

A Very Bounty Christmas

December 1st

“Have you all been good boys and girls?”

“Yeah!” came the collective response of various ankle biters.

“And are you all ready to meet Santa?” asked Santa’s curviest elf with a smile that lit up her face.

“Yeah!” they screamed in deafeningly loud tones - much to the chagrin of their parents.

“Well, here he is!” Carly the elf jumped up and down, squealing and clapping almost as loudly as the kids.

The elf costume, while respectable on the slim female it was intended for, was downright risqué on Carly’s voluptuous form. Her mate, Jackson lived in constant fear that she might just burst out of it altogether. He wasn’t worried about potentially scarring young children. No, he just didn’t like the idea of any other male setting his pervy eyes on his mate. Her luscious form was for him and him alone. His wolf howled in agreement.

Jackson was a wolf shifter, and Carly was a fox shifter. They were both bounty hunters. They met over a year ago when she was charged with murder, and he was tasked with hunting her down when she skipped her court date. It all worked out in the end. She was exonerated, and she caught herself a prize mate – *even if he did say so himself*. They had been living, more or less, happily ever after since. They fought a lot, but they also made up a lot. It was bliss.

His wolf grumbled. What wasn’t bliss were assholes checking out his female. He ought to run out there and rip their fucking throats out. Of course, Carly wasn’t helping the situation. He swore she had no idea the effect she had on men.

As it was, the way she was jumping up and down, parts of her were jiggling as if they were completely separate to her body. The kids hadn’t even noticed – they were young and innocent. But the dads in her audience were staring at her with wide eyes and bulging trouser fronts. The moms in the audience were trying to glare at the dads and Carly simultaneously. Carly didn’t pay any attention to them. At that moment she was waving at him, frantically and giving him the pout that he’d learned to mean ‘if you ever want to have sex again, you’ll do as I say’.

Crap.

He rearranged the pillow, scratched his chin – because the false beard was itchy as hell - and strode out of Santa’s workshop to his adoring audience.

“Ho, ho, ho,” he growled.

The kids went silent and stared at him, blinking with huge eyes. *Fuck, this was a bad idea.* How the hell would anyone believe he was Santa?

But, Carly would not be deterred. "Look, kids, it's Santa!"

Her enthusiasm was infectious because the kids soon started screaming again. *Ugh, he preferred quiet and subdued.* But he supposed they needed to play the part, or it would look suspicious.

They were hunting a toad shifter who had skipped his court day. And why was he making an ass out of himself by pretending to be Santa? Well, they had it on good authority that the toad would have to come and refill his prescription from the pharmacy right next to Santa's Magical Kingdom at the Playa Lunar Sunset Mall. They had tried every other avenue, and this seemed to be the last lead they had. Dressing up like idiots had been Carly's idea. He just hoped the fucking toad turned up quickly. No way could he stand this for long. The day before, two kids yanked his beard off, four hit him with the crappy toy they were giving out to everyone, one brat actually peed on his leg and smiled while doing it, another sneezed on him, and three burst into tears.

He stomped over to Santa's chair and slumped into it. It was going to be a *long* day.

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"See? That wasn't so bad, was it?"

He muttered under his breath.

Jackson slammed the door to the workshop. It wasn't quite so magical on the inside. Basically, it was where they stored their real clothes, the cheap gifts he was forced to hand out and for some reason, a dozen or so folding chairs.

Carly pulled off her hat and fake ears. "Ugh, this is a fun job, but I'm glad I don't have to wear this costume for too long."

"Yeah, like your costume is so bad." Jackson pulled off the beard and threw it against the wall. It kind of made him feel better. He pulled the pillow out and turned to look at her. "At least you... you... thong..." Words failed him.

She was bent over pulling her boots off, giving him a full view of her thigh highs and thong. His wolf virtually drooled at the lush pink globes pointing in his direction.

"What was that?" she asked, muffled as she wrestled with her boots.

He dropped the pillow. The urge to go to her, to touch her was unbearable; he was going to... *hey, wait a moment.* "Foxy!" he snapped, and she spun at his angry tone, giving him a quizzical look. "Have you been wearing that thong and those damn thigh highs the whole time we've been out there?"

She smirked. "Well, it would be indecent to go commando."

His wolf snarled. "Anyone could have seen you. All those men were already coming in their pants from looking at your tits. If you bent over you might have given them a fucking heart attack!"

Carly pouted. "But I wore them for you."

"Wait, what?"

She sauntered over to him, swinging her hips. Wordlessly, she took his hand and led him to one of the folding chairs, pushing him to sit down.

"I knew today would be difficult for you, so I wanted to make sure you know how much I appreciate it."

Carly slipped to the floor in front of him. He actually gulped as her hand ran up his thigh and squeezed his growing erection.

