the proposed route completed the training section without an error. It reduced one repeated crossing and moved a gate transfer into a longer safe window.

Bell examined the result in silence. He checked the ledgers, returned to the screen, and traced the proposed order from beginning to end.

“The improvement is small,” he said.

I tensed. “It’s only one section.”

“I did not say it was insignificant, young man.” He closed the training ledger. “Carried through to other sections, it could be quite the opposite.”

Then he unfastened the final leather case and removed a much larger roll. The map spread across the workbench until Liesl had to rescue two jars of screws from beneath it. Dense lines crossed every region, and columns of times continued down both sides.

Professor Bell placed the official Big Night schedule beside my laptop.

“The Academy route,” he said. “You wanted the information necessary to redesign it. You now have every stop, load, gate, current, and required observance for the first regional section.”

He set a blank route ledger on top of the map.

“Prove your program can improve that section without violating a single condition, Mr. Crispin. If it can, I will give you the next one.”

Liesl moved her chair beside mine. Her hand settled over mine on the model, and the sealed Craft Bond flickered as I opened a new project on the laptop.

I entered the first gate schedule and began.

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Chapter 14



By Krampusnacht, the frantic beginning of my first year at the Academy had settled into a routine.

Classes, route simulations, and Agathe's investigation filled most of my time. We still had no proof connecting Bea or Tobiah to the Hollow, and no further sabotage had given us another lead. Agathe continued watching both of them while Liesl and I audited material transfers and worked on the route.

The Academy had also rerun the two Reindeer Games disrupted by the sabotage. Britta and I beat Sigrid's team in the rescheduled Sleigh Sprint, giving Flight House the victory we should have had the first time.

The Chimney Run was more complicated. Once the damaged course had been repaired, the Academy invalidated the earlier results and offered every competitor another attempt. Bea refused to run again, claiming she had already demonstrated her superiority. I completed the course with the fastest time of the rerun, so my name went onto the official board and Craft House received the points.

I couldn’t claim I had beaten Bea head-to-head, but I was perfectly willing to enjoy the technical victory.

My relationships had settled too. Britta and Liesl spent as much of their free time with me as Academy rules permitted, although neither could stay overnight in my tower until I passed the Trial. Paloma and I moved more slowly. She was sweet and shy, and we usually just ended up sitting around eating cookies and talking about life. It was as if she’d been waiting all her years to talk about the things that interested her and the things she’d like to do and see. Once she realized I was actually interested in listening to her, she could happily chat for hours, snuggled up against my side, holding my hand, and only pausing every once in a while for some more kissing and the occasional adventurous hand up the shirt. I felt no need to rush, with the other two jumping me every chance they got.

Then there was Rin. The cute-but-crazy elf continued appearing wherever I was least prepared to find her, seeming to take great pleasure in scaring the shit out of me any chance she got. And while she respected my rule against kissing until I decided whether I wanted to open our Bond, that didn’t prevent her from testing nearly every other boundary.

As far as Big Night prep, Liesl and I had successfully revised the first regional section of the official route without violating Professor Bell’s restrictions. He wasn’t exactly excited about it, but he also hadn’t pulled the plug on the whole operation or tried to throw my laptop into the candy cane maker either, which he actually had threatened to do at one point. I had nightmares about my one, sole hope of surviving the Trial sinking to the bottom of a huge vat of red and white swirled liquid candy.

Kris had helped us decide where to begin with our re-routing attempts. He compared our proposed changes against his flight records and identified the oldest sections of the route, where generations of adjustments had created repeated crossings and badly timed load transfers. The section we were testing offered the greatest potential savings without changing any delivery windows.

Bell had finally approved a physical test, but he still refused to accept the program’s estimate without actual Flight data.

That was why, on Krampusnacht—when we were all ordered to be inside the locked Academy before dark—Britta and I were circling the practice course for the second time with a weighted receiving compartment behind us.

The first circuit had followed the official sequence. We crossed the course from east to west, turned back to accept a practice load, then repeated most of the same distance to reach the final markers.

Our revised sequence moved the load transfer between two nearby delivery groups. That eliminated the return crossing and allowed the receiving compartment to open while the sleigh was traveling through a steady current instead of turning against one.

Britta sat beside me with her hands close to the reins but no longer touching them. A month ago, she had needed to correct me constantly. Now she could concentrate on the route and let me drive.

“Take the next current higher,” she said. “You need room for the load shift.”

I drew on our Flight Bond. Cold magic spread through my chest and opened my awareness to the air ahead. A rising current curved above the next marker, strong enough to lift the sleigh without forcing the reindeer to climb sharply.

I guided the team into it.

The runners rose. Behind us, the receiving compartment rotated into position. Craft warmed beside Flight inside me, revealing the movement of its gears and the tension gathering in the supports.

A brass signal lamp beside my knee flashed green.

“Gate opening,” I said.

The practice Craft gate connected with the receiver. A weighted crate dropped into the cargo webbing behind us.

The rear of the sleigh pulled downward. I sensed the strain through the Craft Bond before the runners dipped. I loosened the right rein, shifted my weight forward, and let the rising current carry the added load.

Britta kept her attention on the markers. “Hold this heading.”

The compartment moved toward the center of the load bed. Its weight settled evenly between the runners.

We passed the point where the official route required us to turn back across the course.

“Next marker is north,” Britta said. “Take it now.”

I adjusted the reins. The reindeer banked into the turn while the current still supported the loaded sleigh. Britta shifted with me, but she didn’t have to correct my hands or tell me how far to lean.

We crossed the final marker and descended toward the landing strip.

The runners struck the ice together. I kept the team straight until the sleigh slowed beside the timing post.

Professor Bell stood there with Fennick. His spectacles had slipped halfway down his nose while he examined the two sets of figures on his slate.

Britta climbed from the sleigh and looked over his shoulder. “How much faster?”

Bell moved the slate away from her. “Forty-three seconds.”

“That sounds conclusive.”

“Promising,” he corrected. “But far from conclusive. The test covered one abbreviated section under controlled conditions.”

“And my flying was excellent,” Britta added.

Bell scoffed and buzzed around her head, sprinkling purple magic dust on her head. “*You* were not the one driving.”

“My instruction was excellent, then,” she said. “Cole has improved his Flight Gift more than any other candidate I’ve seen. And it’s at least three-quarters due to my Bond. Admit it.”

Fennick snorted and began checking the team.

I released the reins. “The transfer definitely felt smoother on the second circuit. We accepted the load inside a rising current instead of trying to balance it during the west turn.”

Bell made another notation. “The compartment also reached its locked position four seconds sooner.”

There was another burst of purple magic dust from his shivering wings. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought the little fairy was much more excited than his dour expression suggested. But I didn’t dare point it out.

“The new sequence gives it more time to settle before the next turn,” I said. “That reduces the strain on the load bed, not only the flight time.”

He examined the sleigh before returning his attention to the slate.

“I will release the next regional section for simulation,” he said. “If, and only if, you submit every proposed change before attempting another physical test.”

Coming from Bell, that was practically a parade in my honor. “Understood, Professor.”

He tucked the slate beneath his arm. “All testing will stop at fourth bell today. The outer gates close before dark for Krampusnacht, and the last supply transfers are being completed early. I will *not* have you delaying the lockdown because your machine discovers another interesting shortcut.”

“We’ll be finished,” I said.

Bell zipped off toward the course office trailing purple sparks like a comet.

I watched him go. “Agathe told me the Academy bars every door on Krampusnacht. Does anyone actually expect an attack?”

“Not anymore,” Britta said. “Krampus and the Perchten used to come to the Pole on Krampusnacht. Some years they attacked the Academy or tried to enter the Workshop. Other years they slipped into the village and sabotaged sleighs, released animals, or set traps for people to find.”

“What made them stop?”

“They simply stopped coming. There hasn’t been a confirmed Krampusnacht attack in decades. These days, the lockdown is mostly a

tradition, but we still take it seriously. No one wants to leave the gates open on the year they decide to return."

She glanced toward the course office. "Bell *knows* the route is better, and he can't stand it."

"He did use the word promising," I said. "I almost passed out from shock."

"He definitely admitted I'm an excellent teacher, too."

I gave her a skeptical look. "Did he, though?"

Britta shoved my shoulder. I caught her wrist before she could withdraw it.

Her eyes brightened.

"We finished early," she said, biting her lip in a way I was coming to know well. "What do you say we head back to my dorm room and play a little game of hide the yule log?"

"That depends," I said. "Are you going to run away from me this time?"

"I might…" she purred. "Or it might be you who's running. Only time will tell."



Britta attacked as soon as her bedroom door closed behind us.

She caught the front of my coat, hooked one foot behind my ankle, and drove me against the wall. Before I recovered, she twisted my arm behind my back and pressed her body against mine.

Both of her arms were fully healed now, and she made certain I knew it.

“I win,” she said beside my ear.

“We’re just getting started.”

She tried to force me toward the floor. I planted my feet, turned inside her grip, and caught her around the waist.

Britta laughed as I lifted her. She locked both legs around my hips and pulled at my shoulders until our balance shifted. We struck the bed together, with her on top.

She pinned my wrists beside my head.

“Still think you can overpower me?”

I drove one knee between hers and rolled us.

Britta fought the movement. Her nails dragged across my wrists, and Flight surged through our Bond as she fought me. I hauled her to the edge of the bed, bent her over it, and pinned both hands behind her back.

Her laughter broke into a moan.

“There,” I said. “Now I win.”

“The match isn’t over.”

She bucked beneath me. I held her down with one hand and pulled her skirt above her hips with the other.

Britta twisted harder when I dragged her panties down. The struggle exposed her wet pussy between her spread thighs.

Flight flared cold and sharp inside me. Her excitement traveled through the sealed Bond, making my cock hard as I opened my trousers.

I pushed into her before she could find another advantage.

Britta cried out and fought the hold on her wrists. Her pussy clenched around me as I pumped deeper. Her toes scraped the floor, but she couldn’t find any leverage.

I kept her wrists pinned behind her back with one hand and held her hip with the other. The practice flight had already left both of us excited, and neither of us had much patience left. I fucked her quickly while she twisted in my grip.

Her efforts gradually lost their coordination. Her thighs shook around mine, and her breath broke into short cries. Then her climax struck through the Flight Bond in a rush of cold air, speed, and open sky.

I slowed without stopping. Her pussy continued fluttering, and every pulse of pleasure traveled through the Bond. Britta moaned into the mattress and rocked her hips back against me.

“Oh, I definitely won,” I said. “I don’t think you’ve ever come that fast.”

“How are you so strong?” Her voice sounded breathless and irritated, although the pleasure flooding the Bond ruined any attempt to sound genuinely offended. “And so damned heavy?”

I tightened my grip on her wrists and thrust into her several more times. I was close, but I didn’t want our rematch to end yet. Just before I lost control, I pulled out of her.

Britta made a frustrated sound and pushed her hips back, searching for me. “Cole…”

Instead of returning to her pussy, I drew the wet head of my cock through the cleft of her ass and stopped against the tight opening above it.

Desire exploded through our Bond. The surge struck so suddenly that I forgot to breathe. My entire body strained. Britta’s excitement filled me with the sensation of diving out of the sky, so intense that my stomach dropped and my vision blurred.

She squirmed beneath me. Her hips shifted from side to side, but she made no real effort to dislodge me. The movement only rubbed my tip against her entrance and sent another flare through the Bond.

I held still until I could think again.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Is this fair game?”

Britta turned her face enough to look back at me. Her cheeks were flushed, and her breathing remained ragged from her climax.

“Winner takes all.”

“Is that you admitting I won?”

“If you get your prize, I can’t deny it.”

Her answer was still a challenge. Britta’s hips moved beneath me again. Her excitement surged so strongly that my cock throbbed against her.

“Come on, Cole… take me!”

I released her hip long enough to prepare her carefully. Even the first slow pressure made her tense, so I waited until her body relaxed beneath mine. Her wrists remained in my other hand. She pushed back against my touch and sent another rush of need through our Bond.

I pressed forward very slowly. Her ass resisted at first, then slowly began to yield around me. The pressure was so tight that I stopped after barely entering her.

Britta gasped and fought my grip. Her feet shifted restlessly on the floor while her body struggled to adjust.

Our Flight Bond went wild.

Her excitement tore through me with enough force to make my arms shake. I clenched my ass and thighs and held myself motionless. The tight heat around the head of my cock nearly finished me before I had properly begun.

“Don’t stop,” Britta said.

“I’m trying not to come.”

A breathless laugh escaped her. “That doesn’t sound like winning.”

I pressed deeper.

Her laugh ended in a moan. The tight ring of muscle gradually opened around my shaft, squeezing every inch as I eased inside her. Britta stopped trying to taunt me. Her pinned fingers curled into fists, and her hips trembled beneath my hand.

I didn’t move once I was fully inside. I needed time to regain control, and she needed time to adjust. Her ass clenched around me in small involuntary contractions. Each one sent another pulse through the Bond.

Britta turned her face into the mattress and drew several unsteady breaths.

“All right?” I asked.

“Yes.” She pushed her ass toward me as much as my weight allowed. “Move.”

I drew back slowly. The pressure followed me, and I gritted my teeth as I tried to hold on. Britta moaned when I pushed forward again.

I established a careful rhythm. She continued squirming beneath me at first, testing my hold and trying to make me lose control. I kept her wrists pinned and used my other hand to hold her hip steady while I fucked her ass with slow, deliberate strokes.

The Bond intensified with each one. Britta’s pleasure filled my body along with my own until I could hardly separate them. I experienced the tight

pressure inside her and the excitement rushing through her at being pinned beneath me and taken in such a way.

Her resistance gradually disappeared. She stopped trying to reverse our positions and surrendered her weight to the mattress. Her ass lifted toward me at the end of each stroke, eagerly accepting me again.

“Cole,” she moaned. “Unnngh.”

I tightened my grip on her wrists and increased the pace. The mattress shifted beneath us. Britta’s cries rose with every thrust, and her legs began shaking again.

The second climax built through the Bond before I saw any other sign of it. Her pleasure climbed fast, carrying me with it. Britta moaned my name while I sank into her.

Then her entire body stiffened and shook.

Her ass clenched around my cock hard enough to stop me. Britta cried out into the mattress as the climax took her. The Flight Bond surged between us, flooding me with cold air, falling speed, and pleasure so intense that I lost what remained of my control.

I thrust as deeply as I could and came inside her.

The release seemed to last far longer than it should have. Every contraction of my cock triggered another pulse from the Bond, and every pulse intensified Britta’s climax. I held her down until both of us had taken everything we could from it.

When the last surge faded, I released her wrists and lowered myself carefully beside her. My arms felt weak. The room seemed to drift around

me, and Flight magic still raced through my body. I was lightheaded and almost intoxicated by the strength of what we had shared.

Britta stayed draped over the edge of the bed. Then she crawled onto it, rolled onto her side, and stared at me.

“What was that?”

“Fucking amazing,” I said.

“I didn’t know people could *do* that.”

I laughed and pulled her against me. She was still trembling, and the Bond carried her startled satisfaction along with the fading pleasure.

“You seemed to figure it out.”

“I… liked it.” Her cheeks flushed darker. “I came harder than I expected.”

“You and me both.” I laughed. “So… you’d be game to try that again sometime?”

She licked her lips and looked up at me through her long lashes. “As long as you can hold me down, you can do anything you like.”

She planted one hand against my chest and shoved without warning.

I was still too dazed to resist. Britta rolled me onto my back and climbed on top of me, looking pleased with herself again.

“The next round starts now,” she said.



I was halfway back to my tower when a hand caught my wrist and pulled me into the alcove behind a stone fountain.

Rin pressed my back against the wall and licked her lips. “There you are, baby… I’ve been waiting for you.”

A carved reindeer rose from the center of the basin, with water streaming from its antlers. The statue shielded us from anyone walking along the main corridor, but only if they kept their attention ahead. Any student who glanced through the water or walked around the end of the fountain would see us.

“What are you doing?”

“I told you,” she said. “Waiting.”

One of her hands remained wrapped around my wrist. Her other hand rested against the front of her skirt.

At first, I thought she was smoothing the fabric. Then her fingers gathered the hem and slowly drew it upward. Rin held my gaze as her hand disappeared beneath her skirt.

I looked down. The position of her wrist and the small movements beneath the fabric took a moment to register.

She was touching herself.

“Uh… Rin?”

“Shhh, baby…”

Her fingers continued moving. She parted her thighs and leaned closer, trapping her hand between our bodies. Her breathing quickened, and a faint flush spread across her cheeks.

“Uunnngh, yes… hold still… I just need… mmmm!”

My cock hardened immediately.

I had barely recovered from Britta. My muscles still felt loose from the Flight Bond, and I should have needed more than a few minutes before I wanted anyone again. And yet…

The speed of my reaction unsettled me almost as much as what Rin was doing. She had dragged me into a public alcove, pressed me against a wall, and started touching herself where anyone might discover us. Everything about her behavior should have made me pull away.

Instead, I wanted to lift her skirt and see what her hand was doing.

Rin frightened me a little. She ignored boundaries most people accepted without thinking. But so far, she’d kept the firm lines I’d set for her. No kissing under the mistletoe being the biggest one. But I never knew what she would do next, and my body responded to her unpredictability with an urgency I couldn’t explain. Something about this crazy girl made me need her.

Several students passed on the other side of the fountain. Their voices carried through the falling water.

Rin's fingers moved faster.

"Were you watching me with Britta?" I asked.

She nodded, blushing hard. The wet sounds her fingers made were driving me insane. "I'm always watching you, Cole. I told you…"

She leaned hard against me while she touched herself, close enough that her arm moved between our bodies. I knew she could feel my cock against her belly, too.

Another pair of students entered the corridor.

Rin kept one hand wrapped around my wrist, still holding me against the wall. But she turned her head and watched the pretty elves pass through the shifting curtain of water from the fountain. She continued moving her hand. Her fingers sped up when one of the students glanced toward the fountain.

The student looked away without slowing.

"You wanted someone to notice," I said.

"It excites me that they might," she moaned. "Mmm, yes! I want them all to watch me come in your arms. I want them to know you're mine, baby…"

She hooked one leg around my hip and climbed higher against me. I caught her beneath the thighs before she could slip. Rin used the support to wrap both legs around my waist, leaving me to hold her while her hand continued working beneath her skirt.

Her breath was warm against my neck as she leaned forward. Her body moved restlessly in my hands each time footsteps approached. But she didn't make a move to kiss me. I glanced up to see a mistletoe garland hanging above the arch at the end of the alcove. Its faint golden glow stopped several feet from the fountain.

Rin had chosen the only part of the recess where she could climb all over me without triggering the custom that allowed a kiss.

"You're still following my rule."

"I'll always do anything you tell me, baby…"

Her legs circled my waist, and her free hand caught the back of my neck. The hand beneath her skirt continued moving.