Her mouth formed an O of shock. "Oh, Santa! This is certainly a big package you have here. I wonder what it can be. Maybe I should unwrap it."

Jackson chuckled. "Cute."

Deftly, she opened his pants, and his manhood sprang out. "Oh, it's just what I wanted. Is this all for me Santa?" she teased. "Well, I suppose it must be. I have been a very good girl this year." She pouted angelically before her lips curled, wickedly. "But maybe I ought to be a bad girl now."

Carly winked at him before sucking the head into her mouth. Jackson groaned as she swirled her tongue and suckled at his flesh.

"Foxy," he breathed and gently laced his fingers in her hair as she bobbed up and down his length.

She let him go with a wet pop and her hands rapidly massaged his length. "Oh, Santa, will you fill my stocking?"

"Fuck, Carly!" he growled and grabbed her by the waist. He ripped the thong away and yanked her down his member. She yelped at the sudden intrusion and wrapped herself around his body. It didn't take much. He was already fit to burst. He thrust into her three times before he exploded. Reaching between them, he pinched her clit and Carly's orgasm quickly followed his.

Carly panted and quivered against his chest as they came down from their high. "Mmm, maybe you can bring the costume home?" She punctuated each word with a roll of her hips.

Jackson snorted and kneaded her buttocks. "You get turned on by Santa? Really?"

"Don't you find my elf costume sexy?"

"Well yeah, but I thought you were sexy when you dressed as a Ghostbuster for Mia's Halloween party. But Santa's a fat old geezer. And come on," he wagged his eyebrows, "a man who only *comes* once a year – where's the incentive?"

"And I thought I was the only one capable of dirty innuendo."

“Oh, I am very capable, trust me.”

“Hmmm, well, I guess we better get going. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “Terrific.”

Carly pulled back and grinned, naughtily. “Oh, wolfy, if you think what we just did was fun, just wait until tomorrow night.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I have lots planned for us – something exciting every day right up until Christmas. Think of me as a slutty advent calendar.”

Jackson beamed. “Maybe working here won’t be so bad.” His wolf roared in agreement.

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December 5th

“Darling, I thought you were still in bed.”

Viktor hid the invitation behind his back.

His mate, Alma stretched her long, lithe form and Viktor gaped. Yes, no matter how many times he saw her lovely, naked body, it never seemed to be enough.

They were both vampires. But while Viktor had been alive and turned for decades, Alma was barely even a year old in terms of being a vampire. As to how old she was when she was *vamped*, that was a closely guarded secret that she literally took to her death.

Vampires didn’t tend to need rest unless it had been a long time since they fed. But Alma was too used to being human. She still felt the urge to go to bed and sleep. She could sleep, but her body didn’t need it. It was the same reason she still breathed and tried to eat food.

Alma had been turned after she almost died at the hands of a vampire with a grudge against Viktor. Course they were mates and Viktor had always intended on turning her, but the choice had ultimately been taken out of their hands.

“What are you hiding?” she purred.

“Me? I’m not hiding anything,” he said nonchalantly.

Alma shrugged a thin shoulder and sashayed through their apartment, swinging her hips far more than necessary. *Not that he was complaining.*

When she was *vamped*, they were living in Playa Lunar, a supernatural heavy city in California. But the sunny climes of Playa Lunar were hardly friendly to a newborn vamp. So Viktor had whisked her north. They were living in Serpens City in an apartment block that specifically catered to those with a serious aversion to the sun. It rained about eighty percent of the time, but at least they didn’t get heatwaves.

For the first few months of her rebirth, they stayed in a cabin as far away from any humans as possible. Going nuts and attacking humans was not unheard of for newborns. Suddenly turning into a vampire can give you a real thirst. But, Alma was the most controlled vamp Viktor had ever met. *She made it look damn easy.* Viktor, after decades of practice, struggled more than she did! Of course, Alma was a witch before she turned. She'd learned to control her witchy powers when she was young. Perhaps that kind of self-control helped.

But why on earth was his pointy-toothed goddess wandering over to the window when she knew it was the middle of the day?

She placed a delicate hand on the heavy drapes, readying to pull them back and he was across the room and pulling her away before she could suck in a breath she didn't need.

"What the fuck, Alma?" he roared, pulling her naked body against his. He was pretending not to feel the hard points of her nipples pressing against his chest.

Over time, vampires built up a tolerance to the sun. But if that drape had been opened – she would be freaking toast right about now.

"Marcus and Ling are having a Christmas party," she read over his shoulder.

It took him a couple of moments to realize that he was no longer holding the invitation. It was now daintily grasped in her elegant hand. He hadn't even noticed her plucking it out of his hand as he *rescued* her.

"Devious minx," he growled into her shoulder. "We're not going."

Alma let out a sound of disgust and pushed him away from her. Reluctantly, he let her.

"Marcus and Ling are my friends."

"You've never even met Ling."