"You looked so good holding that blonde bitch down," she whispered. "I wanted it to be me so bad. She moaned like a whore, but I could moan louder."

Her fingers moved faster. The front of her body rubbed against my chest, and her breath warmed my mouth.

A faint wet sound came from beneath the plaid fabric.

Rin leaned closer. "Do you want to see?"

I came to a decision. I did want to see. And I wanted to do more than see, too. I caught her waist and put her feet back on the floor.

For the first time since she had appeared, uncertainty crossed her face.

I took the wrist behind my neck and pinned it against the wall above her head. Her other hand remained beneath her skirt.

“If you want me involved, you’ll do what I tell you.”

Rin’s lips parted. “Anything.”

“Pull up your skirt.”

She gathered the fabric and raised it to her waist.

She wore no panties. She had shaved herself bare and her mound was pink and puffy from her abuse. As I watched, she flicked her fingers rapidly over her swollen clit.

“Slow down,” I said.

Her fingers obeyed.

I stepped closer and held her wrist against the wall. Rin trembled between my body and the wooden paneling. Her hand circled her clit with small, deliberate movements.

“Look at me.”

Her dark eyes met mine.

“What do you imagine when you watch me with the other girls?”

“That you own me,” she gasped. Her fingers slipped lower and entered her pussy. “I imagined you deciding I belonged to you whether you opened the Bond or not. Using me like a little whore…”

“Would that work?” I asked. “Could I fuck you without opening a Bond?”

She bit her lip and nodded. “Most people don’t know… but… it’s possible. The urge to create the Bond becomes so strong it’s like a drug. It would drive me mad, eventually.” She moaned and giggled. “Madder…”

“And you’d do that, just to be with me?”

Her breathing quickened. “I want you so bad, baby. I’d do anything. *Any*thing!”

The madness had crept into her voice again, as if to prove just how far she would go. I had no doubt that if I asked Rin to murder someone in cold blood for me, she’d do it without question. And she might do it even if I didn’t ask her to, if she thought it was justified. But I wondered… if I opened a Bond with her, maybe I’d be able to sense what she was feeling the way I could with the others. That might give me some warning before she acted on one of her more dangerous impulses. Maybe the best way to keep her from doing something dangerous was to keep her close.

That, or I was just rationalizing, because she was driving *me* insane with the sound of her pussy.

I covered the hand between her legs with mine. Her fingers continued moving inside herself as I controlled the rhythm.

Rin’s head pressed against the wall. I locked my grip on her raised wrist and forced her to keep looking at me.

“Don’t come yet.”

Her pussy twitched beneath our fingers. “Cole—”

“You said you’d do what I told you.”

“Yes.” A shudder passed through her. “I’ll be good.”

She fought the climax while I moved her hand faster. Her knees shook, and moisture ran over our joined fingers.

Faint rectangles of light appeared along the corridor walls.

Sight panes opened and closed around us. One showed Britta sitting on the other side of her door with her forehead resting against it. Another flashed with the practice sleigh outside. A third showed the Toymakers’ receiving hall, where workers unloaded the final supply transfer before lockdown.

Rin’s control over her Gift weakened as her pleasure built.

“Please,” she gasped. “Please let me come.”

I pushed her fingers deeper and rubbed the heel of her hand against her clit.

“Now.”

Rin cried out. Her body convulsed against mine, and every Sight pane in the corridor flashed white. She clung to my hand while her fingers continued moving inside herself.

I held her upright until the strongest contractions passed.

The panes faded. Rin lowered her skirt and leaned against the wall, panting.

The mistletoe garland still waited above the nearby arch.

I released her wrist, caught her around the waist, and walked her backward out of the alcove.

Rin followed without resistance until I pushed her beneath the mistletoe arch. Her back met the carved stone of the archway, and golden light gathered among the leaves above our heads.

She stared up at me, trembling in my arms.

I kept one hand firmly around her waist. With the other, I caught her chin between my fingers and tilted her face toward mine.

Her lips parted.

I lowered my head until our mouths were almost touching, then stopped. Rin’s breath trembled against my lips. I held her there long enough for her to understand what I intended and long enough for her to pull away.

“Yes, baby… please!”

Her fingers twisted in my shirt.

Rin made a startled sound against my mouth as I pressed my lips to hers. I held her chin in place and kissed her harder, taking control before she could recover. Her body pressed against mine, and her arms circled my neck.

She opened eagerly beneath me. When her tongue met mine, I squeezed my arm around her waist and lifted her onto her toes. Rin clung to me while I kissed her with all the desire I had refused to give her before.

The mistletoe warmed above us.

Sight opened inside my chest.

For an instant, countless panes pressed against the edges of my awareness. I could sense the vast reach of Rin's Gift and the thousands of places she might look. I couldn't open any of them or control what appeared. I only knew that the Sight was there, waiting for me to learn.

Rin shuddered in my arms.

Then her entire body stiffened.

For a second I thought she was climaxing from the kiss. It was good, but I didn't think it was that good. She was pretty pent up, though.

But then, her eyes lost their focus. She stared past me at something only Sight allowed her to see. The lingering pleasure vanished from her face, and sudden terror struck through our new Bond.

"Rin?"

"Oh no," she whispered.

I set her feet on the floor. "What is it?"

She pulled away from me. "No, no, no."

Rin ran to the emergency bell lever beside the stairwell and threw her weight against it.

Alarms rang throughout the Academy.



Rin was already running when I caught her at the end of the corridor.

“What did you see?”

“The final transfer entered the Toymakers’ receiving hall. Then Sight lost the entire building.”

Suddenly she didn’t seem so crazy anymore.

“How long ago?”

“Seconds. Cole, we have to go!”

We ran down the stairs and crossed the Academy yard. Instructors were directing students away from the outer buildings while the emergency bells continued ringing above us.

The receiving hall stood against the outer wall beside the Workshop warehouses. Toymakers poured through the west loading doors as we approached. Several supported injured companions, and gray frost spread across the open doorway behind them.

A practice sleigh descended into the loading yard. Britta brought it down hard enough to throw snow across the paving stones. She jumped from the driver’s seat with a hooked driving staff already in her hands.

A masked figure charged through the doorway after the fleeing Toymakers. Horns rose from its carved wooden face, and dark fur covered its shoulders.

Britta used a burst of Flight to cross the yard. She struck the Perchten in the chest with both boots and forced it backward into a stack of empty crates.

“My Sight still can’t penetrate the hall,” Rin said. “I can’t tell how many are inside.”

“Stay above the Hollow if you can,” I told her. “Warn us about anything you see.”

We followed Britta into the receiving hall.

Crates covered the central floor. Several had been opened, revealing gray crystals hidden beneath layers of receiver fittings. Frost spread from the contaminated wood into the metal tracks used to move cargo through the building.

The Toymakers had overturned two worktables near the north wall. Liesl crouched behind them with several injured elves.

The main receiver stood at the far end of the hall. Brass locking arms surrounded an opening wide enough to accept a loaded freight pallet. An iron wedge held one arm partly open while Hollow crystals covered the base of the mechanism. Gray frost had already entered the channels that carried Cheer from the Hearth to the receiver.

Three Perchten guarded the receiver. One carried an iron club. Another forced more crystals beneath the jammed locking arm. The third waited behind the north loading racks with a short iron axe.

“They’ve reached the Cheer channels,” Liesl called. “If the Hollow reaches the main supply line, it can follow the magic back to the Hearth.”

Britta charged the nearest Perchten.

“Close the gate,” she said. “I’ll keep them away from you.”

Her staff caught the creature across the ribs. She followed with a short pulse of Flight that lifted it from its feet and threw it against the platform railing.

The Hollow flashed.

Cold tore through the Flight Bond. Britta stumbled as the crystals consumed part of the Cheer she had used.

“Use short bursts,” I shouted. “The Hollow is drawing from our Bond.”

Britta recovered before the Perchten could reach her. She blocked its club with the hooked end of her staff and fought without channeling again.

Rin ran for the nearest loading rack. “I need a clear view of the floor.”

She climbed the frame and pulled herself onto the upper crossbeam. From there, she could see over the stacked crates and track the attackers with her ordinary vision while Hollow blinded her Gift.

I reached Liesl behind the overturned tables.

“The magical shutdown mechanism is dead,” she said. “The Hollow consumes the Cheer every time we try to activate it. We have to disconnect the receiver mechanically.”

She led me to the control platform. A red brake lever stood beside the outer wheel, but Liesl caught my hand before I touched it.

“They forced the receiver open while the loading spring was under pressure. If you engage that brake now, the shaft will shear and the gate will stay open.”

“What do we do?”

“Bleed the spring through the service wheel. Once the pressure reaches the green section of the gauge, I can remove the wedge and release the locking collar.”

A protective grate covered a narrow iron wheel beneath the platform. I pulled the grate open and gripped the rim.

I used only enough Craft magic to read the mechanism. Cold bit inside my chest as the Hollow began consuming it, but our Bond still showed me the spring compressed beneath the loading bed, the gear train grinding against the wedge, and the locking collar held several inches out of alignment. The entire receiver was straining to close. I withdrew the magic before the Hollow could take more.

I turned the service wheel.

The pressure fought me immediately. I braced one foot against the platform and forced the wheel through the first tooth. A heavy impact shook the frame as part of the spring released.

“Keep it moving,” Liesl said. “Don’t let it turn backward.”

The second Perchten abandoned the locking arm and started toward us.

“North side!” Rin called from above. “It’s moving behind the crates.”

Britta tried to disengage from the first attacker, but it slammed its iron club across her staff and pinned the shaft against the platform railing.

I forced the service wheel through another tooth. The injured shoulder from the Chimney Run protested, but I couldn’t release the rim. If the wheel spun backward, the spring would force the gate farther open.

Liesl opened the maintenance panel beside the locking collar. She reached inside and tested the mechanical release.

“It’s still under too much pressure.”

I leaned harder against the wheel. Another tooth passed through the gear, then another. The needle above the receiver began to move out of the red section.

The approaching Perchten appeared between two stacks of crates.

Rin dropped from the crossbeam onto the top of the nearest stack. She kicked a loose crate into its path. The Perchten smashed through it without slowing.

“Liesl, behind you!”

Liesl turned. The Perchten reached the platform and swung one heavy fist at her.

I couldn’t let go of the wheel.

Rin snatched a narrow iron loading spike from the top of the rack and jumped.

She landed on the approaching Perchten’s back. One arm locked around its horns while her weight dragged its head backward. The creature staggered away from Liesl and reached over its shoulder to tear her loose.

Rin pulled the mask upward. The lower edge lifted far enough to expose the creature’s neck.

She drove the loading spike beneath it.

The Perchten jerked. Its hands clawed at Rin’s arm, but she forced the iron deeper until its legs collapsed. Rin rode it to the floor, pulled the spike free, and rolled away before the body struck the platform.

Protective fury surged through our new Bond. The fear she had felt when Sight lost me was still there, but it had hardened into a vicious determination to destroy anything that approached me.

The third Perchten charged from behind the north racks. It swung its short axe at Rin’s head.

She ducked beneath the blade. Her size let her move inside the creature’s reach before it could reverse the weapon. She stabbed the loading spike into the back of its knee.

The Perchten dropped onto one leg.

Rin caught one of its horns and used it to pull herself onto its back. The creature tried to rise, but she stabbed the spike beneath the rear edge of its mask.

It collapsed face-first onto the floor.

Rin remained crouched on its back for several seconds, holding the iron in place. When she finally pulled it free, dark blood covered the spike and streaked one side of her face.

Damn. Rin was a beast. She was the smallest person in the receiving hall, and she already had two dead demons at her feet. She looked directly at me and grinned in a slightly unsettling way.

“Keep turning that wheel, baby,” she said. “I’ll kill anyone who comes near you.”

Fierce satisfaction passed through the Bond. Rin made a little heart with her fingers, awkward with the spike in her hand, then turned to search for another attacker.

Across the hall, Britta tore her staff free from the Perchten holding her against the railing. She struck it across the ribs and forced it away from the control platform.

“Pressure is almost safe,” I shouted.

Liesl checked the gauge. The needle entered the green section. “Hold it there.”

I locked both arms and kept the service wheel from turning.

Liesl dropped beneath the receiver with a short hammer. The iron wedge extended through the locking assembly above her. She struck it once, but the wedge barely moved.

Across the hall, the first Perchten charged Britta again. She caught the descending club against her staff. The impact forced her onto one knee.

Rin scrambled back onto the loading rack.

“Another strike, Liesl,” she called. “The collar shifted.”

Liesl adjusted the hammer and struck the lower edge of the wedge. It slid several inches through the locking arm. The receiver shuddered. Pressure surged against the service wheel and forced it backward. The iron rim tore across my palms before I stopped it.

“Again!” Rin shouted.

Liesl struck the wedge a third time. It dropped free and hit the floor beneath the platform.

“Turn the wheel forward,” she ordered.

I forced it through the final release. The main spring unwound inside the receiver, and the locking assembly settled into alignment.

Liesl reached into the maintenance panel and pulled the mechanical disconnect.

The brass arms slammed shut.

The dark opening at the center of the receiver disappeared. Iron shutters closed behind it, cutting the contaminated receiver off from the Hearth.

The sudden discharge knocked Liesl against the floor and threw me away from the service wheel. I caught the platform railing before I fell.

The gray crystals flashed once, then stopped spreading.

The outer loading doors burst open.

Dame Agathe entered behind a line of Coalers carrying iron shields and sealed containment boxes. Two more dragged the Perchten Britta had knocked down in the loading yard between them, its wrists and ankles secured with iron chains.

Coal magic spread from the black stone pinned to Agathe’s sash. It formed a barrier around the receiver, the contaminated crates, the two bodies near the platform, and the surviving Perchten still fighting Britta.

The creature broke away and ran toward the north service door.

“North exit!” Rin shouted from the loading rack.

Two Toymakers shoved an empty cargo cart across the doorway. The Perchten struck it hard enough to drive them backward, but the obstruction stopped its escape.

Britta attacked from behind. She hooked its ankle with her driving staff and pulled its leg out from under it. The Perchten struck the floor, and she sent it flying toward the waiting Coalers with a kick between its shoulders.

Three iron shields closed around the creature. One Coaler pinned its weapon arm while another bound its wrists.

Agathe raised both hands. The barrier tightened around the Hollow and cut off the remaining cold.

“No one channels Cheer inside the barrier,” she said. “Use iron tools and seal every contaminated crate.”

The Coalers advanced around the receiver.

I looked at the dead Perchten beside the platform. “I thought the Krampusnacht attacks had stopped.”

“So did we,” Agathe said. “We kept barring the doors, but we stopped expecting anyone to test them.”

Rin climbed down from the loading rack and hurried to me. Dark blood marked her cheek, and the hand that caught my coat was shaking.

“I couldn’t see you once you entered the hall.”

I put my arms around her. “I’m here.”

She pressed her face against my chest and held on. The violent certainty that had filled our Bond during the fight had disappeared. All I could feel from her now was fear and relief.

Around us, Coalers secured the surviving Perchten while healers moved among the injured Toymakers. Liesl sat on the edge of the platform and pressed a cloth against one bleeding palm. Britta stood beside her with both hands locked around her driving staff, breathing hard as she watched the doors.

Agathe called my name.

Rin released me, although she kept one hand wrapped around my sleeve as we approached.

An injured Toymaker stood beside Agathe. “The Perchten were already inside when the delivery arrived,” she said. “They must have slipped through the loading doors during one of the earlier deliveries and hidden behind the storage racks. We didn’t see them until the Hollow crates crossed. Then they attacked.”

A Coaler handed Agathe the papers recovered from the final crate. I didn’t need to study every page to understand the important parts. The load had entered through an authorized Academy transfer, and someone had removed the record identifying who released it.

“The receiver opened normally,” Rin said. “Sight only failed after the crates were inside.”

I looked at Agathe. “Someone used a legitimate delivery to send them the Hollow.”

Agathe passed the papers back to the Coaler. “Seal the Academy’s supply warehouse and secure every transfer record. No one enters until I arrive.”

The Coaler left at a run.

We had spent weeks trying to learn who was moving Hollow through the Academy. Tonight, that person had armed the Perchten.

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Chapter 15



By the time the Coalers allowed anyone to move near the receiver, the blood on my hands had dried around splinters of iron and wood. My left shoulder ached from forcing the service wheel. But the cold left by the Hollow had settled deeper than the actual injuries. I stood outside Agathe's barrier with Rin's fingers twisted into my sleeve and watched the cleanup begin.

The Coal Guild handled the coal and other consequences assigned to children on the Naughty List, and in the aftermath of the attack I learned its duties also included security and investigations at the Pole. Its members had separated the surviving Perchten and bound them in iron. Neither had spoken since the fight ended.

Coalers removed their masks, searched their clothing, and found no letters, insignia, or personal possessions that might identify their contact inside the Academy. The horns were real, and their faces, while human, were twisted and ugly. The carved faces of the masks had made them look like demons, but under the masks, the hatred in their eyes was worse.

It had not been a single security failure. Someone had known the receiving hall well enough to tell them where to hide, when the final load would arrive, and how long the Toymakers would be distracted by it.

Agathe ordered two Coalers to preserve the loading records and question every porter who had passed through the hall that afternoon. She had already sealed the warehouse. No one would be able to enter the office or remove another record before she arrived.

“Dame Agathe, assuming the person who authorized those crates is still inside the Academy, they’re going to know we survived,” I said. “But if they are, they’ll probably try to leave before you finish the search.”

Agathe glanced at Rin. Dark blood had dried along one side of her face, but she still held the loading spike in her free hand.

“Can you watch the Academy exits without looking through the Hollow in this building?” Agathe asked.

“Yes. The blind area ends at the receiving hall walls, but…” Rin’s grip tightened on my sleeve.

Through our open Bond, I sensed a cold knot of fear inside her. Her hand remained clenched around my sleeve, with her thumb pressed against the pulse in my wrist. She didn’t seem eager to let me out of her physical sight after her magical Sight had failed her.

I covered her hand with mine. “Go. I’ll be fine. If we don’t catch whoever is working with Krampus, they could attack us again. It’s important, Rin.”

Rin looked down at the blood covering my palm. “You’re hurt.”

“Paloma will take care of me.” I felt the instant flare of jealousy through our Bond, but she didn’t voice it, which I considered a huge improvement.

“Don’t worry, Rin. You’ll still be able to feel me. If anything changes, you’ll know.”

She studied my face, then released my sleeve. The pretty little elf handed the loading spike to a Coaler with obvious reluctance and wiped her bloody fingers against the dead Perchten’s fur before she left, glancing forlornly over her shoulder at me.

Through our open Bond, I could still sense her fear and determination once she left the receiving hall, but I no longer caught glimpses of what she was seeing with her Sight.

Liesl remained near the receiver, directing the Toymakers as they placed iron covers over the contaminated channels. Her injured palm had been wrapped, and she had already begun sketching changes to the mechanical disconnect on a scrap of packing paper. Britta joined the Flight instructors searching the rooftops and loading yards for additional attackers. I could feel their exhaustion through the Bonds I had with each of them, but neither woman had any interest in stopping while the Academy remained unsecured.

I felt the same way, but Paloma arrived, and the buxom Hearth House student had no interest in whether or not I was *willing* to rest. She and a second group of healers swarmed through the warehouse, ensuring everyone who was injured was taken care of.

Paloma took both my wrists and pulled me away from Liesl and the receiver before I could offer to help with anything else. Her eyes moved over the blood on my hands, the bruising at my shoulder, and the gray residue frozen along one coat cuff.

“You’re coming with me,” she said. “Immediately.”

“Agathe may still need—”

“Dame Agathe has Coalers, Toymakers, and three of your Bonds working for her. I’m sure she’ll be fine.” Paloma looked toward Agathe. “May I take him? He has Hollow on his clothing that needs to be neutralized.”

Agathe gave me a tired look. “Please, take him. Perhaps you’ll have better luck than I have convincing him that he needs to rest.”

Before we left, one of the Coalers sealed my contaminated coat inside an iron container. They then checked the rest of my clothing and cleaned the traces of gray residue from my wrists before allowing Paloma to whisk me out of the receiving hall.



The first-aid room in Hearth House was crowded with injured Toymakers, so Paloma collected a medical case and took me upstairs to her suite. As a senior student, she had a private sitting room and bedroom at the end of a quiet passage.

Paloma’s sitting room was small and orderly. A red wool blanket covered the narrow couch, bunches of dried herbs hung beside the stove, and a half-finished row of paper lanterns waited on the table.

She locked the door behind us and hurried over to the stove to get some water boiling. She directed me to sit on a stool beside a basin, where she poured the steaming water, and then got her supplies organized while it cooled enough not to scald me.

She worked in silence at first, using a pair of fine tweezers to remove the splinters from my palms. She washed away the blood, spread salve over the torn skin, and wrapped each hand while leaving my fingers free. Hearth magic followed every careful touch, sinking through the pain and driving out the cold that the Hollow had left behind.

“The cuts are shallow,” she said. “Your shoulder is worse, though. I can feel it. It wasn’t healed yet after your accident. I *did* tell you to rest, didn’t I?”

“I was doing pretty well until we got attacked by demons,” I said. “I had to do *something*.”

I pulled my shirt over my head with her help. Paloma examined the bruising, pressed along the joint, and asked me to raise my arm. The movement hurt, but the shoulder held.

“It’s definitely aggravated,” she said. “But it doesn’t seem anything has torn. Hopefully they will find the culprit of tonight’s attack, and you will not be pulled into any new and irresistible adventures.”

She gave me a look that said she doubted how much I needed to be in the thick of the action, but I couldn’t very well have stood idly by with Britta, Liesl, and Rin fighting for their lives. Not to mention all the other workers in the warehouse.

“I’ll do my best to stay out of trouble,” I said. “I promise.”

She rested both hands over the bruised muscle and let more of her Gift flow into me. The warmth loosened the tightness along my neck and shoulder, but Paloma’s expression remained troubled. “I felt the Hollow touch you. It frightened me badly.”

I lowered my arm. “Through our Bond?”

“I knew you were alive because the warmth between us never disappeared completely. But when it weakened, I couldn’t tell whether you were injured or whether the Hollow was consuming it.” She kept her attention on my shoulder as she spoke. “I was treating one of the Toymakers when someone said you were inside the barrier. I couldn’t leave her, and I couldn’t reach you. All I could do was feel you getting colder. It was awful, Cole.”

There was no useful promise I could give her. I had gone into the receiving hall because people were trapped inside. If the Academy was attacked again tomorrow, I knew I would make the same choice. Paloma understood that as clearly as I did.

I turned on the stool and took her gently by the waist. “I’m sorry you had to feel it without knowing what was happening.”

“I don’t want you to tell me you’ll never do anything dangerous again.” She finally met my eyes. “I know what you’re training to do, and I know why you went into that hall. It’s just… if you feel I’m being short with you, it’s only because I was worried.”

“I understand.” I drew her closer until she stood between my knees. “It’s nice that you’re worried for me, actually. Since my mom died and I broke up with my girlfriend back home, I’ve spent a long time feeling like no one would have even noticed if I was gone. Now, I have you, Britta, Liesl, and Rin looking out for me. I don’t ever want to worry you, Paloma, but it means a lot to me that you feel that way. Does that make sense?”

Paloma hesitated. “Rin, too? I mean… I know she’s watching out for you whether you like it or not… but I feel a hint of Sight magic about you. Have you opened a Bond?”

I sighed. “Just today. I hope I haven’t lost my mind. You did say she’s strong, didn’t you?”

“Incredibly,” Paloma said. “I think that was a very wise choice. And a very kind one, too. She’s unusual, and sometimes can be a little bit frightening…”

“She killed two of those Perchten creatures with an iron spike,” I said. “She’s more than a little bit frightening.”

Paloma giggled. “Well, yes. But the point remains that I think your influence will have a calming effect on her. If she can quiet some of her impulses, she may become even stronger. I suspect her Sight is more powerful than anyone realizes.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I just hope I can rein her in.”

“If anyone can, it’s you.”

Paloma touched my face with one hand. She had approached every earlier moment between us carefully, as though her desire were something she could only handle in small doses, like some expensive, very potent ingredient. There was still uncertainty in her expression, but it no longer controlled her.

She kissed me, taking charge for the first time. Her lips were soft and warm. I held her waist while the kiss deepened, allowing her to choose the pace. Paloma’s hand slid behind my neck, and she moved closer until her breasts pressed against my bare chest.

When she drew back, color had spread across her cheeks. “Last time, you told me I could decide how far we went.”

“You still can.”

“I know.” Her gaze dropped briefly to my mouth. “I don’t want to stop where we did last time. But I’m not sure how to…”

Her quiet plea made my cock press harder against my trousers. I stood, slid one arm around her waist, and kissed her again.

Paloma gasped against my mouth, then opened for me. Her hands climbed my bare chest and locked around my shoulders. When I tilted her head and kissed her more deeply, she rose onto her toes and pushed her soft body against mine. Every time I eased the pressure, she followed my mouth and pulled me back.

Our Hearth Bond warmed between us. The heat spread from my chest, down my arms, and into my bandaged hands as I gripped her hips.

The wrapping around my palm caught on one of the small buttons down the back of her dress. Paloma turned in my arms, swept her hair over one shoulder, and worked the buttons loose herself. I kissed the side of her neck while she opened them. Her pulse beat rapidly beneath my lips.

Once the last button slipped free, I pushed the dress from her shoulders. It dropped around her feet. Paloma pulled her white shift over her head and let it fall beside the dress.

She turned to face me in a cream-colored bra, matching underclothes, and white stockings. Her chest rose and fell rapidly beneath the thin fabric. She reached behind herself, released the bra, and drew the straps down her arms. Her breasts settled free, her nipples already hard.

My cock throbbed at the sight of her.

I cupped one breast with my wrapped hand and kissed her again. Paloma arched into my palm. Her nipple pressed against the bandage as I stroked it with my thumb, and she made a soft sound into my mouth.

I kissed down the side of her neck and guided her backward. When the bed touched the backs of her knees, she sat and drew me closer between her

legs.

I knelt in front of her. After removing her shoes, I rolled one stocking down over her knee. The edge of my bandage rasped lightly against her calf, and a shiver passed through her. By the time I reached the second stocking, her knees had parted around me.

I kissed the inside of her ankle and worked my way up her leg. Paloma's fingers slid into my hair. Her grip trembled as my mouth passed her knee and moved along the soft skin of her inner thigh.

"Cole…" My name caught in her throat when I reached the edge of her underclothes.

I looked up at her. Her lips were puffy from kissing me. "Tell me what you want."

Her fingers tightened in my hair. "Touch me. Please."

I hooked my fingers into the waistband. Paloma lifted her hips before I asked, allowing me to draw the fabric down her legs. She lay back across the bed and opened her thighs for me.

Her pussy was wet and swollen, with a stripe of dark hair on her mound. I ran one finger through the moisture between her lips, then circled her clit. Paloma jerked beneath my hand. Her heels pressed into the mattress, and her back lifted away from the blankets.

I climbed over her and kissed her while I touched her. She moaned against my mouth each time my finger passed over her clit. When I pressed lower and slipped one finger inside her, her pussy closed tightly around it.

A pulse of warmth moved through our Hearth Bond.

I withdrew slowly and pressed inside her again. Paloma's hips rose to meet my hand. Her breathing grew louder, and her fingernails dragged across my shoulders as I found a steady rhythm.

Each contraction around my finger sent another pulse through our Bond. Her pleasure heated my chest and hardened my dick until the pressure inside my trousers became painful. I added a second finger and curled them inside her.

Paloma broke the kiss. She turned her face against my neck and held on to me while I worked my fingers deeper.

"Ooooh, Cole," she whispered. "That feels… so…"

I pressed my thumb against her clit and kept the same rhythm. Her thighs closed around my forearm. She tried to muffle her cries against my shoulder, but they grew louder as her body tensed and trembled beneath me.

Her orgasm pulsed through our Hearth Bond with every contraction around my fingers. Paloma clung to me and cried out against my neck. Heat rushed across my skin. The coals in the stove flared bright enough to wash the room in red light.

I slowed my hand while the trembling eased. Paloma's thick thighs remained wrapped around my arm until the final contractions passed. When I withdrew my fingers, she caught my wrist and brought them to her mouth. She kissed the tips before releasing me.

Then she reached for my trousers.

Her fingers struggled briefly with the fastening before it opened. She pushed the fabric aside and wrapped her hand around my thick shaft. The first stroke was light and cautious. Her thumb passed over the wet head, and a groan escaped me.

Paloma watched my face. Her next stroke was firmer.

She ran her hand slowly down the shaft, then back to the head. My hips rose into her grip. Paloma squeezed her fingers and repeated the motion.

“I want you,” she said. “All the way.”

My cock jerked in her hand. I pushed my trousers and underwear down, then stepped out of them. Paloma moved toward the center of the bed and lay back against the pillows. Her dark hair spread around her shoulders as she reached for me.

I climbed over her. She drew me between her thighs and ran both hands down my back. Her skin was hot against mine, and her wet pussy pressed against the underside of my cock.

“Tell me if you need me to slow down,” I said.

“I will.” Paloma pulled me closer. “I’m sure, Cole.”

I held the base of my cock and rubbed the head through her wetness. She shivered beneath me. Her legs seized around my hips as I positioned myself at her entrance.

“Please,” she whispered.

I started to press forward.

Suddenly, the warmth in our Hearth Bond vanished.

Cold spread behind my ribs and raised goosebumps across my arms. I stopped before entering her. The coals in the stove dimmed, and the red light faded from the walls.

Paloma’s eyes opened wide. One hand left my shoulder and pressed against the center of her chest.

“The Hearth,” she said. Her voice was no longer breathless. “I can barely feel it.”

A brass alarm bell mounted above Paloma’s door rang. The red glass globe beside it flashed with every strike.

Paloma slid out from beneath me and reached for her shift. “That’s the Hearth alarm. Something has happened to the fire.”



The paths between Hearth House and the Workshop had been cleared. Coal barriers glowed across every entrance to the warehouse district, and armed patrols moved along the roofs. Paloma and I ran beneath them toward the red light that usually shone through the snow around the Workshop.

The light had weakened to a dull pulse.

A Hearth Keeper met us at a service door and led us down a stone stair. Heat should have increased with every step. Instead, the air grew colder as we descended beneath the Workshop. Our Bond allowed me to feel Paloma reaching for the fire ahead of us. She found it, but the connection was faint and uneven.

The stairs opened onto a circular chamber cut into dark stone. A broad iron basin occupied the center. Red-gold fire burned within it without wood or coal, and engraved channels carried its light outward through the floor toward the Workshop above. I had felt that power through the snow on my first night at the Pole. Now the flames barely rose above the rim.

Kris and Agathe stood beside the basin. Marta had taken charge beneath the wall gauges, directing the Hearth Keepers as they closed valves and tested the channels carrying Cheer out into the Workshop. Every elf in the chamber responded as soon as she gave an order.

I slowed at the foot of the stairs. “Marta is in charge down here?”

“Of course,” Paloma said. “She leads the Hearth Guild. The Hearth has been her responsibility since Kris took the coat.”

Marta looked across the chamber at us. “Questions later. Paloma, I need you at the basin.”

Paloma approached the basin. She held her hands above the flames without touching them, and Hearth magic stirred inside our Bond. The fire leaned toward her, then sank again.

“It’s stable now,” Paloma said. “But it’s much weaker than it was.”

“Once the Hearth Keepers confirmed how much had been lost, they reduced the Hearth’s output as far as they safely could and closed every channel they could isolate from here,” Marta said. “That was what you felt upstairs. Until you disconnected the contaminated receiver, the Hollow consumed every bit of Cheer sent through it.”

“So the Hollow never reached the Hearth itself?” I asked.

“No,” Kris said. “You and Liesl disconnected the receiver before the Hollow could travel back along its supply line to the Hearth. Britta and Rin kept the Perchten away long enough for the two of you to finish. You stopped the drain, but the Hollow had already consumed a great deal of Cheer.”

Paloma moved around the basin, testing the warmth above different channels. “The reserve was already lower than it should have been.”

Kris nodded. He looked more exhausted than I had ever seen him. “That surge from Northstar cost us more than we first understood. We were rebuilding steadily, but tonight’s loss removed the margin we had left.”

Agathe looked toward a wide gauge mounted behind the basin. Its face had no numbers. A silver line crossed the lower third, and the red needle rested beneath it.

“What does that mark mean?” I asked.

Kris answered without looking away from the fire. “The minimum reserve needed to lift the Big Night sleigh and sustain it through the Trial route.”

The chamber seemed colder after he said it.

“And we’re below it,” I said.

I had spent weeks rebuilding the route to save seconds and reduce the strain on the reindeer. But none of that was going to matter if the sleigh couldn’t leave the ground.

“Can the Cheer be replaced?” I asked.

“The Hearth is still gathering it,” Marta said. “But the ordinary flow will not restore this much before the Trial. We must find every remaining point where Hollow has touched the network and remove it. Even then, we will need another source of Cheer.”

Agathe’s expression hardened. “The person who authorized those crates knew exactly what the attack would cost us. This was not merely an attempt to breach the Academy, or sabotage a candidate. This was an attack on Christmas itself.”

The flames had fallen low enough that black stone showed between them. Paloma held both hands over the basin. A red glow surrounded her fingers, and warmth spread inside my chest as her Gift touched the Hearth. The nearest flame stretched toward her palm, then sank again.

I sensed the fear twisting inside our Bond. Paloma swallowed and moved closer until the rim of the basin pressed against her skirts. Her fingers trembled.

I rested my hand against her lower back. She leaned into my touch for one breath, then steadied both hands.

“Tell me what you need me to do,” Paloma said.

Marta took her place on the other side of the basin. “Help me keep the fire stable. Don’t ask it for more than it can give. We need to protect what remains until we know how much Cheer was lost.”

Paloma nodded. She lowered one hand toward a darkening patch of coals, and several of them brightened beneath her fingers.

My shoulder throbbed. My bandaged palms stung. Whoever had planted the Hollow in the Chimney Run had nearly killed me with it. Tonight, more of those crystals had drained the fire that powered my sleigh.

Even if I sealed my remaining Bonds and mastered every mile of the route, I couldn’t complete the Trial without enough Cheer to leave the ground.

I looked at Kris. “How long until the Trial?”

“Nineteen days.”

Paloma’s fingers curled. One of the flames guttered, but she lowered her hands and coaxed it upright again.

“Can the Hearth recover by then?” I asked.

Kris looked across the basin at Marta.

“We won’t know until we measure what remains,” she said. “Tonight, we’re just trying to keep it alive.”

I had to wonder if Krampus had planned exactly this when he stopped attacking on Krampusnacht all those years ago. Maybe he’d just been biding his time, waiting for the Academy’s guard to slip. I hated to think that one mistake could be the end of Christmas itself.

As I stood close enough to lay my hand on the iron rim, the fire barely warmed my face. I was forced to consider the fact that my work at Northstar had somehow made this possible. That my work at that horrible, corporate cesspit hadn’t just ruined the holiday season for me, but for the entire world.

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Chapter 16



A Coaler entered the Hearth chamber with snow on her boots and a folded paper in one hand. She crossed directly to Agathe and spoke too quietly for me to hear over the valves and the low rush of the fire.

Agathe read the message. Her eyes lifted to mine.

“Miss Bea is missing.”

Paloma’s hands remained above the basin. The weak flames trembled beneath her palms, and alarm flickered through our Bond.

“When did anyone last see her?” I asked.

“Shortly before the attack. A Coaler is searching her rooms now.” Agathe folded the paper and passed it back. “Tobiah has been detained. Once I have examined Miss Bea’s rooms, I intend to question him about the transfers he approved.”

She looked at the bandages around my hands.

“You will come with me, if you don’t mind, Mr. Crispin. We may need your expertise. Tobiah knows how to make his ledgers appear complete, but you understand what must physically happen between an import entering the warehouse and its contents reaching the receiving hall. I want you to listen for anything in his account that does not make sense. Paloma, as his healer and his Bond, do you feel this is acceptable?”

Paloma lowered one hand from the fire. “His injuries shouldn’t prevent that. The healing is already working. Rest would help it work faster, but walking and examining records won’t make his hands or shoulder worse.”

“What should he avoid?” Agathe asked. “I don’t want to take any risks of further injury before the Big Night.”

“Lifting anything heavy, forcing the shoulder, or putting pressure on his palms.”

“I’ll be careful,” I promised.

Paloma touched the bandage around my right hand. “If the pain becomes worse, please stop and come back to see me.”

“You’ve got it,” I said, then I bent to whisper in her ear. “And even if it doesn’t, I’ll come back to see you as soon as we’re done. You and I have some unfinished business to attend to.”

She blushed deeply.

I kissed her forehead before following Agathe toward the stairs. Paloma returned both hands to the failing fire.



Two Coalers guarded the Passage House corridor. Students in nightclothes and winter coats crowded the far end. They whispered among themselves while an instructor tried to herd them downstairs. Bea’s door stood open.

The bed was made, her Academy books were stacked by subject, and three uniforms hung in the wardrobe with equal space between them. A washbasin stood dry beside the window. The desk was bare.

The Coaler inside the room pointed to an empty space at the bottom of the wardrobe. “Her travel case is gone. So are her outdoor boots and Passage coat. The student across the corridor saw her carrying the case shortly before the alarm.”

“She packed before the attack,” I said. “And she left nothing behind that could tell us where she was going.”