"Well, she's my future friend!" snapped Alma.

Marcus and Viktor had been friends for years, and when Alma started working at Marcus' bounty hunter agency, she met and fell in love with Viktor. Marcus was pretty much the only friend either of them really had. Vampires didn't tend to keep people close due to a tendency to try and suck their blood. Instead, they had *acquaintances*. And any friends Alma had, didn't want to know her now she was a vampire.

Since they had left Playa Lunar, Marcus had surprised them by getting mated and married and producing twin boys. *Well, at least, Ling produced twin boys, but Marcus assured them he had something to do with it.* Marcus had sent them a picture of the twins along with the invitation. They were black haired, chubby cheeked and shared their father's piercing stare.

"We shouldn't go. We shouldn't risk it. Being around people can be difficult when you're so young."

Alma waved a hand airily. "I'm around people all the time."

“You’re not around babies all the time,” he muttered.

She gaped at him, horrified. “You don’t really think I would do anything to hurt them?”

Viktor winced. “Not intentionally. But I know how vampire minds think. The younger the blood, the tastier it is. When it comes to vampires, you’ve only known me, and I am a fucking paragon of virtue compared to ninety percent of the undead population.”

“I’ll nominate you for sainthood, shall I,” she hissed acidly.

“But...”

“I am not the sort of person to go around eating babies, never mind my friends’ babies.”

“You’re coping well with the transition, but...”

Alma pouted and fluttered her long eyelashes. *Oh lord*. For a dead, guy he felt particularly hot right at that moment. She pressed her body against his. Her breasts crushed against his chest and he shuddered.

“Please, Viktor. It’s just one party. You know I could never regret becoming a vampire to be with you, but it is nice to have friends.”

Unconsciously, Viktor realized his hands were already creeping around her body and tracing patterns on her back. “I know, my love. I know.” He’d agonized for years about Alma becoming a vampire. He knew it was inevitable so they could be together, but dying for someone was a lot to ask.

Alma planted butterfly kisses along his collarbone. “I promise I’ll stay by your side all night. And if I look like I’m about to go crazy, you can carry me out of there and spank me like the naughty little vampire I am.” She wiggled her bare rear for emphasis, and he groaned.

“Please, Viktor. It’s just one night.”

He was weak. He was pathetic. He was a slave to his goddess of a mate. “Okay, just one night.”

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December 21st

“Did you remember to pick up the ice?”

“Yes.”

“Did you remember to get the wreath for the door?”

“Already up.”

Ling paced up and down their bedroom, going into near meltdown. *Why did she think planning a Christmas party would be easy?* It sounded fine – get some food, drink and invite people – piece of cake really. Except, it meant sending out handwritten invitations, finding

out their food allergies, finding out which family members were fighting with which, sourcing caterers, decorating the house, cleaning the house, buying presents, hiring a Santa Claus to keep the kids entertained and managing to stop her mother from interfering with all of her plans. Maybe it didn't sound too horrific to the seasoned party thrower – but this was Ling's first party. And her family was big on Christmas. It was the one holiday her terrifying mother had embraced with glee ever since she came to America. *Therefore, it had to be perfect.*

Usually, her parents threw the annual Christmas party, but given that Ling was now mated and married, her mother decided Ling should take over from her. *Or more like guilted her into it.* 'After all, little one' – her mother had said – 'it's not like you have anything else to do. Your husband is at work all the time, and you must have something to occupy your time'.

Ling did. They were called Asher and Ellison; they were six-month-old twins and they took up every waking moment. But instead of saying that, she had simply caved and agreed to hold the party. Only now it was turning into an even bigger party because, in spite of Marcus who said he didn't care either way, she had invited his family. And of course, they were all coming.

The hell was she thinking?

Marcus, her mate, was sprawled on the bedroom floor playing peek-a-boo with both of the twins at that moment. Her inner beast melted at seeing her handsome men laughing and playing together. The babies looked more like her, with black hair and light brown skin. But they both had their daddy's green eyes. She suspected they would both take after him when they became shifters.

Ling was a red panda shifter, and Marcus a boa constrictor shifter. They met when Ling, at the insistence of her best friend Carly, came to work at his bail bond agency. It was love at first sight, although there were a couple of hiccups along the way while her ex-husband was trying to win her back, and her ex-boyfriend's wife was trying to kill her - but that was all in the past. Now they were married, living in a beautiful new house – that thankfully wasn't situated anywhere near her parents' house – and had two perfect, if a little noisy, baby boys.

She looked at her watch. "The ice sculpture's late."

Marcus arched an eyebrow. "You ordered an ice sculpture?"

"No," she said, patiently, "my mother did. It's going to be in the shape of an angel. She also hired a professional quartet to play live music."

He gazed at her for a moment, an inscrutable look on his face.

She could sense he was annoyed about something, but he was trying not to let it slip through their bond. "What's that look for?"