Agathe opened the desk drawers. Paper, sealing wax, and spare pen nibs filled the first two. The bottom drawer held neatly folded route maps of Austria and the neighboring mountain regions.

“No Hollow?” I asked.

“None that we can detect,” the Coaler said. “We found no correspondence either.”

Quick footsteps approached behind us. Rin slipped between the guards before either could stop her. Dried blood still marked the side of her face, and her short black hair was mussed by the wind.

“She’s gone.” Rin gripped the edge of the door. “I can’t find her anywhere.”

“You were instructed to watch the exits,” Agathe said.

“I did. No one crossed a gate or an outer wall after I started watching.” Rin looked at me instead of Agathe. “She was already outside, or she carried enough Hollow to hide herself from me.”

“Could she have left through the receiving hall?” I asked.

Agathe’s gaze sharpened.

The hall had disappeared from Sight before Rin raised the alarm. Bea could have entered that blind area while the Perchten waited inside, then used Passage to slip through the receiving hall’s locked exterior doors without appearing anywhere Rin could see.

Rin’s fingernails scratched the wood. “She crawled into the hole she made in my Sight while I was watching you. I should have been watching her too.” Her grip tightened. “I hate her.”

“You found the attack before anyone else and warned us in time to save the Hearth,” I said. “You did exactly what we needed.”

“And she still got away.”

“So don’t waste your strength trying to see through the Hollow. Watch the ground around the blind area instead, like you did with the Northstar building in Cedar Falls. If the part you can’t see starts moving, follow it.”

Rin turned toward me. “Interesting. You think I could stalk her this way, even though she’s invisible?”

“Would it work?”

“I’ll try it for you, baby.” She released the door and climbed onto Bea’s desk, crouching among the neatly stacked books. “And when I find her…”

“You will report her location and wait for the Coalers,” Agathe said. “You will not approach her yourself.”

Rin tilted her head. “Can I watch when they catch her?”

“You may watch. You may not interfere.”

“I can work with that.” Rin settled more comfortably on Bea’s desk and turned her attention toward the window.

Before Agathe could resume the search, one of the guards stepped into the room.

“Dame Agathe, the Bursar has asked to speak with you. He says he knows who Miss Bea is and where she may be going.”



Tobiah sat on a narrow bench behind iron bars. His dark coat had lost two buttons, and his gray hair no longer lay neatly against his head. He stood when Agathe brought me into the cell room.

“Why is the candidate here?” he asked sourly.

“Because I asked him to be,” Agathe said. “You concealed the shipments inside import and transfer records. Mr. Crispin understands how those records should correspond to the actual movement of goods. You will answer both of us.”

Tobiah gripped the bars. “You have to warn the Austrian line. She’ll return to her father.”

“Who is her father?” I asked.

Tobiah’s fingers tightened around the bars. He looked past Agathe toward the locked door and the Coaler stationed beside it.

“If I answer that, you’ll either call me a liar or understand that no cell in this Academy can protect me.”

“You requested this interview,” Agathe said. “Cooperation may improve your position. Refusing to answer will not.”

Tobiah removed his spectacles and wiped them on the front of his coat. His hand shook hard enough to smear the glass rather than clean it.

“Krampus.”

Agathe’s expression hardened. “Krampus has no daughter.”

“He does. Bea.”

“What makes you certain?”

“When the racing harness failed, I refused to authorize another import for her. She came to my office, locked the door, and let her elven glamour fall.” Tobiah put his spectacles back on. “I saw the horns beneath it. Then she told me whose daughter I had been helping.”

Agathe moved closer to the cell. “Who was her mother?”

Tobiah stepped back until his leg struck the narrow bench.

“Frau Perchta.”

Agathe closed one hand around a bar. “Frau Perchta died without an heir.”

“That is what Krampus wanted the Pole to believe. Frau Perchta had a daughter, and Krampus concealed her until she was old enough to enter the Academy.”

“How did he place a Perchten inside an elven Passage line?”

“Her enrollment file identified her as a member of the line responsible for the Austrian mountain routes. The line was real, but Krampus forged the records that connected Bea to it. He prepared her identity years before she applied.”

“And no one questioned the records?” I asked.

“Why would they? The seals were valid, and Bea knew the routes, transfer points, and regional customs better than most of her instructors. Every examination she passed made the file appear more credible.”

The cover had worked because most of it was true. Bea knew Austria because she had grown up among the creatures who haunted its mountains.

“So the princess act wasn’t an act,” I said.

Agathe shook her head. “No. If she succeeds her mother, she will become the next Frau Perchta.”

“She looked like an elf, though,” I said. “And I watched her channel real Cheer.”

“A daughter of Frau Perchta could maintain an elven glamour,” Agathe said. “Krampus can still channel Cheer despite what the Hollow has done to him. Bea may have inherited both kinds of magic.”

Agathe turned toward the Coaler beside the door. “Send a warning to the Austrian line. They are to report any sign of Bea or concealed Hollow and wait for the Coalers before approaching her.”

The guard opened the door long enough to relay the order to someone in the corridor, then returned to her post.

I stepped nearer to the bars. “You said you refused another import after the racing harness failed. Did you know what she had put in it?”

“Not before the race. She paid me to approve one sealed import as repair compound. No supplier, no itemized contents, no receiving signature. I knew it violated every procedure in my office, but I told myself one crate could do no harm.”

“You also gave her access to the warehouse,” Agathe said.

“Only to collect what she had imported.”

“That isn’t what the records show,” I said. “If she collected the sealed crate herself, it would have left the warehouse under a single release. Instead, material from that crate appeared in a Flight House repair order. Someone received the shipment into inventory, divided its contents, and issued them under separate records.”

Tobiah dropped his gaze to the floor.

“You did that,” Agathe said.

“When the sleigh crashed, I understood what must have been inside the compound,” he said. “I confronted her.”

He rubbed both hands over his face. “She told me who she was. She said if I exposed her, every altered page would lead back to my stamp. I would be blamed for the Hollow and the attack on the candidate. If I continued helping her, she promised I would have a place in her mother’s court when it was restored.”

“So you kept helping her,” I said.

Tobiah lowered his head. “I was already guilty.”

Agathe stepped closer until the toes of her boots touched the bars. “And every record you altered afterward was another choice. Where did the shipments go?”

Tobiah crossed back to the bars and wrapped one hand around them. “Flight House, the Practice Village, the Workshop warehouses, and the Academy receivers.”

“What did Bea send to those locations?” I asked.

“Hollow concealed inside materials ordered for legitimate repairs. She chose fittings, joint compounds, and replacement parts that would be installed in equipment connected to the Hearth.” Tobiah adjusted his spectacles. Once he began describing the records, his voice steadied. “The quantities were small enough to pass an ordinary inspection.”

The gauge beneath the Hearth flashed through my mind, with its needle resting below the silver line.

“The Hollow couldn’t consume anything while it was sitting in a crate,” I said. “The drain began after someone installed it and the equipment drew Cheer from the Hearth.”

“Yes,” Tobiah said. “Each contaminated repair consumed a small amount whenever the equipment was used. Bea believed the losses would be mistaken for ordinary demand.”

Agathe released the bar and faced him squarely. “Then why attack the receiver?”

“The smaller drains weren’t weakening the Hearth quickly enough. The Perchten forced the receiver to remain fully open so it would draw as much Cheer as the supply line could carry. Bea intended to bring the reserve below the level required for the Trial.”

“She probably expected one of the earlier attacks to kill me,” I said. “The receiver was her backup. If I survived, I still wouldn’t have enough Cheer to complete the route.”

Tobiah raised his eyes to mine. “That was the plan. I’m sorry, young man.”

My hands tightened at my sides. The torn skin pulled beneath the bandages, and I forced my fingers open again.

Agathe extended her hand toward the Coaler stationed beside the door. The woman removed a ring of iron keys from her belt and placed it in Agathe’s palm.

Agathe unlocked the cell. Tobiah backed away until the narrow bench pressed against his legs.

“You are not being released,” Agathe said. “You are going to the Bursar’s office under guard. You will show Mr. Crispin every altered import record, identify the shipment connected to it, and tell him where the material was installed.”

“Once we match the shipments to the repair orders, we can shut down the affected equipment, remove the Hollow, and replace the contaminated parts,” I said. “Until then, every one of those repairs could keep draining the Hearth whenever it draws Cheer.”

Tobiah looked toward the door. “I’ll need my ledgers. The import entries are cross-referenced with the receiving and transfer records.”

“You will have access to whatever Mr. Crispin requires,” Agathe said.

The Coaler opened the barred door and entered the cell. Tobiah held out his wrists without being asked.

He glanced at me as the Coaler fastened an iron restraint around them. “There are hundreds of entries. If Bea removed a record entirely, you may not know it ever existed.”

“The import numbers are sequential,” I said. “A missing entry will leave a gap. If she reused a number or changed the destination, it won’t match the receiving logs, repair orders, or warehouse inventory.”

Tobiah’s mouth thinned. “That comparison could take days.”

“Then you can save us time by showing me where to start,” I said.

Agathe returned the keys to the guard. “If Mr. Crispin finds a shipment you chose not to identify, your cooperation ends there.”



We took the records to Liesl’s shop because her largest worktable gave us enough room to spread them out. She had already returned from the receiving hall. A clean bandage covered her palm, and she held a pencil awkwardly between her first two fingers.

Tobiah stood at the end of the table with a Coaler on either side. He separated the register for materials imported from Earth from the Academy transfer ledgers.

Every falsified import had the same omissions as the first crate. The contents were listed only as repair materials or replacement fittings. None named a supplier or carried a proper receiving signature. Tobiah had used his red stamp to authorize each shipment, then divided the contents among smaller work orders after they entered the warehouse.

Liesl pulled one work order from the stack and tapped the destination with her pencil. “This shipment supplied receiver brackets in the southern warehouse.”

“Does that receiver draw Cheer when the door is closed?” I asked.

“All the time,” Liesl said. “It remains connected to the Hearth so it’s ready whenever a transfer arrives.”

I circled the entry. “That comes out first.”

Two more work orders accounted for Hollow we had already found: the compound used in the lead racing harness and the material worked into the damaged Practice Village chimney. I marked both as recovered. The next page sent brass couplings into the Workshop’s sorting equipment.

Marta arrived from the Hearth chamber while we were still tracing that shipment. A Hearth Keeper followed her into the shop with the latest gauge reading, and two Workshop runners waited beside the door.

Marta read the gauge slip and placed it beside our circled work orders. “Paloma and the Hearth Keepers are holding the fire steady, but it won’t recover while the smaller drains remain. I have shutdown crews waiting. Tell me where to send them first.”

At Northstar, assembling those crews would have required layers of approval from people who didn’t know where the loading bays were. Marta had them ready before we finished tracing the first shipment.

“Stop every receiver and piece of equipment connected to one of these work orders,” I said. “Shutting them down stops the Hollow from drawing more Cheer while we remove it. Start with anything that stays connected to the Hearth all night. Training equipment can wait until the live channels are isolated.”

“I can stop the warehouse receivers immediately,” Marta said. “Some of the Workshop sorting lines share a Cheer supply. Isolating one suspect coupling may shut down an entire section.”

“Then shut down the section,” I said. “Tell the foremen that nothing connected to a contaminated repair runs until we remove the Hollow.”

She nodded once. “What else?”

I looked at the work orders covering the table. We could identify the original destinations, but not every later repair that might have reused the same parts.

“Send Craft teams to each location to compare the maker’s marks against the work-order dates,” I said. “No one channels Cheer into a suspect fitting. The teams remove the parts mechanically, secure them beneath the iron mesh covers of containment sledges, and turn them over to the Coalers.”

Liesl tapped the damaged receiver sketch she had brought from the hall. “I’ll show them how to isolate the channels before they loosen anything.”

“Can you do that without opening your hand again?”

She shifted the pencil between her fingers. “I can explain it. Other people can turn the tools.”

Marta pointed to the uncircled entries. “How will we know when we have all of them?”

“These quantities are too precise to be guesses,” I said. I turned one of the work orders toward Tobiah. “You divided every shipment among several repairs, which meant you needed to keep track of how much material remained after each order.”

Tobiah stared at the figures he had written.

“You kept the false imports out of the official supplier totals,” I continued, “but you still needed a private inventory that showed the real quantities. Where is that ledger?”

Tobiah looked toward the Coalers.

“In my office,” he said. “There is a narrow ledger beneath the bottom drawer of the map cabinet.”

Agathe, who had remained beside the door, sent one of the guards to retrieve it.

Marta’s gaze stayed on me. “Once we have that ledger?”

“We compare the hidden ledger against everything the teams recover,” I said. “Anything already installed comes out. Anything still in storage remains sealed in iron. Once the amount we recover matches the full amount Bea imported, we check the Hearth again. If it’s still losing strength, she brought Hollow inside through another route.”

Marta began issuing orders before I finished speaking. Runners left for the Workshop, Flight House, and the warehouses. Agathe sent Coalers with each group. Liesl pulled fresh paper toward her and drew the safe order for disconnecting the first receiver brackets.

Rin rejoined us in Liesl’s shop and perched on the end of a high workbench, with her boots on a lower shelf. Her dark eyes lost focus as she checked the teams inside the Academy, then searched the visible ground around the receiving hall and beyond the walls for any moving gap in her Sight. I couldn’t see any of what she saw, but I sensed her concentration through our open Bond. Each search that failed to find Bea brought a fresh pulse of anger.

“The southern warehouse has stopped its receiver,” she said. “The Craft team is opening the access plate now.”

“Tell me if anyone channels magic near it,” I said.

Rin’s attention returned to me. Warmth pulsed through our Bond, and one corner of her mouth lifted.

Before she could respond, the shop door opened. Britta entered with snow across the shoulders of her blue Flight House coat.

“Flight House has grounded every training sleigh,” she said. “Fennick is checking the harness work orders now. Where else do you need me?”

Marta gave her a stack of orders for the Workshop teams. Rin’s gaze traveled from Britta to Liesl, then returned to me. Her smile slowly widened.

“Mmm, baby,” she said. “I like watching you tell everyone what to do.”

“Focus,” I said.

“I am focused.” She slipped down from the bench and leaned close enough that only I could hear her next words. “When you finally fuck me and seal Sight, I want them watching too. Britta, Liesl, and Paloma. I’ve been thinking about it since I watched you with Britta.”

Heat surged through our Bond. Rin shivered when she felt it and pressed her thighs together.

“As amazing as that sounds, Rin,” I said, “we are not discussing it while Christmas is running out of power.”

“Later, then.” She kissed the edge of the bandage around my palm and returned to the workbench before I could answer. The pleasure inside our Bond remained, but her gaze lost focus again as she returned to Sight.

Liesl looked up from her drawing, meeting my eyes with a curious gaze. “What did she say?”

“We’ll talk about it later,” I said, shaking my head. “It has nothing to do with what we’re doing now.”

Rin giggled from the workbench, obviously still listening even if her eyes were focused somewhere else. Britta gave both of us a suspicious look, but Marta pushed another stack of orders into her hands before she could ask.

The Coaler returned with Tobiah’s hidden ledger. Its narrow pages listed the true quantities from every false import. I placed it beside the work orders and started matching the remaining parts.

We were halfway through the first shipment when Rin straightened.

“They found Hollow,” Rin said.

A few minutes later, two Craft students pulled an iron sledge into Liesl’s shop while a Coaler walked beside it. A brass receiver bracket lay beneath the closed mesh cover. Gray crystals packed the screw holes and the groove where Cheer had passed through the metal. Cold spread from it across the floor.

Liesl reached for my right hand. Our Craft Bond heated between our fingers, but the warmth faded when I stepped closer to the sledge. A messenger hurried into the shop from the Hearth chamber.

“The red needle moved,” she said. “Only a little, but it rose when the warehouse disconnected that receiver.”

Marta took the next page from the stack and called for another team. Outside, the Coalers pulled the first loaded sledge toward the bare ice beyond the Workshop. Another empty sledge already waited beside the shop door.

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Chapter 17



The last contaminated fitting left the Workshop nine days before my Trial, and the red needle still hadn’t reached the silver line.

Two Coalers pulled the covered sledge away from the sorting hall while the Craft team disconnected their tools. The contaminated coupling beneath the iron mesh looked no different from the others we had removed, except for the gray crystals packed inside its channel and the frost spreading across the metal.

I marked the final quantity in Tobiah’s hidden ledger. Every false import now balanced against something we had recovered from a warehouse, receiver, harness, or repair site. Nothing remained unaccounted for.

“That’s all of it,” I said.

Liesl checked my figures from the other side of the worktable. Her palm had healed enough that she no longer needed a bandage, although a thin red line remained across the skin. “Are you sure?”

“Yup. I’ve checked it all multiple times. Every shipment balances.”

Tobiah had confirmed the same thing from his cell. Agathe had kept him under guard and made him go through the records again after we finished, but he hadn’t identified another shipment or destination.

The smaller drains had stopped. The Hearth had begun recovering as soon as the crews disconnected the contaminated equipment, and every part we removed allowed the Hearth Keepers to reopen another section of the Workshop. Flight House had its training equipment back. The receivers were operating again under constant supervision. Even the sorting lines had resumed moving gifts through the warehouses.

The red needle had risen steadily for several days before stopping just short of the silver mark.

Once the Craft team finished securing the fitting, Liesl and I went down to the Hearth chamber. Marta stood beside the wall gauge with both hands folded beneath her apron.

The fire burned higher than it had after the attack, but it no longer filled the iron basin. Dark gaps remained between the red-gold flames.

“The reserve is stable,” she said. “Ordinary use and ordinary accumulation are nearly equal again. We are no longer losing Cheer.”

“But we’re not gaining enough,” I said.

“Not before your Trial.” Marta looked at the narrow space between the needle and the silver line. “We’ve removed everything Bea brought into the network. The Hearth needs more Cheer than the normal flow can provide in nine days.”

Kris rubbed one hand over his beard. He had spent most of the cleanup moving between the Hearth and Workshop, but he still looked exhausted. “We can postpone lessons and reduce power to the village again.”

“That would preserve what we have,” Marta said. “But it won’t replace what was lost.”

“We could cancel the remaining Reindeer Games,” I suggested. “Ground every training sleigh and stop anything that isn’t directly connected to the Trial.”

“Already done,” Agathe said from behind me.

She entered the chamber with Paloma beside her. Several elves followed them down the stairs. I recognized instructors and senior members from Flight, Craft, and the Hall of Lists. More waited on the steps behind them, wearing the colors of guilds I had barely encountered.

Paloma held a folded sheet against her chest. Her dark hair had been tied back, and nervous heat moved through our open Bond.

“But we may have another source,” she said.

Marta looked from Paloma to the elves crowding the stairway. “What source?”

“The village Posada.”

Marta’s attention returned to Paloma.

“They came to me,” Paloma said. “I’ve spent years asking the guilds to restore it, but this time, they were the ones who asked me to lead the

procession. Every hall along the old route has agreed to open its doors tonight.”

“And the Academy?” Marta asked.

Paloma glanced back at Agathe. “They want the Academy to take its place in the procession again. They’ve submitted a formal request for the students and instructors to participate and for the ninth door to be opened.”

Agathe stepped up beside her. “I have approved the request. The Academy will participate, and we will open the ninth door.”

Relief and joy rushed through my Bond with Paloma. Behind her, the waiting elves began to cheer.

I looked at Paloma. “You did it.”

Paloma smoothed one thumb across the folded paper. “I kept getting almost enough. One guild would offer food, another would promise singers, and everyone said they would open their halls if the Academy opened the final door. When it didn’t, the rest backed out.”

“Not tonight,” the Flight instructor said. “We’ll have our hall ready before the procession reaches us.”

Liesl nodded. “The Toymakers have already started cooking.”

Other voices answered from the stairs as the remaining guilds offered their support. With each agreement, some of the nervousness eased through my Bond with Paloma. She kept her attention on Agathe, but excitement gathered beneath it.

Agathe waited until the chamber quieted. “The final welcome traditionally belongs to the candidate. Mr. Crispin should decide whether he still wants that place.”

“The Posada isn’t cursed,” Kris said. “I opened the ninth door, and I survived. But every time another candidate died, fewer people joined the next year. The procession raised less Cheer, and eventually people began to treat the welcome as if it invited bad luck.” He looked at the guild representatives gathered on the stairs. “If the village is ready to put that fear aside, I would be glad to see it return.” He looked at me. “But the choice is yours, Cole.”

Through our Bond, I felt how badly Paloma wanted me to say yes and how hard she was trying not to influence my answer. I could already imagine her leading the procession she loved. I wanted to see that moment from beside her, not from a doorway at the end.

“I agreed to take part when Paloma first told me about the Posada,” I said. “But I’m not sure I want to open the door.”

Paloma’s expression wilted. “You changed your mind?”

“Yes,” I said, willing my emotion through our Bond so she wouldn’t worry. “But not because I am worried that the tradition is bad luck. I just… want to experience the whole thing. You’ve put so much work into it, Paloma. I want to walk the route with you.”

“Oh!” She beamed again. “I would love that. But… we’ll need someone else to open the door.”

Kris smiled beneath his mustache. “It’s been a hundred years or so, but I believe I remember how.”

Paloma’s surprise warmed into happiness inside our Bond.

Agathe looked from Kris to the guild representatives. “Very well. Mr. Crispin will accompany the procession. Kris will receive you at the ninth door, and the Academy will participate.”

Paloma stared at me for a moment before her fingers closed tightly around mine. Her happiness came through the Bond so strongly that I couldn’t stop smiling.

“Oh, I can’t wait!” she said. “The kitchens have already started cooking, every hall has its part of the route, the lanterns are waiting… It’s going to be so wonderful, Cole! We can begin tonight.”

Marta walked around the basin and took Paloma’s hand. “This is an excellent idea, child,” she said. “I hope you will lead it for us.”

“I would be honored to.” Paloma looked toward the low fire. “I just hope it will help as much as I think it will.”

Marta looked from Paloma to the guild representatives filling the stairway. “I haven’t seen this many people excited about the Posada in years. If the procession once filled the Hearth, perhaps it can do so again.”

The guild representatives began discussing the remaining preparations before Marta finished speaking. Paloma’s happiness remained strong through our Bond, and my own excitement rose with it. I had never seen a Posada, but I wanted to see hers.

I squeezed her hand. “Tell me where to start.”

“Come with me,” she said. “We have a lot to finish before tonight.”



Paloma met me outside the Hearth Guild after the lanterns were lit.

She wore a red skirt beneath a white blouse embroidered with green leaves and flowers. A dark green shawl covered her shoulders. The fabric crossed over her heavy breasts and tied at her waist, although it did very little to conceal the curves beneath it.

I had seen Paloma naked and still had trouble looking away.

Her cheeks warmed when she caught me staring. “Do I look all right?”

“You look beautiful.”

The answer made her smile. She held out a candle lantern, and I took it carefully in one hand.

The cuts across my palms had closed, and my shoulder no longer hurt unless I pushed it too far. Paloma had checked all three injuries multiple times a day, which I was beginning to suspect was just an excuse to get my shirt off, but I wasn’t complaining.

Nine Hearth elves waited behind her in ceremonial clothing, each carrying a lantern. The rest of the procession filled the road. Students, instructors, Workshop families, and guild members stood together beneath strings of

colored lights. Some carried covered dishes or baskets of bread. Others held candles protected by glass globes.

The first notes of a song rose from the back of the crowd.

Paloma looked over her shoulder. Her lips parted when she saw how many people had gathered.

“I thought each guild would send one or two representatives,” she said. “It looks like the whole village is here!”

I looked at the elves filling the road. “Apparently they all wanted to see your Posada for themselves.”

She laughed softly and reached for my hand. We started down the road together.

The first door belonged to the Toymakers’ Hall. Liesl waited on the steps with a wooden lantern hanging above her red hair.

Paloma raised her voice for the first request.

“Through the cold and dark we roam.Will you share your fire and home?”

The procession repeated the words behind her. Voices answered from beyond the closed doors.

“Our fire is low, our rooms are small.You must seek shelter at the next hall.”

Liesl’s smile made it impossible to believe she would turn away anyone.

When the verse ended, the doors opened behind her. Toymakers poured into the road with wheeled trays full of carved ornaments, warm drinks, and small toys for the village children. Liesl fell in behind us, and several apprentices rolled the trays into the growing procession.

Flight House refused us next.

Britta stood in front of the closed barn doors with Fennick and a row of Flight students behind her. She delivered the refusal so firmly that several of the Hearth elves faltered in the next verse.

“You’re supposed to sound reluctant,” Paloma told her.

“They asked whether there was room,” Britta replied. “There isn’t. The reindeer have the barn.”

Fennick struck the doors behind her with one fist. They opened to reveal Flight House students holding bells, blue lanterns, and evergreen branches. Britta stepped down and fell in beside Liesl.

“I don’t see what the problem is,” she said. “I was perfectly convincing.”

“You sounded ready to have us removed from the property.”

“Then I did it correctly.”

At the Hall of Lists, Rin opened a viewing pane in the middle of the door rather than appearing in person. Her dark eyes filled the glowing rectangle.

“I watched you leave Hearth House,” she told Paloma. “I already know who you are and what you want.”

“You still have to give the response,” Paloma said.

Rin sighed. “There is no room for you here.”

Her eyes shifted toward me.

“There would be room for Cole, but only in my bed.”

The List-Keepers behind the door groaned in unison.

“Rin,” I said.

Her eyes crinkled with a smile, and she closed the pane.

The doors opened a moment later. Rin joined the procession with a candle in one hand and immediately placed herself on my other side.

“You look very handsome carrying that lantern, baby. It makes me want to do sexy things to you.”

“Behave yourself,” I warned. “This is important.”

“I am behaving myself,” she insisted in a whisper. “Or you’d be naked right now and I’d have your cock in my mouth.”

I tried to ignore the effect her words and the desire I felt through our Bond had on the body part in question. She grinned at me, knowing exactly what I was feeling. But she didn’t try anything else.

We crossed another section of the village before reaching Passage House. A tall woman in a fitted black coat waited alone in front of the red doors. Her dark hair had been pulled into a tight knot, and a weighted sash circled her narrow waist. She stood completely still until Paloma finished the request.

Then she gave the refusal in a low, serious voice.

The Passage House doors remained closed.

I glanced at Paloma. “Is that supposed to happen?”

“She’ll open them.”

The woman stepped backward through the solid door and disappeared.

A second later, the doors swung outward without anyone visible near them. Passage students streamed into the road. I searched for the dark-haired woman until I discovered her walking on the opposite side of the procession.

She caught me looking at her.

Then she stepped into the open doorway of the nearest cottage and vanished again.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“Anneke,” Paloma said. “She’s one of Passage House’s best senior students.”

I kept looking at the place where Anneke had stood. She was beautiful, and the calm, assessing way she had watched me made me curious. I hadn’t been able to tell what she thought of me, and I wanted another chance to find out.

“Will I see her again?” I asked.

“If Anneke wants to be seen,” Paloma said.

I wasn’t sure whether that meant yes. I hoped it did.

Paloma hid a smile behind her hand. “She is stunning, isn’t she? In a scary kind of way.”

Rin narrowed her eyes. “Don’t encourage him when he hasn’t sealed our bonds yet.”

“Is that your only complaint?” I asked. “You aren’t going to threaten to kill her because I think she’s cute?”

“Anneke is powerful enough to be an acceptable Bond,” Rin said. “But *I* am going to be the scary one, one way or another.”

Wonder House had covered its entrance with enough ribbons, garlands, and silver tinsel to decorate an entire Northstar store. The front doors stood beneath a gold arch strung with small bells. Students in yellow coats waited along the steps while Paloma led the next verse.

A loose red ribbon fluttered from the arch.

One of the students launched herself over the railing.

She caught the ribbon in both hands and landed in a crouch near my boots. Warm brown hair spilled across her face. A pair of light-brown cat ears rose through it, with white fur covering the tips. A long tail snapped behind her, also white at the end.

The ribbon remained clenched between her teeth.

She raised her face and looked directly at me.

Her golden-hazel eyes had narrow pupils. She was gorgeous, with a pretty face, full lips, and a curvy body that filled the yellow Wonder House uniform in several interesting places. The cat ears should have made her look cute. The way she watched me made me wonder whether I had become part of the game.

“Kisa,” one of the Wonder students said. “Drop it.”

Kisa’s ears flattened.

The student held out her hand. “We practiced this.”

Kisa slowly removed the ribbon from her mouth and surrendered it. “I couldn’t help it. It moved.”

“That is what ribbons do.”

“I caught it fair and square.”

Several Wonder students had thin scratches across their gloves and coat sleeves. All of them gave Kisa plenty of room as she stood.

Her gaze remained on me. She took one step closer and sniffed.

“Uh, hello,” I said.

Kisa’s tail curved behind her. “You smell like reindeer.”

“Is that good?”

“Better to smell of cat.”

The bells above the door rang when someone moved inside. Kisa startled and spun toward the sound with her fingers spread. Her nails had lengthened into sharp claws.

The Wonder students stepped back.

Kisa lowered her hands. The claws withdrew.

“Don’t scare me like that!” she hissed. “No one wants to be scratched, but you’re always trying to scare me!”

Paloma gently caught my sleeve and guided me back into position. “Kisa was practicing a transformation glamour several years ago. Something went wrong, and parts of the spell never released.”

“The cat parts?”

“It wouldn’t be so bad if it was just the physical changes,” Paloma said. “But it affected her behavior too. She can be a little… temperamental.”

Kisa returned to the steps and delivered Wonder House’s refusal without looking away from me. When the doors opened, she fell into the procession behind us.

Kisa had pulled a strand of tinsel loose and was lifting it toward her mouth when a yellow-coated instructor took it away. The catgirl’s ears flattened and she hissed, taking a swipe at the instructor with her claws. Fortunately, the woman backed away in time to avoid a swat. It was clear she was used to this kind of thing from the catgirl, but the expression on her face said she was more than a little tired of it.

I was busy thinking about what it would feel like to scratch her between the ears, or on top of her tail. Or if she might be the kind of kitty who liked tummy rubs, and how badly I’d get clawed if I tried.

By the time we reached the eighth door, the procession filled the road. Music traveled through the village ahead of us. Every hall had added something: food, lanterns, bells, candles, evergreen branches, or another group of singers.

The Academy waited at the top of the road, as the final destination.

Light shone through its windows, but the tall front doors were closed. Holly, Professor Bell, Noelle, and several other instructors stood along the steps. Agathe waited at the center.

The nine lantern bearers formed a line in front of the Academy. The rest of the village crowded behind us.

The ninth door stood closed at the top of the steps. Paloma tightened her fingers around mine. Through our Bond, I felt her excitement sharpen with nervousness.

“Ready?” I asked.

Paloma drew a breath and repeated the request she’d made at every other door along our route.

“Through the cold and dark we roam.Will you share your fire and home?”

The procession joined her on the final line. For a moment, the ninth door remained closed.

Then Kris answered from inside.

“Come through the door. Your journey ends.Our hearth and home are yours, my friends.”

The Academy doors opened.

Kris stood inside wearing his red coat. A broad black belt crossed his round belly, and his white beard covered most of the fur-trimmed front. Marta waited beside him.

Until then, I had concentrated on forming my Bonds and surviving one Trial at a time. Seeing Kris dressed for the procession forced me to imagine what earning the coat would actually mean. Someday, I was expected to take his place.

For a moment, I couldn't picture it. I had no belly, no beard, and only a few weeks of experience with a sleigh. Children had believed in that face for more than a hundred years. What would they see when they looked at mine?

I hoped there was a glamour that could give me the look until I'd had time to grow into it naturally.

Paloma squeezed my hand.

Kris descended one step and held out his hand to Paloma.

"The Academy has room for everyone who seeks shelter," he said. "Come inside."

Paloma's lantern trembled in her hand. She climbed the first step and accepted Kris's outstretched hand.

He looked past her to me.

"It has been a long time since I have had the pleasure of opening the final door of the Posada," Kris said. "I'm glad to welcome you, Cole. You've given this Academy a great deal to hope for."

He extended his other hand to me.

“Please come inside.”

Warmth spread through my chest before I touched him. The open Hearth Bond carried Paloma’s happiness into me, but something else moved beneath it. The fire below the Workshop stirred.

I climbed the steps and took Kris’s hand.

He pulled me through the doorway, then released me and stepped aside. I caught the heavy door before it could swing back.

Paloma looked at me from inside the Academy.

I held the door open while the lantern bearers entered. The procession followed them. Liesl crossed first and squeezed my arm. Britta gave me an approving nod. Rin kissed my cheek and whispered something naughty as she passed.

I didn’t catch Anneke as she crossed the threshold, but I saw her at the edge of the group inside, as if she had used magic to get past me. And as a Passage student, it was entirely possible she had.

Kisa stopped in front of me. Her pupils narrowed as she examined my face, then she sniffed my coat again. She curled her lip and sneered.

“Reindeer stink,” she said. “I’ll fix that.”

Then she darted after the Wonder students with her tail puffed up into a fuzzy brown bottle brush. I had to admit I was curious about getting to know her, and the mysterious Anneke, provided I survived my First Trial.

As the last people in the procession crossed the threshold, music filled the entrance hall. Hearth students carried food toward the dining room, and long tables had been arranged beneath the garlands. Someone began passing cups of hot punch through the crowd.

Paloma turned to me as I closed the door. Her cheeks were still flushed from the cold and excitement.

“More people joined at every hall,” she said. “I could feel the Cheer reaching the Hearth before we were halfway through the route. By the time Kris opened the ninth door, it was stronger than I ever expected.”

I pulled her against me. “You brought the Posada back.”

“*We* brought it back,” she said.

Heat rushed through our Bond.

Warmth surged through the Academy floor and spread into the walls. Every candle flame lifted at once, and a cheer rose from the people in the entrance hall.

Kris turned toward Marta. “Was that the Hearth?”

“I believe so.”

“Huh,” he said. “That was stronger than I remember.”

A Hearth Keeper pushed through the crowd several minutes later. She carried a gauge slip in one hand and had run hard enough that her braid was coming loose.

“Marta,” she called. “The needle crossed the line, and it’s still climbing!”

The entrance hall erupted.

Paloma covered her mouth. I lifted her from the floor and hugged her until she laughed against my shoulder.

“That gives us enough reserve to support the Trial route,” Marta said. “As long as it continues to rise and we find no further drains, that is.”

Kris accepted the slip and examined it.

“Then I believe Mr. Crispin should know where he is going,” Agathe said.

The crowd nearest us quieted.

Kris folded the paper. “A candidate’s First Trial takes place in the district he knows best. Familiar roads, familiar towns, and familiar people usually make the first route safer.”

“Usually,” I repeated. “Why does that sound like a big red flag?”

“Your home district contains the largest concentration of Hollow we have ever found around an active Northstar location,” Kris said. “You will be running Cedar Falls, Minnesota.”

For a moment I pictured the town around me instead of the Academy. The Northstar store with its huge red banner. The streets I had driven since I was a teenager. The empty land where my parents’ tree farm had once stood.

“Good,” I said.

Kris raised his eyebrows. “Good?”

“If running the route creates Cheer, that’s where I want to do it. Northstar has taken enough from Cedar Falls. I’d like the chance to give the town something back.”

“You understand the Hollow will make your Trial more dangerous.”

“Then it’s a good thing I know exactly where Northstar keeps screwing up the traffic.”

Kris laughed. “We’ll review the route tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I agreed.

Paloma’s body remained pressed against my side. Her cheeks were still flushed from the celebration, and her full breasts rose beneath the embroidered blouse with every breath.

I remembered another promise I had made.

Marta was directing the Hearth Keeper toward Agathe when I caught her attention.

“Can you manage without Paloma for a while?”

Marta looked from me to Paloma. Understanding appeared in her expression.

“The Hearth survived the last several days because she helped us stabilize it,” she said. “But I think we can manage the rest of tonight.”

Paloma’s eyes widened. “There’s still the feast. I should help serve.”

“The kitchens are full of volunteers,” Marta said. “Go. You deserve a break.”

I bent and put one arm behind Paloma’s back. My other slid beneath her knees.

“Cole—”

I lifted her against my chest.

Paloma squealed and caught both arms around my neck. The people around us laughed and moved out of the way.

“We have unfinished business,” I said.

Her blush spread down her throat. “You don’t have to carry me.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I don’t. But that’s not going to stop me.”

She buried her face against my shoulder, but pleasure heated our Bond as I carried her toward the stairs.



Paloma’s arms remained around my neck until I reached her room.

I managed the door with one hand and carried her inside. The red wool blanket had been folded across the couch again. Fresh coals burned in the stove. I kicked the door closed behind us.

Paloma raised her face from my shoulder. “You can put me down now.”

“I will, when I’ve got you where I want you.”

I carried her into the bedroom and placed her in the middle of the mattress. Her green shawl loosened around her shoulders as she landed. The red skirt spread over her thighs.

She watched me remove my coat and boots.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Take off the shawl.”

Paloma untied it and let it fall beside her.

“Now the blouse.”

Her fingers moved to the buttons. She watched my face as she opened them one by one. The embroidered fabric separated over her chest, revealing a pale pink bra beneath it.

She drew the blouse from her shoulders.

I pulled my sweater over my head. Paloma’s gaze moved down my chest and settled on the front of my trousers.

“Keep going,” I said.

She reached behind herself and released the bra. Her breasts dropped free, heavy and full, with dark nipples stiffened by the cooler air.

I stared.

Paloma covered one breast with her hand. “You like them?”