His jaw ticked. "Nothing, I just hope they can do the theme from Jurassic Park, that's my favorite."

"They'll be doing Christmas carols." Ling grabbed her pad and went through it checking her list. Marcus stood and scooped the babies into his arms.

"Where are you taking them?" she snapped in a panic. "I still have to bathe them, and dress them – my mother made them elf costumes for the party, if they're not in them she'll..."

"Beautiful," he said calmly, as the heat rose to her cheeks. "Mia's already here - I asked her to come by to keep these two out of trouble."

Ling felt relief and then guilt. She'd been so busy with the party over the last week she'd palmed her children off on far too many reluctant babysitters. "But I should..."

"No, you're stressed. Let Mia take them, she'll give them back, I promise."

Mia was Marcus' niece and a bunny shifter. The twins adored her. Well, of course, they did she thought sulkily. Mia didn't give them disgusting medicine when they were sick or force them into taking a nap when they didn't want to. They loved their cousin Mia – *she wasn't mean like Mommy!* Her panda tried to soothe her, but everything was irritating her.

"Fine," she muttered. "I have to get dressed anyway."

Marcus wordlessly left the room and Ling sniffed and looked in the mirror. "Pull yourself together, panda," she told herself. "You've got it all – don't go to pieces over a stupid party."

She pulled her t-shirt over her head.

"Good advice," rumbled a deep voice behind her.

She jumped as she realized Marcus was standing behind her. "You scared me," she grumbled petulantly.

Marcus knelt behind her and kissed her neck. She sighed. "Oh, I don't think we have time."

"Make time," he mumbled against her skin.

His hands slipped around her waist and settled on the swell of her stomach. She tried to push him away, but he wouldn't budge.

"Don't touch me there."

Marcus looked up in surprise, meeting her eyes in the mirror. "What? Your stomach?"

"Yes, I... I don't like it."

She could feel his confusion. "You used to love it when I kissed your bellybutton."

"That was before."

"Before?"

“Before I was carrying baby weight,” she hissed. *Did she really have to spell it out?* She was curvy before she gave birth to twins, but since then she had barely lost any baby weight. She thought running around after the twins would help, but she just seemed to be eating more than ever.

“Ling!” he growled. “You’re beautiful, and if I want to touch your stomach, I am going to touch your stomach.”

She felt a quiver at his dominant tone and her panda yipped. She loved it when he got bossy. But at that moment, she was tired, she felt fat, and everything was annoying her – she just wasn’t in the mood.

Ling folded her arms, and Marcus sighed. “Beautiful, we’ve had sex since the babies were born, you never said anything before.”

“I wasn’t naked before. I’ve been covered every time we had sex since the birth.” Mostly because the only times they’d managed to be together had been quickies in the back seat of their car after the few date nights they’d managed – now canceled since their last babysitter’s mate started a fire in the kitchen. *It was Jackson.* The other times had been right before they went to bed and Ling was too tired to get undressed. Or hurried fumbles right after they woke up when there was no point in undressing as the babies would be awake any second.

Marcus’ eyes gleamed, and she felt his stirring arousal reignite. “How very neglectful of me,” he purred, “because there is no sight in the world more gorgeous than you without your clothes on. I’d hate for you to think otherwise. I really think I should get you naked right now.”

His fingers danced over her stomach, but she wouldn’t budge. “The guests will be arriving any minute.”

“They’ll wait.” His fingers teased open the ratty old bra she was wearing. *Her sexiness went down another notch.*

“I have to be there when they arrive – it’ll look rude if I’m not.”

Marcus shrugged. “So look rude.”

She whimpered as he nipped her neck. “You don’t understand.”

He growled and moved away from her. “I understand your mother guilted you into throwing this stupid party and has been trying to micro-manage every decision you make. I also know she tries to tell you how to raise our children, and I know we haven’t had sex in over two weeks!”

“Marcus...”

He stopped and looked at her sternly. “Is it me? Is it something I’ve done?”

Her panda twittered. She was about to answer when someone knocked on the door.

“What?” snarled Marcus.

“Temper, temper,” teased Carly through the door.

Ling pulled her t-shirt back on. “What is it, Carly?”

“Your Santa called to cancel – he can’t make it, he has the flu. Also the ice sculpture’s stuck in a jam on the freeway, and it’s melting. And the caterers have arrived, but instead of the Christmas Wonderland menu, they’ve brought the Chinese New Year banquet.”

Ling rubbed her temples. “I’ll be right there.” She gave her simmering mate a forlorn look. “Can we talk about this later?”

“Sure.” He turned on his heel and disappeared into the bathroom. Seconds later, the shower started.

She tried to push through their bond and soothe him, but she found it closed. Her beast whined.

Great. So bad mother, bad party planner and add to that, bad mate. Yep, she was a failure at life.