“Did you have doubts?”

A shy laugh escaped her. “No.”

I caught one of her ankles and drew her toward the edge of the bed. Paloma gasped. Her skirt rode above her knees as I stepped between her legs.

She reached for my trousers.

I allowed her to open them. My cock pushed against the fabric as she pulled it aside. Paloma wrapped both hands around the shaft and leaned forward.

Her breasts pressed against my thighs.

She looked up at me. “You’re watching them again.”

“I’m trying to decide what I want to do with them.”

“I’ve been thinking about that too.”

Paloma moved to the edge of the mattress and knelt on it in front of me. With me standing beside the bed, her breasts were level with my hips. She gathered them in both hands and pressed them around my cock.

The hot softness closed around the shaft.

“Fuck,” I said.

Her eyes brightened at my response. She squeezed her breasts together and moved them slowly down the length of my cock. My hips jerked forward.

Paloma licked the exposed head.

Pleasure rippled through my body. Her breasts were so large that my cock disappeared between them until the head emerged near her mouth. She stroked them up and down, keeping steady pressure around the shaft.

“Mmm,” she moaned. “You feel good. And you taste even better.”

She repeated the motion. Her tongue circled the head each time it appeared between her breasts. Hearth magic pulsed through our Bond with her excitement.

Paloma had blushed when I carried her out of the feast. Now she watched my face while she used her breasts around my cock, adjusting the pressure whenever my breathing changed. The shyness had disappeared.

“Do you like this?” she asked.

“It feels fucking amazing.”

She smiled and moved faster.

The pressure built quickly. I placed one hand against the back of her head and tried to hold still while she worked. Paloma moaned each time my cock slid between her breasts. The sound vibrated against the head when she closed her lips around it.

I was going to come if she continued.

I twisted my hand in her hair. “Stop.”

Paloma immediately released me and looked up.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” I bent and caught her beneath the arms. “You did that too well.”

Gently, I lowered her onto her back.

Her smile returned. “You didn’t let me finish.”

“I’m going to finish inside you.”

Desire flared through our Bond.

Paloma pushed the red skirt over her hips before I told her. She kicked it away, then removed her underclothes and opened her thighs.

Her pussy glistened for me.

I climbed over her. “Hands above your head.”

She obeyed.

I caught both wrists in one hand and held them against the pillows. Paloma’s breathing quickened, but she kept her thighs open around my hips.

“Tell me what you want.”

“I want you inside me.”

“Anything else?”

Her cheeks darkened. “I… don’t even know what to ask for. I want you to decide how to take me.”

I released her wrists and settled between her thighs, lowering my mouth for a kiss. Paloma wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me against her, her soft breasts pressed between us. She opened wider beneath me as the kiss deepened. I reached between our bodies and positioned my tip against her opening.

Paloma gasped as the head entered her. Her pussy stretched around me, hot and tight. I moved slowly for her until her body relaxed beneath mine, then pressed deeper.

Our Hearth Bond opened wider with every inch.

Paloma raised her hips. “More.”

I sank the rest of the way inside.

Her cry filled the room. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and pulled me against her. Her breasts shifted heavily against my chest as I lowered my weight over her.

I waited until she looked at me. “All right?”

“Yes.” She wrapped both legs around my hips. “Please move.”

I drew back and pushed into her again.

Heat rolled through our Bond. Paloma moaned and squeezed her legs, pulling me deeper. I established a slow rhythm and held her in place

beneath me.

The uncertainty vanished from her expression. She met every thrust eagerly, raising her hips and taking as much of me as she could.

“Harder,” she whispered.

I increased the force.

Her breasts bounced between us. I grasped one in my hand and squeezed. Paloma arched into my grip.

“Yes. Cole, please. It feels so good…”

The bed shifted beneath us. Paloma’s cries grew louder, but she made no effort to hide them. Her pussy clenched with every stroke. Pleasure moved through the Bond from her body into mine. Her need came through stronger than my own, which was saying something.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped. “Please don’t stop.”

I grabbed her wrists and tugged them above her head, holding them against the pillow as I thrust.

Her Gift answered. The coals inside the stove flared. Red light spread across the bedroom. Heat filled the room, but none of it burned. It passed through Paloma, through our joined bodies, and into my chest.

Paloma cried out as she came. Her thighs locked around my waist. The climax rushed through our Bond in hot pulses, tightening her body beneath mine.

I pushed as deeply as I could and came inside her.

The Bond sealed.

At first, all I could feel was Paloma. Her pleasure, her trust, and the fierce happiness beneath both. Then the connection spread beyond the bed.

I sensed the stove in the next room. The ovens beneath Hearth House. The kitchens and homes throughout the village.

Far beneath us, the Hearth pulsed in time with my heart.

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Chapter 18



The next morning, Professor Bell had covered the map-room table with Cedar Falls before I finished my first cup of coffee.

The town filled four joined maps, with the surrounding roads continuing onto loose sheets pinned beneath brass weights. Bell’s handwritten route curved through the neighborhoods in purple ink. Numbered delivery groups matched the load schedule Noelle had placed beside my laptop.

Rin stood across from me with both palms against the edge of the table. A planning image stretched above the maps, combining her live Sight of Cedar Falls with Bell’s projected conditions for the Big Night. Streetlights traced familiar roads beneath the expected snow cover.

A dark obstruction covered both Northstar buildings and several surrounding blocks.

Nothing appeared inside it. Roads entered the blank area and disappeared. The official route crossed its edge, emerged several streets away, then passed through it again farther south.

“That’s going to be a problem,” I said.

“It hasn’t grown since the receiving-hall attack,” Rin replied. “But it hasn’t weakened either. I can watch everything around it. I can’t see inside.”

Noelle Kringle stood at the head of the table with the First Trial packet open in front of her. As the Academy’s Trial proctor, she would evaluate the run and decide whether I passed, so every change to the route had to satisfy her.

“Every child assigned to the district must receive the correct gift,” she said. “The presence of Hollow does not alter that requirement.”

“I wasn’t planning to skip anyone.”

Britta leaned over the northern edge of the map. Her ice-blond braid slid across one shoulder. “The official approach takes us through the obstruction before the outer deliveries have added enough Cheer to the district.”

“And it sends us back through the Hollow repeatedly,” I said.

I traced the route Bell had drawn. It entered Cedar Falls from the north, followed the oldest delivery order through the center of town, then doubled back to the newer neighborhoods. The route made sense if the only concerns were distance and the order in which the Toymakers loaded the sleigh.

It made much less sense if flying past Northstar consumed Cheer every time we approached it.

I opened the routing program and pulled up the district file. Bell had entered the delivery windows, load restrictions, and Passage points before I arrived. The program highlighted the same route he had drawn by hand.

“What happens to the Cheer generated by a delivery?” I asked Paloma.

She stood beside me in a red Hearth House dress. Every time her arm touched mine, the newly sealed Bond warmed behind my ribs.

“Some reaches the Hearth,” she said. “The rest remains near the home for a while. Enough successful deliveries can strengthen an entire neighborhood.”

“So we don’t start in the center.” I selected the streets around the edge of town and moved them ahead of the official sequence. The route changed on the screen. Instead of cutting repeatedly across the obstruction, it circled the outer neighborhoods before tightening toward Northstar. “We start at the outer edge and clear every stop we can without entering the blind area. Then we make one pass through it. The less time the sleigh spends inside the Hollow, the less Cheer it can take from us.”

Liesl shifted the brass sleigh model closer to the laptop. “The gifts are loaded for Bell’s route. We’ll need to reverse several compartments and move everything assigned near Northstar into the final group.”

“Can we do it without creating too many receiver rotations?”

“I’ll have to test it.” Liesl examined the load schedule. “But I can rebuild the order before the Trial.”

Bell flew lower over the map. Purple light surrounded his small body, stirring the edges of the papers beneath him.

“The route will be longer,” he said.

“But it keeps us outside the Hollow until the final approach,” I replied. “I’d rather spend the extra Cheer on distance and cross the obstruction once.”

Bell studied the revised route on my screen. A few months ago, he would have rejected it because his records said something different. The sugar plum fairy landed on the map tray and gripped a red map pencil nearly as long as he was. His wings buzzed harder as he lifted it and guided the point across the paper. He drew a thick curve around the Hollow and connected it to the route on the other side.

“I will revise the official route,” he said. “The Toymakers may load to Mr. Crispin’s order.”

That was as close to enthusiastic agreement as Bell usually came.

Noelle looked from the map to the four women around me. “Show me how you intend to manage the final approach.”

Liesl set the brass model at the northern entry point. Britta rested one hand on my shoulder. Cold Flight magic opened around me, carrying the pressure and direction of the air above the route. Paloma placed her fingers against my other arm. The Hearth Bond showed me the Cheer available to sustain the sleigh.

Rin opened another Sight pane.

“First turn after the river,” she said. “The northern street is clear.”

I moved the model. Craft spread through my hand and into the brass frame. I sensed the gifts inside each compartment and rotated the first load toward the rear delivery gate.

“Next home is two streets east,” Rin continued. “The children are asleep. Approach from the south because the west side is inside the obstruction.”

Britta corrected the imaginary flight path. I moved the model across the map and reached for the next load.

“Cheer is falling,” Paloma warned. “We’re drawing from Hearth faster than I can replace it.”

“The route is too close to the boundary,” Rin said. “Turn north.”

I pulled back from Britta’s Bond and drew more power through Hearth. The model slowed beneath my hand.

“Which street?”

“The one past the school.”

I searched the map for the building. By the time I found it, Britta had already changed the approach and Liesl was warning me that I had rotated the wrong compartment.

Noelle raised one hand. “Stop.”

The three sealed Gifts withdrew, and Rin closed the Sight pane. The model sat sideways across a street, with the wrong delivery waiting at its rear gate.

“I can manage one change at a time,” I said. “I can’t keep three Gifts aligned while translating everything Rin sees into a separate set of directions.”

“You cannot receive Sight directly until its Bond is sealed,” Noelle replied. “That will remove the need for verbal directions. It will not allow the Gifts to function as one.”

“What am I missing?”

“The Team Bond. Once Sight is sealed, the five of you must join the four individual Bonds before the Trial.”

I waited for her to explain what joining them required. Noelle merely closed the Trial packet.

“All five of us?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“The same way I sealed the individual Bonds?”

Noelle’s expression did not change. “The Academy requires the five of you to seal the Team Bond together. The precise arrangement is private, provided every participant consents.”

I looked around the table. Britta met my eyes without embarrassment. Liesl remained calm. Paloma flushed, although warmth moved through our Bond. Rin stared at me with undisguised hunger.

“You knew?” I asked.

“I knew the requirement,” Britta said. “I didn’t know you hadn’t been told.”

“I thought Dame Agathe had explained the first-year Bonds before we chose you,” Liesl said.

“So did I,” Paloma added. “I’m sorry, Cole.”

Rin’s attention remained fixed on me. “I’ve already told you I wanted your other Bonds there to watch while you use me to seal Sight. It’ll be so hot, baby. I want you to open me in front of them, and then I want to feel every Bond close around us.”

I breathed out slowly. “Okay. I didn’t make that leap with you when you first mentioned it, but yeah. I guess so.”

“Sight must seal before the Team Bond can close,” Noelle said. “Both may be completed during the same encounter. The Academy does not involve itself in the arrangement beyond confirming that every participant consents and the Bond is properly formed.”

She gathered the Trial packet from the table.

“I will repeat the rehearsal tomorrow morning. The Team Bond must be complete before your Trial. Hopefully by then you will be communicating well enough to complete this exercise.”

She left the map room without another word.

Rin watched the door close. “I like her.”

“You like anyone who orders me to have sex with you.”

“She didn’t order you.” Rin walked around the table and pressed against my side. “But if that’s how you took it… why don’t you take me to bed, big boy?”

Liesl began collecting the load schedules. “We should finish the compartment plan first.”

Rin looked personally betrayed. “Excuse me? How could you say something like that in front of my unsealed Bond?”

“We have eight days before the Trial, Rin,” I said. “Your sealing can wait until tonight.”

Rin sighed and returned to her side of the table. “Fine. But if I get too excited and bite you, it will be your fault.”



Rin pressed herself against my back during the entire climb to my tower room. Her fingers slipped beneath my shirt on the first landing. By the second, both arms had circled my waist and her mouth was against my shoulder. Britta, Liesl, and Paloma followed close behind us.

“Hurry,” Rin whispered against the side of my neck. “You made me wait all day. I’m done waiting.”

I reached the top floor and opened the bedroom door. Rin darted past me, turned, and caught the front of my shirt in both hands. She dragged me across the threshold and kissed me before the others reached the door.

Rin climbed my body until I caught her beneath the thighs. Her legs locked around my waist, and her tongue pushed into my mouth. Her fingers twisted in my hair until the sharp pull stung across my scalp.

Britta closed the door behind us. Liesl set a coil of soft rope and a small jar of oil on the bedside table. Paloma placed several folded towels beside them.

Rin broke the kiss long enough to draw a breath.

“I need you inside me,” she whispered. “I need them to watch you take me. I want them to see everything I’ve been fantasizing about, baby.”

Sight pulsed through our open Bond. Her desire poured into me without restraint, hot and frantic. Beneath it, I found a smaller current of fear. She wanted this too badly to admit that her first time frightened her.

I carried her to the bed and set her on her feet.

“Are you sure?”

Rin gripped my belt and pulled my hips against hers. “I watched you choose them. I watched you open every Bond. I watched you fuck them while I was waiting for you to trust me.” Her eyes were dark and wet. “I’m done watching, Cole. Put me on that bed and make me yours.”

Britta moved closer behind her. The tall elf rested one hand on Rin’s shoulder.

“If you need to, you can still tell him to stop,” Britta said. “No one here will think less of you.”

Rin turned her head. “I won’t. Are you crazy? I want him to hold me down when I lose control.”

Her attention returned to me.

“I want it hard,” she said. “I want to feel bruised inside tomorrow. And I want them to watch you fuck me and know that I’m yours, too. Just like they are.”

Rin tore open her uniform shirt. Two buttons struck the floor. She shoved her skirt and underclothes down together, kicked them aside, and climbed onto the mattress. Her body was narrow through the waist and soft through the breasts, and she was shaved completely bare between her thighs. Moisture already shone across her pussy.

Clothing fell behind her as the others came to the bed. Britta stripped quickly and pulled my shirt over my head. Liesl opened my trousers before she had finished removing her own dress. Paloma hesitated with her fingers on the buttons of her blouse, but when I held out my hand, she let the rest of her clothes fall and stepped against me.

Their naked bodies closed around mine. Britta tossed my shirt aside, Liesl pushed my trousers down, and Paloma spread her warm hands across my chest. The scent of their arousal thickened beneath the faint smoke from the fireplace.

Rin crawled to the edge of the mattress. The moment my cock sprang free, she caught it in both hands.

“Oh, fuck,” she breathed. “It’s really going to be mine.”

Her tongue passed over the head. She opened her mouth and drew me between her lips, taking only a few inches before sucking hard enough to make my hips tighten.

I caught her hair and pulled her away.

Rin made a desperate sound. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to prepare you first.”

“I’m wet, baby, I’m sooooo wet.”

“You’re also small, and this is your first time.”

“Then stretch me until I can take you.”

She crawled backward across the mattress and spread her thighs. Britta, Liesl, and Paloma climbed onto the bed around her.

I knelt between Rin’s legs. Her pussy glistened from her opening to her swollen clit. When I stroked two fingers through the heat, her hips jerked from the bed.

“More,” she demanded.

I pushed one finger inside her.

Her body closed tightly around it. Rin grabbed my wrist and tried to press me deeper. I caught her hand and pinned it beside her hip.

“You asked me to take control.”

“Yes.” Her breath shook. “I need you to.”

I worked my finger slowly until the tension inside her eased. Her thighs opened farther. A second finger stretched her, and the sharp breath she drew softened into a moan.

The other women closed around her. Paloma kissed Rin’s temple while Britta and Liesl held her thighs open beneath my hand. Rin’s gaze moved greedily over their naked bodies.

“Touch yourselves,” she said. “I want to feel how much you want him while he fucks me.”

Their arousal struck through the three sealed Bonds at once, separate currents crowding together behind my ribs without joining. Sight remained open between Rin and me, following her attention from my hand to my cock and then across the women watching her.

I added a third finger.

Rin cried out. Her head pressed into the mattress, and her pussy flickered around me.

“That’s it,” she gasped. “Make room for yourself. I want all of you inside me.”

I moved my fingers until her body yielded. Wetness coated my hand. Her thighs trembled against my arms, but the fear inside Sight had weakened beneath her arousal.

When I withdrew, Rin pushed herself upright and caught my shoulders.

“My turn,” she whispered.

She pulled me onto the bed and shoved me back against the pillows. Before I could reposition her, she threw one leg across my hips and straddled me.

Her small body barely covered my lap. My cock rested against her stomach, reaching above her navel.

Rin looked down at it. Her fingers closed around the base. “They’re going to see you inside me.”

She lifted herself and pressed the head against her opening.

I caught her hips. “Slowly.”

“Shut up, baby,” she snapped. “I want it hard.”

“You’ll get it hard after your body can take me.”

Her pupils widened. “Then make me take you. I want it so bad, Cole. I don’t want to wait. I don’t *care* if it hurts. I *want* it to hurt.”

I guided her downward.

The head entered her with steady pressure. Rin’s mouth opened, but no sound emerged. Her fingernails dug into my chest. I held her still while her body stretched around me.

Sight opened wider. Her pain reached me first, bright and immediate, followed by the fierce pleasure beneath it. I stopped.

Rin shook her head. “No, no, no. Don’t pull out.”

“I’m not.”

“More. Please, baby. I need more.”

I eased her lower. Her pussy gripped every inch. Sweat gathered along her hairline. She breathed through her open mouth and kept her eyes fixed on mine.

Britta knelt behind her and supported her waist. Liesl stroked Rin’s trembling thigh. Paloma reached between us and rubbed slow circles around Rin’s clit.

Rin moaned. Her body relaxed enough to take another inch.

“That feels so good,” she whispered. “It hurts, but I want it. Push deeper.”

I lifted my hips while Britta guided her down.

Rin cried out when she reached the base. Her entire body stiffened. She was so small that a firm swelling appeared low in her stomach where my cock filled her.

Her eyes dropped to it.

“Oh, fuck.”

She took Liesl’s hand and pressed it against the bulge.

“Feel him,” Rin whispered. “That’s his cock inside me.”

Liesl’s fingers spread over Rin’s stomach. Her green eyes darkened as I drew back an inch and pushed upward again. The movement showed beneath Rin’s skin.

“I can feel him,” Liesl said.

Rin looked at Britta and Paloma. “You see it, don’t you? You can see how deep he is.”

Paloma’s hand remained between Rin’s legs. Her breathing had quickened. “Yes.”