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“Thank you so much for doing this,” gushed Ling.

Logan looked at Mia, who gave him a pleading look. His bear grumbled, but he wasn’t about to say no to his mate. He turned back to Ling. “Hey, we’re family – family helps family.”

Ling gave him a brittle smile and leaned up to pinch his cheek. “That’s why you’re my favorite nephew.”

Logan snorted as Ling bounced away to tackle another disaster. He was about six years older than her, but yeah, technically he was her nephew. Ling was mated to Marcus. Mia was Marcus’ niece, and Logan was mated to Mia.

“Thank you,” cooed his little mate as she snuggled against him. “I thought Ling was going into meltdown – I had to volunteer you.”

Logan shrugged and wrapped his beefy arms around his mate. “Hey, it’s just one night. And if Jackson can play Santa, I’m pretty sure anyone on the planet can.”

He pressed kisses into her hair, and she sighed against him. They’d met at her uncle’s bail bond agency. Mia ran the office, and Logan was a bounty hunter. Logan was a bear shifter, and Mia a bunny shifter. Some people laughed at how different the two of them were. Logan was over seven feet tall and generally had trouble with any kind of technology unless he was using it to punch someone. *A computer keyboard makes quite an effective weapon.* Mia was just over five feet and loved computers. She had spent a lot of time before she met him playing online games. Course, now he generally kept her busy. As far as his mate was concerned, he was inexhaustible.

Logan didn't have any family left, so merging into Mia's wasn't exactly smooth, particularly as they were predominantly snake shifters who hated his guts for taking their little bunny away from them. But, Marcus and Ling were cool, and Mia's mom, Karen was on his side – she was another bunny and knew all too well about disapproving parents. Many years ago, her own weren't thrilled when she ran off to mate Mia's dad, Matthew.

"You'll be the sexiest Santa ever," she murmured.

"Well, that is true." His bear growled in agreement.

He swung her tiny body into the air, and she made a gagging noise. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry." He set her on the ground, and she steadied herself against him while clamping one hand over her mouth.

"I'm fine; it was just that seafood from the other night." She turned a little green before whispering, "It keeps repeating on me."

Logan winced. His mate was, in general, a vegetarian, but after much cajoling from him, she had agreed to try a new seafood restaurant a few days ago. She'd been sick as a rabbit that couldn't stop throwing up ever since. He felt inordinately guilty.

"Baby..."

"No, really, it's fine I'm..." Her stomach made a disturbing grumbling noise. "I was wrong!"

She scuttled toward the bathroom with Logan lumbering after her.

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Francine thrust out her breasts and pouted at the caterers. She'd spent two hours getting dressed, and she was milking her fabulous appearance for all it was worth. She'd swiped a dress from the last stage show she appeared in – Chicago in which she played Velma. And she looked like a siren.

"But can't you guys just serve the food you brought?" she pouted.

One of the pimply waiters groaned. "This is actually meant for a party across town."

"But you're here now." She gave him a tentative smile, that, had it been aimed at her mate, would have had him out of his pants in seconds flat.

Francine was an actress and a flamingo shifter. When it came to flirting and getting her own way, she was great – *hell, it was just acting*. It was being herself that had always been hard for her.

Recently she'd been accused of murder, and when she'd skipped her court date, a beefcake of a bounty hunter had been sent after her – a rhino shifter called Stone. She ran from him; he caught her, she ran again... it was a long story, but it culminated in him catching and mating her.

His first name was Ronald, but he preferred it if she didn't spread that around. Only his stepmom called him Ronald. *And only Francine called him Ronny when she was in a particularly saucy mood.*

Now, they were attending his boss' Christmas party, and since the boss' wife was fretting over every detail that appeared to be going wrong, Francine had offered to help with the caterers. Apparently, they had turned up with entirely the wrong menu and were now trying to take it away to another party.

It involved a lot of cajoling and pouting on her part, but she'd almost convinced them to stay and just give her the food.

Francine placed a hand on the arm of the waiter in charge. "But we don't have any food for our party without this."

"It's meant for someone else..."

"Who probably has our food and is probably enjoying it right now. I say we just call it a trade."

The headwaiter frowned. "We're not supposed to..."

"Please, you'd be doing me an awfully big favor."

His eyes took on a dazed, lusty expression - probably partially caused by how much perfume she was wearing. Stone said she virtually bathed in it. Not that he minded. He didn't mind anything that potentially scared other males away.

"Well, I... I'm not sure. Company policy..."

"What the fuck?!" roared a furious voice.

Francine beamed, but the waiter nearly jumped a foot in the air as Stone filled the doorway. *And she did mean fill.* The man was enormous – every part of him was enormous. And in that suit, ooh, he looked like a beefy James Bond. Her inner bird almost swooned. The effect was slightly ruined because they couldn't close the shirt at the neck. Her honey had a huge neck, and they couldn't get shirts to fit properly. But it didn't matter – her bird still simpered like a southern belle.