“You love watching him stretch me.” Rin’s voice had become breathless and feverish. “I can feel all three of you getting wetter. You love seeing his cock in my belly.”

Britta tightened her grip on Rin’s waist. “Ride him.”

Rin planted both hands on my chest and lifted herself. The first stroke was shallow. She sank again, taking me to the base. Her pussy dragged tightly along my shaft.

She repeated the motion. Her black hair fell across her face. Her small breasts shook with every downward stroke.

I held her hips and helped her establish a rhythm. The discomfort inside Sight faded beneath rising pleasure. Rin began taking me faster, her wetness spreading across my lap.

“Harder,” she begged. “Don’t protect me anymore. Fuck up into me.”

I slammed my hips upward.

Rin screamed. Her body snapped forward, and I caught her against my chest.

“Yes. Again.”

I thrust into her each time she dropped. Her pussy opened around me, hot and slick. The bulge in her stomach appeared with every deep stroke.

Rin caught my wrist and brought my hand to her throat.

“Hold me here.”

I curved my hand around her throat and held her gently against me. Her breathing remained free, but she could no longer throw herself forward.

Her eyes widened with pleasure.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Keep me right there. Make me ride you while you hold me like that. Tighter!”

I squeezed, tightening my other hand around her hip. Rin moved above me, her thighs shaking as she took my cock to the base again and again.

Liesl kept her palm against Rin’s stomach, increasing the pressure on the magic spot inside. Paloma rubbed her clit faster. Britta leaned over Rin’s shoulder and watched my cock disappear inside her.

Rin looked at all three women.

“Look at me,” she said. “Look at what he’s doing to me. You love it, don’t you? You fucking whores. Ahhhh—”

Her voice broke when I thrust upward.

“You love his cock,” she continued. “All of you. I can feel it through him. You love watching him stretch my little pussy. I’m his whore too!”

Her pussy shivered.

“I’m his now. I’m finally his. He’s going to fill me with his seed and you’re going to feel every drop through the Bond.”

Sight panes flashed across the bedroom walls. One showed the dark map room. Another opened above the Academy roof. Dozens more flickered behind them as Rin’s control weakened.

Her thighs clamped around my hips.

“I’m close,” she gasped. “Fuck me harder. Come inside me. Seal it, Cole. Seal me to you.”

I held her throat and hammered upward with all the force her body could take.

Rin cried out. Her pussy clenched like a fist. Sight flooded me with her climax before the first contraction reached my body. I pulled her down to the base and came inside her. The Sight Bond sealed.

Thousands of panes opened at once. Academy corridors, House common rooms, workshops, kitchens, and other elves moving through the Pole filled my mind. Beyond the Academy, streets and cities spread across different continents beneath night and daylight. Names shifted between the Lists. Every direction held another view, with more waiting behind it.

Rin collapsed against my chest. The flood tore through her too. Her hands clutched my shoulders, and frightened sounds escaped her between shallow breaths.

I released her throat and wrapped both arms around her. “Stay with me.”

Her Sight rushed from one pane to another. I searched through the sealed Bond until I found her inside the movement.

I held her there and closed the nearest panes.

The bedroom returned slowly. Britta’s hand remained on Rin’s waist. Liesl still touched her stomach. Paloma pressed against her other side, one arm around her shoulders.

Only a single dark pane remained above the bed.

Rin lifted her face. Tears shone on her cheeks, and her black hair clung to her damp skin.

“It’s quiet,” she whispered.

“You can open it again when you’re ready.”

She kissed me. The frantic need in her mouth had softened, although her body still pulsed and fluttered.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too,” I said. “I love all of you.”

And I meant it. Every one of my Bonds had opened an affection and connection so strong that the feeling I’d once called love in my past life paled in comparison. The words moved through all four Bonds, and the women’s answering love reached me without any of them needing to speak.

Rin held me until her breathing steadied. Then Britta and Paloma lifted her from my lap while Liesl settled her against the pillows. My cock slipped free, and my release ran down the inside of Rin’s thigh.

Sight settled beside the other three Gifts. The Bonds remained separate, but power moved through all four whenever I reached for them. The new connection waited quietly behind my eyes instead of dragging us from pane to pane. Rin watched my cock harden again, and her hunger passed through Sight with enough force to tighten my stomach.

Britta caught my shoulder. “Lie back.”

She straddled my thighs before I had settled against the mattress. Her body towered over me. Pale hair hung around her face, and her athletic thighs pressed hard against my hips.

Britta stroked my wet cock against her pussy. Her arousal coated the head.

“I want everything you gave her,” she said. “Then I want more.”

She lowered herself onto me in one smooth movement.

Her body took me easily. Wet heat closed around my shaft. Britta planted both hands against my chest and began riding me hard enough to make the mattress shift.

Flight rushed through the room. Cold air lifted her hair and moved across my overheated skin. Her breasts bounced above me. Muscle tightened across her stomach each time she rose.

I gripped her hips and tried to control the pace.

Britta resisted. Her eyes brightened when our strength met.

“Take it from me,” she said.

I rolled her beneath me.

Her back struck the mattress. I caught both wrists and pinned them beside her head. Britta tested my grip with enough force to tighten every muscle in my arms, then opened her thighs wider.

I thrust into her.

A deep moan escaped her. She arched beneath me, driving her breasts against my chest.

“Harder.”

I fucked her with the force she demanded. Her strong legs locked around my waist. Each thrust pushed her higher against the pillows.

Rin crawled closer to watch. Paloma cupped one of Britta’s breasts while Liesl moved her hand between Britta’s legs and pressed her fingers around the place where my cock entered her.

Britta struggled against my grip until her breath broke into rough cries. Her pussy pulsed around me.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Oh, fuck, yes!”

I thrust into her until Flight roared through the tower. Britta climaxed beneath me. Her heels dug into my back, and her body clenched.

Cold wind swept over the bed, stirring loose hair and damp skin. Her pleasure surged through our sealed Bond and pulled another orgasm from me. I came inside her while her contractions continued.

When I released her wrists, she pulled me down and kissed me. Her mouth was swollen, and sweat shone across her face and throat.

Liesl knelt beside us with the coil of rope in her hands.

Britta allowed her to pull me away.

Liesl placed the rope in my palm. “My wrists behind my back. Tight enough that I can’t pull free.”

I kissed her. Her lips parted beneath mine, and her small, curvy body pressed against my chest.

“Same safe word?” I asked.

“Yes.” She turned away and placed both hands behind herself. “And if I say no…”

I looped the rope around her wrists and secured them. “I’ll just fuck you harder.”

Liesl tested the restraint by pulling in both directions. “Tighter.”

I adjusted the knot.

Her breath trembled when the rope pinched. She looked over one freckled shoulder and nodded.

I bent her roughly over the mattress. Liesl spread her knees. Her bound hands rested against the small of her back. Her pussy was puffy and wet, with moisture glistening along the inside of her thighs.

I ran my palm over her ass and pushed two fingers into her.

She moaned into the blankets.

“Do you need the oil?”

“No. I’m ready.”

I positioned myself behind her and entered slowly.

Our Bond opened every detail of her body to me. I knew the angle of her hips, the tension in her bound shoulders, and how much pressure she wanted before her muscles tightened around me.

I filled her to the base.

Liesl pushed backward and tested the angle, her breath breaking into a moan. “Yes. Keep me there. Use the rope and control every stroke.”

I caught the rope between her wrists and held it while I thrust. Her soft body moved beneath me, and her breasts rubbed against the blankets. Each

stroke drew a low moan from her. The sound sharpened when I pulled her bound hands upward.

Britta stroked Liesl's red hair away from her face. Paloma kissed her shoulder. Rin lay near the pillows with one hand between her legs, her dark eyes fixed on me.

Liesl met every thrust by pushing her hips back. "Pull harder. Don't let me get away from you."

I increased the pace until the bedframe struck the wall. Craft magic hummed through the joints and reinforced them before the wood could split. Liesl's pussy gripped me harder with every stroke.

I pulled her upright by the rope. Her back pressed against my chest, and her head dropped onto my shoulder. I held both bound wrists against her spine while my other hand closed around her breast.

Liesl cried out as I pinched her nipple.

"Ahhh, no!" she gasped. "Too hard!"

I ignored her pleas and thrust upward into her until her legs began to shake.

"No, no more!" she panted. "I can't take another stroke. Please, Cole, stop. It's too much…"

Her climax squeezed my cock in deep, wet pulses even as she begged me to stop. I held her against me and drove as deep as I could. Pleasure broke through me as my cock pulsed inside her, each hot spurt filling her while her body clenched around me.

Craft spread through the room. Every fitting, hinge, knot, and joint settled into place. The awareness of them passed through Liesl and into me while she shook in my arms.

I lowered her carefully and released the rope. Red marks circled her wrists. I kissed each one before Britta drew Liesl against her body and massaged her hands. The red-haired elf wrapped her arms around Britta's neck, still trembling. "Ohhh, Christmas… that was so good."

Paloma remained near the head of the bed. She had watched everything. Her cheeks and chest were flushed, and her full breasts rose with every quick breath. One hand cupped the heavy curve of her breast. The other rested between her open thighs.

Wetness covered her fingers.

I reached for her.

"Come here."

Paloma moved onto her knees and crossed the mattress. Her body was soft and warm against mine when she reached me.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Turn around and get on your hands and knees."

She obeyed. Her dark hair fell over one shoulder. Her breasts hung heavily beneath her, and her round ass lifted toward me.

I spread her thighs and ran my hand between them. Her pussy was soaked.

Paloma moaned at the first touch. "Please don't make me wait."

I pressed the head of my cock against her opening.

“Push back.”

She did, and gasped as her body opened around me. Heat surrounded the head, then the shaft as Paloma took me deeper. I held her hips and allowed her to control the first stroke.

When her ass met my thighs, she released a long, shaking cry.

“Move,” she whispered. “Please.”

I drew back and thrust into her.

Her body yielded around me, wet and soft. Her thick thighs trembled beneath my hands. Each stroke made her breasts swing below her.

I reached beneath her and filled both palms with them. Paloma arched, lifting her chest into my grip.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Hold me.”

I leaned over her back and kept her breasts cradled in my hands while I thrust. Paloma rocked back to meet every stroke.

Warmth poured through my body as our Hearth Bond opened wider. It spread across the bed as the others closed around us. Hands and mouths moved over Paloma and me, keeping all five of us in contact.

The four Bonds pulled closer. Their separate currents pressed against one another inside me, but they still stopped short of joining.

Paloma’s breathing had become ragged.

“Come inside me, Cole,” she begged. “Please. I want to feel your seed.”

I tightened my hold on her and thrust deeper. Paloma cried out. The women surrounding us touched her wherever I could not reach, and their arousal poured through the Bonds in four distinct currents, all pressing toward the same point inside me.

I reached for every Bond at once.

“Stay together,” I said. “Keep touching.”

They obeyed, closing every gap between us. Paloma turned her face toward mine, and I kissed her while I continued thrusting into her.

“Touch yourselves,” I told the other three. “I want all of you with us when she comes.”

Their pleasure climbed through the Bonds and gathered behind my ribs. Until then, each connection had reached me separately. Now the boundaries dissolved, and everything they felt became one rising pressure inside me.

Paloma cried out and clenched around my cock. Her orgasm swept through the Bond and pulled the others with her. All four women came together. Their shared pleasure tore through me, and the Bonds locked.

I came inside Paloma. My cock pulsed deep in her as the Team Bond carried the release through all five of us. I couldn’t separate my climax from theirs.

We sank into the bed together, damp bodies pressed close, our breathing slowing through the completed Bond. The four Gifts settled inside me

without seams between them. Their power moved through my body as one deep, steady current, held by the women surrounding me.

I reached for the connection, and the entire Bond answered. Power pressed against my ribs and ran hot beneath my skin, carrying all four women within it. I could no longer find where one Gift ended and another began.

The four sealed Gifts lived inside me as one power, steady and complete.

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Chapter 19



During the days after the Team Bond sealed, Noelle had run us through the Cedar Falls route until I could hold the streets, weather, load, and available Cheer in my mind without asking Rin what she saw or waiting for Liesl to correct a compartment.

We moved from the map table to a practice sleigh above the Pole, then repeated the route with Britta, Liesl, Rin, and Paloma inside the Academy while I worked through the Bond alone. By our last run, the four Gifts had stopped feeling like separate instructions. I thought about where the sleigh needed to go and what had to happen when we arrived, and the joined power moved with me.

My First Trial covered Cedar Falls and would begin when we reached Minnesota. Kris remained at the reins for the earlier legs of the Big Night, including the European sections Liesl and I had revised. I rode in the second seat to watch those changes operate under real conditions and learn as much as I could before he handed me control.

The reindeer ran through the night as if the sky had become solid beneath their hooves. Wind tore past the sleigh without touching us, and the Earth

turned below in dark fields, strings of road lights, and the brief glitter of cities. Beautifully wrapped Christmas presents arrived through the receiving compartments in ordered waves, moved into position, and vanished down chimneys almost before I could follow the sequence.

Every delivery arrived with the next already bearing down on us. A delay in one place would throw every warehouse and route that followed off schedule. Kris never rushed. He held the reins loosely and watched the route open ahead of us while every part of the sleigh worked at a speed that would have destroyed an ordinary system.

The changes Liesl and I had made to the older European legs held, much to my excitement. Warehouses released their batches against the revised schedule, Craft gates opened when they should, and the sleigh crossed the points where Krampus would have expected the historic route to take us without finding anything waiting for us. Then the revisions ended, and Kris returned to the established path for the rest of the world.

“You were right about the transfer windows,” he said as the last altered sequence closed behind us.

“Liesl was right about the transfer windows. I was right about listening to her.”

Kris glanced at me. His beard hid most of his expression, but his blue eyes twinkled. “Another useful skill.”

The route carried us west. By the time the Great Lakes appeared below, the joined Gifts had been resting inside me for hours, present but quiet. I could feel the women at the far end of the Bond, a steady awareness that I was not carrying their power alone. They were awake at the Pole, waiting with Bell and the route team for Cedar Falls.

Snow covered Minnesota beneath a thick bank of cloud. Kris drew the sleigh lower, and the first edge of Sight passed through the darkness. Roads emerged as pale lines under the storm. The route marker for Cedar Falls burned ahead.

Kris held out the reins. I took them. The leather was warm from his gloves, and the reindeer changed their attention to me so completely that I felt it through the traces.

“From here until the district closes, every decision is yours,” Kris said. “I will not direct the team, choose a route, or reach into your Bond. If I have to take the reins back, the Trial is over.”

“And if I ask for advice?”

“You won’t get any,” Kris said. “The decisions have to be yours.”

I settled my hands on the reins and looked toward the storm. The joined power opened inside me, and the sleigh responded to my attention as a single system. I drew it into the clouds. The runners angled, the load shifted with them, and Sight held the route steady through the white air while Cheer moved through all of it in one controlled current.

The storm struck hard enough to hide the reindeer from me. I could still feel the line of their bodies ahead and the lift under every hoof. We descended through snow that seemed to come from every direction at once, then broke beneath the clouds over Cedar Falls.

For a moment, I forgot the route. The town spread below me exactly where it had always been and nothing like the place I remembered. Streetlights shone against snowbanks. Cars moved along roads I had driven most of my life. The water tower rose beyond the older neighborhoods, and the center of town glowed with Christmas lights strung along the storefronts.

At the edge of it all, the Northstar buildings burned white against the dark. The store faced the highway behind a bright parking lot. Farther out, the distribution center covered the ground in hard lines of loading bays, trailer rows, and security lights. Beyond them lay the former Crispin Tree Farm, its fields white and empty where rows of trees had once stood.

The empty fields made my chest feel tight. For a second, I could smell cut pine and gasoline from the balers and see Dad standing beside the lot before sunrise. I pictured him standing out there until the last customer left, freezing his ass off and never complaining. God, I missed him.

The reins slackened in my hands, and the sleigh drifted off its line. The lead reindeer turned one ear toward me. *No*, I thought. *That's the kind of thing Krampus wants me to be thinking about*.

I tightened the reins and brought the route back into Sight. Whatever Northstar had taken from my family, there were homes below us waiting for Christmas. I was going to deliver it, no matter what Krampus and his hairy-arsed, goat-legged demon buddies thought.

The first roof appeared through the snow. I set the sleigh down beside a brick chimney, held it steady while the receiving compartment moved the correct gift to the rear gate, and let the route narrow to the house beneath us. The chimney had a usable flue. Cheer compressed me into heat and red light, and I dropped through it.

I landed soundlessly in a living room that smelled of pine needles and the remains of a wood fire. A dog lifted its head from the rug. I put one finger to my lips. It watched me set the gift under the tree, thumped its tail once, and lowered its head again.

When I returned to the roof, the sleigh was already balanced for the next turn. I climbed in, took the reins, and moved.

The route found its rhythm. Snow and rooftops passed around me while the joined Gifts kept every moving part aligned. Sight gave me only what I needed: the next approach, the waiting home, the condition of the flue. The load changed as the warehouses sent fresh batches through the fixed gates, but I felt each shift before it could pull the sleigh off balance. Cheer spent on one descent began to return as the delivery settled into the house behind us.

I stopped trying to separate the magic from the work. That had been my mistake in the map room. I didn't need to translate each movement into a Gift or pause to ask Sight what came next. There was one route and one power moving through it with me. As I opened myself to the flow of Christmas Spirit, it began to feel more natural. Kris sat silently beside me. As the magic clicked into place, I let myself imagine he was proud of me.

We crossed the northern neighborhoods, turned east, and worked back toward the center of town. With every successful stop, the pressure behind my ribs grew warmer. The Hearth at the Pole was feeding the run, but Cedar Falls was beginning to answer. Lights below looked brighter through Sight. The storm still fought the sleigh, but it no longer felt empty.

Then the route curved toward Northstar. The distribution center had looked bright from a distance. Up close, the lights meant nothing. Hollow covered the building and the land around it in a darkness that Sight could not enter. It gathered over the loading bays, clung to the trailers, and reached into the storm. It oozed out from the lot like a great black Kraken wrapping its tentacles around the town. The closer we came, the less Cheer returned from the town behind us.

The reindeer felt it, too. Their stride shortened, and the lead pair pulled away from the route marker. But Kris sat beside me without moving. He didn't look at the obstruction or at my hands on the reins. I wished I could read his mind, and make sure I was still on the right path. The anxiety at seeing all that Hollow threatening my town shook my confidence. But I pushed forward. I had to do this, for Cedar Falls. For my parents' memory. For myself.

The approved route crossed the edge of the property. I had put it there because a wider turn would break the warehouse sequence and cost more time than the surrounding stops could absorb. On a screen, the margin had worked. But the Hollow had grown since the map-room review.

I could turn away and try to rebuild the route in the air, but the next batch was already moving toward its Craft gate. If I missed it, the gifts would arrive out of sequence. If I crossed, the Hollow would consume every bit of Cheer it touched.