And he couldn't have had better timing. When finesse wouldn't work, outright bullying might.

"Oh, honey!" she gushed. "This gentleman was just telling me that he was going to take away all our food. I'm very upset by that."

Stone virtually pinned the guy against a wall with just a look. The other waiters started backing away. "You upset my mate?" he demanded, furiously.

Francine nodded piously.

“No, no, no...” stammered the young man.

Stone edged into the room, careful not to break the door frame. Shifters were big – *just look at seven-foot Logan* – but Stone was massive, shorter in height than the bear, but a heck of a lot wider. Stone could menace people by just standing still and doing nothing.

“Nobody upsets my mate,” he growled.

“Okay, okay!” The young man held up his hands. “We’ll stay, it’s fine, we’ll stay!”

Francine smiled at the young man flew out of the room and started barking orders at the other waiters.

“How was that?” asked Stone as he pulled her into his arms.

“Oh, honey, you should really think about becoming an actor. You’re a natural.”

Her flamingo squawked in happiness as he kissed her.

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Alma grinned as Carly gave her a huge hug. It was kind of hard to do it one handed as Viktor hadn’t let go of her other hand all night, but he wasn’t going to hear her complaining about that.

“It’s so good to see you! Isn’t it great, Jackson?” Carly virtually bounced up and down while Jackson grunted and shoved five mini spring rolls into his mouth.

She’d already met Ling and the twins, who were all adorable, and she hadn’t felt the urge to sink her teeth into any of them. She’d had a fond reunion with Mia and Logan and was even thrilled to meet Stone’s new mate. Francine gave her a hug that Stone ended after a few seconds. *He heard that vampires were sexual beings, and he didn’t want Francine to get any ideas.*

Alma squeezed her mate’s hand. “See I told you it’d be fine.”

Viktor pouted, and she rolled her eyes. He was too damn pretty for his own good. It was annoying really. Not only was he prettier than her, but younger, too. He wasn’t very old when he was turned, but she had been thirty-eight. It shouldn’t matter to her now that she was dead and technically exempt from the aging game, but it still did. *Maybe because she still felt human.*

She didn’t get the urge to drink blood. Of course, she enjoyed drinking her mate’s blood – but that was because it was his and it was a sex thing. She drank synthetic blood to keep herself alive. But she didn’t go crazy over it the way she used to for real food. Maybe she was a vampire freak because she still enjoyed real food. It didn’t nourish her, but she still enjoyed it.

Viktor was just being overprotective. But he needed to calm down and trust her.

Francine frowned at her. "Oh, sweetie your mascara's smeared. Come with me, I'll fix it."

Alma tried to move, but Viktor tightened his grip. "I'll just be a minute."

"Yeah," agreed Francine. "I'm an expert at makeup."

"Well you spend enough hours in front of a mirror," muttered Stone, with just the hint of a pout.

"When the alternative is looking at you, I'm not surprised," teased Alma. She turned to her mate. "Seriously, I'll just be a minute."

Viktor growled but let her go. "Hurry back."

Alma brushed her lips against his. "Love you."

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Ling bit her lip. *Everything was going okay.* The food was fine – even her mother hadn't complained about the Chinese banquet. She seemed to think it was a good idea for their new family to get to know their Chinese roots. That was a stroke of luck.

The ice sculpture never arrived, but thankfully Francine knew an actor who was willing to pretend to be a living statue. The kids were currently trying to make him break character – all to no avail.

And Logan was doing great as Santa. *Although possibly too great.* Some of the older party guests – the female ones anyway – were quite taken with the huge, hunky Santa and insisted on sitting on his knee. Mia was not pleased.

Her little beast yipped as her mother tapped her shoulder. "This is a very nice party, little one."

Ling sighed in relief. "Thank you, mother."

She caught sight of Carly and her sister, Shuang who were dancing with her babies and smiled. Then she caught sight of Marcus standing on the veranda drinking alone and her heart clenched.

"See? Having it all isn't so hard, is it?"

Ling narrowed her eyes. "I've been so busy I've barely seen my mate or spent any time with my children in the last two weeks."

Her mother frowned. "I can see them now. Your children are fine, and your mate is right outside."

"That's not what I meant," she ground out. "I've barely played with the kids and me and Marcus we... we haven't been alone."

“Ridiculous. Your kids are here with you and you sleep with your mate every night. What more do you want?”

“More than that!” snapped Ling.

She looked around and saw her party guests looking at her. Marcus sensing her upset came back into the house and gave her a questioning look.

“I’m sorry,” she stammered and burst into tears. As she ran through the kitchen, she didn’t even notice Francine lying on the ground with blood on her neck.

*

“Ling!” called Mia.

Marcus stopped her. “I’ll go,” he rumbled and then sped after his mate.

Mia barely turned around before Shuang passed her Asher and jumped onto Logan’s knee. Her rabbit growled at the red panda shifter as Asher squirmed in her arms.

Logan gave Mia a helpless look under his beard as Shuang giggled. It was one thing for her Great Aunt Mildred to sit on Logan’s knee. It was quite another for Ling’s young, bubbly sister to do it.

Mia handed Asher to his grandmother and strode towards Shuang and the reluctant Santa to give them a piece of her mind. “Shuang, don’t you think you should give the kids a turn with Santa?”

The young red panda beamed. “But he’s so comfortable.”

Logan opened his mouth to object, and Mia cut him off. “Get off my mate, you panda skank!” Mia slapped her hands over her mouth. *She had no idea where that came from!* She tried to open her mouth to apologize, but instead she said, “Well, are you getting off or do I have to drag you off by your weave?”

Logan was shaking with laughter as he gently tried to push the clinging panda away from him.

Shuang squealed. “Mother, did you hear that?”

Her mother shrugged. “I am not surprised. I was the same when I was pregnant with Ling. Females can be quite aggressive especially when expecting their first.”

“What the what?” gasped Mia as her rabbit gaped.

“I can smell it on your scent.”

Karen, Mia’s mom, came forward and squeaked in excitement. “I knew there was something different about your scent. Congratulations sweetie.”

Her father, Matthew, followed and grunted his congratulations before wrapping an arm around Karen.

Logan stood up and strode over to Mia. Shuang yelped as she dropped to the ground.

“Mia? Baby? Is it true?”

She opened and closed her mouth like a fish. “I guess so. I mean, I just thought it was the fish making me sick.”

Logan pulled off the beard. “A baby? A cub?”

“Or a kit,” she added. “It could still be a rabbit.”

“This is incredible!” boomed Logan sweeping her into his arms. He stopped spinning her long enough to look into her eyes. “Right?”

Mia nodded. “I’m thrilled.” She leaned in for a kiss but pulled back sharply. “But I don’t think we’re done with the morning sickness yet.”

“Bathroom?”

“Bathroom.”

Logan made a break for it. “Watch out. Pregnant rabbit coming through!”

Mia giggled and then thought better of it. No, for the moment her rabbit would have to do the celebrating for both of them.

*

“Oh no! Viktor!”

Viktor ran into the kitchen. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

Alma’s bottom lip trembled. “I snapped! I couldn’t help it! I saw her juicy neck and I just... I haven’t eaten in a few days, and I couldn’t help myself.”

Viktor looked over her shoulder to see Francine panting on the ground; blood was splashed on her neck.

“What’ll we do? What’ll we do?” demanded Alma tearfully.

Viktor held her. “We have to finish her off. Finishing feeding and then we’ll attach cinder blocks to her and drop her in the sea and then...”

“What?” roared Stone, suddenly appearing and pulling Francine up into his arms. The flamingo shifter started giggling

Alma slapped Viktor’s arm. “You knew we were faking.”

“Of course, I knew!” he laughed. “I can tell that isn’t her blood.”

“How do you know it isn’t her blood?” asked Stone suspiciously.

“Come on, honey,” said Francine, “let’s give them some alone time.”

Alma smiled at her. “Thank you.”

Francine led away her grumbling mate and Alma pouted at hers. Viktor held up his hands. “You can’t be mad at me; you’re the one who played the trick.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m not mad. Just... I just want you to relax about me being out in the world.”

Viktor groaned. “I’m trying. It’s just if you did lose control, the Enforcers Agency could put you down like a damn animal. I can’t risk losing you.”

“I get why you are worried, but I’m fine. And I trust you to keep me in line. I can handle being a vampire. You forget that I was a totally kick ass human. Why wouldn’t I be a kick ass vampire?”

He chuckled. “That’s very true.”

“But I love you for wanting to take care of me.”

“That will never change, mate.” They kissed, and Viktor growled. “How about we try out one of Marcus’ guest bedrooms?”

“Won’t he mind?”

“I wasn’t planning on asking?”

“Lead the way, mate.”

*

Marcus caught up with Ling in the garage.

“What is wrong with you?” he demanded as she wriggled in his arms.

Ling’s face creased. “I can’t do it.”

“Can’t do what?” he hissed before taking on a brief look of panic. “Our marriage? You want...”

“No, I just... I just can’t be a good wife and mother.”

Marcus snorted as his beast howled in objection. “You’re a great mom, and a wonderful wife.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“No, I’m not,” he snapped. “Where is all this coming from?”

Ling sniffed. "It's just I barely even have time to care for my kids, never mind anything else. And you even had to get me a nanny for the first few months."

Marcus stroked a finger over her cheek. "Beautiful, the nanny was for both of us - we both needed help, we were both new at looking after children."