I lifted the sleigh above the deepest part of the obstruction. The cargo restraints locked against the climb. Sight fixed on the route marker beyond the dark, and Cheer narrowed into a protected current around the sleigh. I could feel my Bonds working together to provide the answers I needed, and sent a pulse of thanks back through my connection to them, hoping they could feel it back at the North Pole.

“Come on,” I said to the team. “We just need to get to the other side…”

The reindeer climbed, and cold closed over us. The sleigh lost lift so sharply that my stomach rose into my throat. Hollow dragged across the runners and stripped Cheer from the shield around us. The lights of Cedar Falls disappeared. Even the storm went silent. Then a voice came out of the dark.

“Cole Crispin.” It was quiet, almost conversational, and close enough to feel as if someone had leaned between Kris and me. The reindeer stumbled in the air. I pulled the traces straight and kept Sight fixed on the single point of light beyond the warehouse. “You have already lost.”

Krampus. I knew it, like I knew the man next to me was Santa Claus.

“I only have to make you fail once,” the demon hissed into my ear. “Every woman bound to you will pay for choosing you.”

My grip tightened on the reins. Through the Bond, the women braced with me, and the traces straightened as I kept the sleigh pointed at the light beyond the warehouse.

“Krampus, buddy… Unless you’re here to suck my jingle balls, you can fuck right off,” I said, driving the sleigh forward. “I still have deliveries to make.”

The protected current of Cheer thinned until I could feel Hollow against my skin. Then the lead reindeer broke through. Wind slammed into us, Sight opened across the town, and the runners caught the air. The load shifted into balance as the rest of the team cleared the dark.

Behind us, Krampus roared in frustration. The sound stayed over the distribution center while the route carried us away.

“Nice one,” Kris said, making me jump. I’d almost forgotten he was there.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to talk to me during my Trial.”

“I’m not supposed to help you,” Kris clarified. “I don’t think there are any rules against me appreciating it when you poke the old goat in the eye. Can’t say I remember any candidate talking back to Krampus.”

I laughed, but I didn’t look back. The next delivery waited beyond the highway. The batch arrived on schedule because we’d made the crossing, and the correct compartment opened beneath my hand. I landed, descended, placed the gift, and returned to the sleigh.

We worked the remaining route outward from Northstar. The storm began to ease, but the cold deepened. Houses passed beneath us, each one distinct in Sight and then gone as I turned toward the next. The final Cedar Falls marker appeared near the western edge of town, but the house beneath it was empty. I circled once. Sight showed bare rooms, clean rectangles where

furniture had stood, and no trace of a child. The List still held the address. In the receiving compartment behind me, a gift waited with a tag that insisted this was where it belonged.

“Bad record?” I asked, already knowing Kris would not answer.

He folded his hands over his coat and watched the snow.

I held the sleigh above the empty house and let Sight widen. The route marker clung to the old address, but the child’s name led somewhere else. I followed it.

The bare rooms disappeared. An older image attached to the girl’s record opened in Sight. I saw a Northstar layaway counter, bright with fluorescent light and cheap tinsel. My younger self stood at the register signing a receipt while a manager waited beside me. Northstar had protected the customer’s identity, as policy required. I’d paid the balance and left without knowing who would collect the order.

The image shifted. A woman came to the counter later with a little girl bundled in a purple coat. The employee brought out the boxes. The woman covered her mouth when she learned the balance was gone.

Sight returned me to Cedar Falls. The little girl was older now, but the line of her face hadn’t changed. She sat at a kitchen table in a different house with a blanket around her shoulders and a mug held between both hands. The rooms were dim. A small Christmas tree stood in the corner with paper ornaments on its branches and nothing beneath it.

Another image showed her mother fastening a Northstar badge to her coat before leaving for a Christmas Eve shift. The connection between them ran toward the distribution center and vanished at the edge of the Hollow.

The family had moved, but the List still pointed to their old house. Maybe Krampus had tampered with it. Either way, I wasn’t leaving the gift there.

I followed the girl’s name through Sight until her new house appeared across town, beyond the route we’d just completed. The gift was correctly tagged, but the sleigh had already released the compartments around it for return staging. Craft would follow the schedule exactly unless I gave it a new one.

I pictured the load as a whole. The waiting gift became a fixed point inside it. Compartments shifted around that point, restraints tightened, and the rear gate opened. The movement pulled the sleigh left until the joined power changed our angle and caught the weight.

Kris looked over his shoulder at the gift now waiting behind us, then back at me. He said nothing. I turned the team into the storm. “Don’t worry,” I whispered. “Santa’s coming, kiddo.”

The new address was a small rental house with a brick chimney and an old furnace that had stopped producing heat. The girl remained at the kitchen table while I brought the sleigh down above the roof. She was awake, and the house offered no place to land unseen except the chimney.

I held the route open and reached through the Bond. Warmth entered the house gently. Frost loosened at the corners of the kitchen window. The girl lowered the mug and looked toward the silent vent, then pulled the blanket tighter and carried it down the hall to her bedroom.

I waited until her door closed. The chimney was cold but clear. I took the gift, spent the Cheer to compress, and descended through the flue. The living room formed around me in a rush of darkness and old brick.

The plastic tree leaned in a cheap stand near the window. Up close, I could see that some of the ornaments had been cut from Northstar bags. The star

at the top was silver cardboard. I set the gift beneath it.

For a moment, nothing happened. The house remained quiet, and the furnace remained broken.

Then warmth moved out from the tree. It passed through the floor under my boots, along the walls, and into the bedroom where the girl had curled beneath her blanket. Through Sight, I saw a small smile curl her lips as she slipped into a pleasant dream.

Cheer rose around me suddenly. Through Paloma, I felt it reach the Hearth at the Pole. The great reservoir answered with a deep pulse that filled my chest and returned through the women as one wave of relief.

The Trial route closed.

I rested my hand against the warm brick of the chimney. At Northstar, this house would've been an address, an order number, and a balance due by closing. Standing inside it, I could hear the wind scraping snow against the windows and see where one of the stockings had been mended with green thread. The present waited beneath the tree, bright against the worn floorboards, with no receipt under its ribbon and no balance coming due after Christmas.

I returned to the roof, climbed into the sleigh, and took the reins. Kris looked at the closed route in the air ahead of us.

"Home?" I asked.

"Home," he said. "For you, anyway. I still have a Long Night ahead of me."

He chuckled at his own joke as the reindeer rose above Cedar Falls. I watched the town recede beneath the thinning storm. Northstar remained

bright at its edge, and Hollow still covered the distribution center. But I’d finished the job and left more Cheer in the town than I had found.

The return to the Pole passed in a rush of cloud and cold stars. I kept the reins until the Academy lights appeared ahead and the sleigh descended toward the launch platform. The four women stood beyond the marked landing area with Bell, Noelle, and the route crew. Even at a distance, I felt the Team Bond pull toward them.

The runners struck the platform and slid to a stop. Stable hands moved for the reindeer while route workers opened the rear compartments and confirmed that every Cedar Falls delivery was gone. I let go of the reins slowly. My palms had healed days ago, but the leather had pressed the new skin tender again.

Bell stood beside the route table with a stopwatch in one hand. He looked from the instrument to the final marks on the map, then to the sleigh. His wings trembled.

“The revised transfers held,” he said. His voice caught, and he cleared it. “Every one of them. No lost loads. No broken sequence.”

I climbed down from the sleigh. “Liesl will probably want the full record.”

“She already has it.” Bell lowered the stopwatch. His eyes were wet behind his spectacles, but he made no attempt to hide it. “She has been correcting my annotations since you crossed the Atlantic.”

The women reached me together. Britta caught the front of my coat and held me steady while the others crowded against us. Paloma found my hand, her warmth flowing through the joined Bond, but Rin stared past me toward the sleigh with her pupils wide, as if part of her were still watching Cedar Falls.

“He spoke to you,” she said. “That bastard.”

“He did.”

Her fingers closed around my sleeve. The feral pleasure I usually felt from her had become something colder and more protective. “He’s dangerous, baby. And he knows your name.”

“Yeah, well.” I tried to shrug nonchalantly, but her fear tickled the back of my neck. “I know his name, too.”

“I’ll kill him if he tries to come close,” she hissed. “I’ll rip his throat out and piss down the hole, I’ll—”

“Shh,” I said. “Here comes the boss.”

Noelle approached, her heels clicking sharply. She carried the Trial packet against her red coat and stopped far enough away that the women had to loosen their hold on me if they wanted to face her properly. Her gaze moved from me to Kris.

“Did you intervene?” she asked.

“Of course not,” Kris said.

“Did the candidate request direction?”

“He asked one question. I assumed it was rhetorical and didn’t answer it.”

Noelle opened the packet and made one final mark. The scratch of her pen seemed absurdly quiet after the sleigh, the storm, and the Hollow.

“A passing mark, Candidate,” she said, finally. “Do try not to let it go to your head.”

Relief broke through the Team Bond. It reached me from all four women at once, warm enough to take the strength out of my legs. They closed around me, and Rin climbed halfway up my side before I got an arm around her.

I’d pissed off Krampus, and his bitchy daughter wasn’t a big fan of mine either. Northstar would keep pumping out Hollow. I had no doubt the Academy would find some fresh hell to put in my second-year Trial packet. But none of that bothered me.

I’d spent my whole adult life finishing a shift with half the problems still waiting on my desk. Apparently becoming Santa worked the same way. That was fine. In fact, that was great. While I’d hated working for Northstar, I’d never really minded the work itself as much as what it stood for. Now that I was working for the good guys, the prospect of more challenges ahead actually filled me with a burst of the Christmas spirit I’d thought I’d lost all those years ago.

Noelle snapped her folder closed and stalked toward the Academy like she had something more important to do. Maybe she did. She was Kris Kringle’s daughter, after all. She wasn’t quite as cold as Bea was, but as far as ice princesses went, she definitely had the looks to back up the attitude. I found my gaze traveling to her backside as she crossed the platform and wondered if she was the kind of ice princess who would try to freeze my heart until it stopped beating or if she’d melt in my hands if I could get her to drop her guard around me.

Then again, maybe it wasn’t a great idea to go after Santa’s only daughter. At least, not until it was certain that I was going to survive to take the coat. I wanted to keep old Kris Kringle on my side for as long as possible. The Academy door slammed behind Noelle, cutting off my view.

But I still had four gorgeous women holding on to me, their joined Gifts moving inside my chest with every breath. I'd earned myself another year. The second Trial could wait.

Tonight, I had every intention of enjoying my Bonds and celebrating our first win as a team, together in every way.

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Chapter 20



The Hearth was roaring when I finally made it to the Workshop on Christmas morning. Red light shone through the grates in the floor, and the great hall was so warm that several elves had stripped down to their undershirts. Down in the Hearth chamber, the needle stood well past the silver line. Cheer continued to pour in as the last deliveries settled into homes around the world.

Nobody seemed worried about conserving it anymore. Food covered the long tables, glasses refilled themselves, and exhausted elves had fallen asleep wherever they found room. Everyone at the North Pole village had spent the whole year preparing for this. Now that the night was over, most of them appeared determined to eat until they passed out.

Britta, Liesl, Rin, Paloma, and I arrived late. We had a good reason, and the satisfied smile Rin wore made it clear she would happily explain that reason to anyone who asked.

Kris slumped at the head table with his red coat open and his boots propped on an empty chair. Every one of his Bonds had gathered around him, mature elf women who looked nearly as exhausted as he did. Holly Kringle rested

against one shoulder, while Marta remained perfectly composed at the other, with a small wooden box waiting in front of her.

“How did the rest of the night go?” I asked. “Did Krampus cause any more trouble?”

“We finished on schedule.” Kris picked up his coffee with both hands. “Krampus didn’t give us anything we couldn’t handle, at least for now. But I’m starting to feel my age.”

“As soon as we’re done here, I’ll be whisking Kris away to bed,” Marta said. “Where I hope he will sleep, for once.”

Kris winked at me. “That’s not what she hopes I’ll do.”

I laughed as Marta slapped his shoulder. “Do not start with me, for Christmas’s sake. Or I’ll use my magic to knock you out and *make* you rest.”

“Don’t tempt her, Kris,” Holly said with a mischievous grin. “She’ll do it. And then the rest of us won’t get to play!”

Marta shook her head as she pushed the wooden box across the table to me. “Don’t listen to these degenerates. Merry Christmas, Cole.”

I opened it. A brass key rested inside, with a tiny palm tree stamped into its round head.

“What’s this?”

“A key to the Summer House,” Marta replied. “You and your Bonds have three weeks there before your second Academy year begins.”

I turned the key over in my fingers. “Where is it?”

“On a tropical island protected inside the Long Night,” Kris said. “You’ll have the place to yourselves.”

“When you’re ready to leave, use it in the lock on your tower door,” Marta said.

That sounded significantly better than the corporate retreat where I’d met my end, but I was a little suspicious of all-inclusive vacations. “There aren’t going to be team-building exercises, are there?”

“Only if the five of you arrange them yourselves.” Marta glanced at Rin, who had wrapped both arms around one of mine. “The Summer House is reserved for Santas, their Bonds, and candidates who have passed a Trial. No faculty, no lessons, and no route work. You have earned time to recover.”

“There’s a private beach and hot springs,” Kris added. “You’ll love it. We used to spend every January there until Marta convinced me to buy into that timeshare in the Bahamas.”

She giggled. “I just love the Junkanoo festival in Nassau. I like to be there every New Year!”

Liesl took the key from me, and Britta and Paloma leaned in to examine it. Rin pressed her mouth against my ear.

“Three weeks somewhere no one can interrupt us,” she whispered. “I’m going to do terrible things to you.”

I kissed her. “Well then, I guess we need to get packed.”



We returned to my tower and carried the women's trunks to the second-floor dormitory before packing for the Summer House. Noelle's passing mark had officially ended the rule keeping my Bonds from moving in. Four of the twelve beds had been claimed. Their clothes filled the closets and chests beside them, and familiar belongings had begun to collect on the desks.

Rin started up the stairs to my suite with her trunk.

"Your bed is down here," I said. "We'll work out a fair schedule for nights in my room."

She looked at the other women. "I want tonight."

"We'll work out a schedule," I repeated.

Rin muttered curses under her breath as she lugged her trunk back to the bed she had claimed, glaring at me the whole time.

Marta had arranged clothes suitable for the Summer House, since my wardrobe contained nothing intended for weather above freezing. I packed the shirts, shorts, and swimming trunks into a case. Then I pulled my laptop bag from beneath the desk.

Britta took it out of my hand.

“Marta said no route work.”

“I wasn’t planning to work.”

“Then you don’t need it.”

“I might want to check some things,” I said. “I still haven’t had a chance to look at the complete results of our altered European run.”

Liesl set the bag back beneath the desk. “The route held. Bell has the records, and if anything failed after we landed, he’ll know where to find me when we get back.”

“But…”

Liesl kissed my protests away. “They’ll survive without us, I promise.”

Paloma closed my case while I was still considering an argument. Rin sat on top of it, plucked the key out of Liesl’s hand, and tucked it between her breasts.

“Now you can’t go anywhere without me,” she said.

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“I know.” She grinned. “But I like the extra security.”

I left the laptop beneath the desk. The girls were right. I didn’t need it if we were going to be relaxing in the sun. The last thing I needed was to bring my old workaholic lifestyle choices into the afterlife.

When the girls were ready, Rin drew the key from between her breasts and dropped it into my palm. Marta had said the key would fit the lock on my tower door. I wasn't really sure how that would work, but hey. Who was I to question magic?

I inserted it into the lock on my tower door and turned it. Bright sunlight filled the crack around the frame. I opened the door onto a stone terrace.

Warm, damp air struck my face. Beyond the terrace, pale sand curved between black volcanic rocks. Clear blue water reached to the horizon. Palm trees shaded a white house with broad windows and a red tile roof, and steam rose from pools farther up the slope.

Britta stepped through beside me and laughed. She dropped her case, kicked off her boots, and ran across the terrace in her stockings.

"You should change first," Paloma called after her.

"Later," Britta called back.

The rest of us carried the cases inside. The house had left cold drinks on the table and bathing clothes folded on every bed. It also had enough bedrooms for all of us, although Rin moved her case into mine while I was changing and dared anyone to remove it.

By the time I reached the beach, Britta had changed into a dark-green bikini and waded into the surf. The top stretched across her chest while narrow straps crossed the muscles of her back. She turned at the sound of my footsteps and swept her wet braid over one shoulder.

"Race you to the rocks," she said.

"You've already had time to inspect the current."

“Are you afraid I’ll beat you?”

“I’m afraid you’ll try to drown me when you realize I’m beating you.”

Britta grinned. “I wouldn’t do that. I might pin you to the rocks and have my way with you when we get there.”

“Sounds like a win-win situation to me.”

She dove into the next wave. I followed her. The water was as warm as bathwater. Britta’s pale braid remained visible beneath the clear surface. I caught her halfway to the rocks. She grabbed my arm, twisted, and tried to pull me under. I locked one arm around her waist and dragged her against me.

Britta planted both hands on my shoulders and shoved. I held on as we sank together and kissed her under the waves. I could still touch the soft sandy bottom with the tips of my toes.

When we surfaced, Rin was swimming toward us with far more speed than her small body should have produced. Her black bikini consisted mostly of strings, and her eyes remained fixed on the arm I had around Britta.

“You started without me,” she complained.

“We were racing,” I said. “We just got distracted.”

“You’re rubbing your cock against her,” the smaller woman accused. “I can tell.”

“I am not!”

Britta glanced down between us. “He definitely is.”

“Only because you were rubbing yourself all over me.”

“You should wrestle with me instead.” Rin reached us and climbed onto my back. Her thighs locked around my waist while she bit the edge of my ear. “I’m much easier to overpower.”

Liesl splashed into the shallows in a bright red bikini that showed off her tight curves and the freckles across her shoulders. Paloma followed more slowly in white and held her arms across her stomach when I looked at her.

She was gorgeous. The white fabric contrasted with her warm brown skin, and the cups pushed her full breasts high against her chest. Her thick dark hair fell loose over one shoulder instead of being tied back for the Kitchens.

“Come on,” I called. “The water’s warm!”

She lowered her arms and smiled. Liesl caught her hand and drew her deeper into the water.

Much later, as the sun lowered, we climbed the volcanic slope to the hot springs. A broad pool overlooked the beach, surrounded by black stone and flowering shrubs. Paloma leaned against my chest while the others settled close enough that bare legs and wet skin overlapped beneath the steaming water. Rin eventually claimed my lap and settled there with possessive satisfaction.

Warmth moved through the Bond and carried all four women with it. Flight, Craft, Sight, and Hearth rested together inside me. Next year, four more Gifts would join them. I wondered what they would be, and whether I had already met the women who carried them.



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