"But when my mother..."

"Oh god!" he snarled, and his snake slithered. *That woman could be downright vicious without even realizing it.*

"When my mother," she persisted, "was raising us, she still organized dozens of huge parties and threw loads of perfect dinners to impress my dad's clients. She had like a thousand hobbies, and she did all our cooking, cleaning and ironing. And clearly she had time for my dad because he never once complained. You're lucky if I'm even awake by the time you get home." Her cheeks dusted pink with the effort of her rant.

"First of all, you're not your mother. She's... well, she..." He took on a pained expression. "She has some admirable traits." *Although, he doubted he could name any if pressed.* If he were married to her, he wouldn't want to spend time with her, and he imagined Ling's father felt the same way. "But she's not half the woman you are. Do you really want our kids to have the same relationship with you that you have with your mother?"

Ling shivered. "No, definitely not." She was terrified of disappointing her mother. Although Ling conceded that her mother meant well, she tended to interfere and do what was right for herself, rather than Ling.

"You won't, you're far too loving to allow that to happen. Your mother tries to run her house with military precision. I prefer your method of marginally controlled chaos. Don't try to be her, Ling, for my sake if not your own."

"But..."

"So you're not an expert at throwing parties – who gives a crap? And dinner parties? Beautiful, my clients are almost all criminals – they're not setting foot in my fucking house, never mind anywhere near my family.

"And hobbies? Come on. You told me you'd die before you started indulging in tennis or spin classes. And as for me, I can cook, I can iron, and I can certainly clean the house. No offense, beautiful – but I managed to survive on my own before you came along."

"But you shouldn't have to do those things, you work all day," she persisted with an adorable trembling lip.

"And then I get to come home to you and the babies. You think that isn't worth me throwing something in the oven and scrubbing the toilet?" He pressed his forehead against hers and his beast sighed in happiness. A moment with his mate was worth a thousand scrubbed toilets. "We are not your mother and father." *It was his turn to shiver at the mere*

idea. “We’re more than that. We’re partners, and I’m sorry I didn’t realize that earlier when you were planning this damn monster of a party.”

“What are you talking about? You’ve been nothing but supportive.”

“No, I just didn’t object. I was too busy feeling pissed at you for not standing up to your mother. I should have helped you to organize the whole thing.”

“You picked up the ice and the wreath,” she offered generously.

Marcus chuckled. “I mean really help. This isn’t your party, and definitely not your mother’s - it’s ours. I should have been helping you. It’s our first Christmas with the boys – it deserves to be marked with a big party. Our first annual family Christmas party.”

Ling sniffled. “You mean you want to do this again next year?”

“With a few changes. I would never sign off on an ice sculpture.” *Or inviting Jackson for that matter.* The last he saw, the wolf shifter was getting into a fight with Marcus’ brother.

“But this party is a disaster.”

“Hardly, beautiful. This is by far the best Christmas party I’ve ever been to, and listen.” She cocked her head at the sound of Christmas carols. “Everyone seems to be doing fine.”

“Probably because I didn’t skimp on the booze.”

Marcus grinned. “Exactly, see, you are good at throwing parties. And next year, at least, the whole party will be ours. Think of the benefits, if we see all our loathsome relatives before Christmas, it means we can spend the day alone, just the four of us.”

Ling smiled. “You think of everything. I really do love you, you know.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been neglecting you.”

“I wouldn’t say...” She rubbed her hand against his groin, and he groaned. “Keep doing that and I’ll have you out of that dress in seconds and I’ll take you right here, right now. I don’t care who might see.”

“So do you really think I’m still beautiful? In spite of the pregnancy changes.”

“You’ll always be the most beautiful creature on the planet to me.”

Her cheeks bloomed pink. “Well, if you don’t mind the extra pounds, then I guess I don’t either.”

“Sounds like someone’s angling to get her bellybutton kissed.”

“Amongst other things, yes. Think we can sneak off for ten minutes without anyone noticing?”

Marcus looked aghast at the idea. “Why Ling, wouldn’t that be rude?”

She blushed at the thought of the taboo pleasure she would derive from having sex while all her guests – including her mother - were downstairs singing carols. “Okay, make it twenty – I have been very neglectful these past two weeks.”

Marcus grinned predatorily and scooped Ling into his arms. He ran through the kitchen, narrowly missing Carly, who gave him the thumbs up, and sprinted up the back stairs to their bedroom. As he eagerly stripped her out of her clothes he declared, “I really think I’m going to start enjoying our Christmas parties.”

*

December 24th

Carly and her fox preened, as she rubbed her leg up against her mate. They were in Santa’s workshop again, panting and trembling. She smiled as she noticed that her panties were hanging from the light fixture.

“Just think,” she cooed, “that was our last shift. I have to say I really enjoyed myself.”

Jackson grunted. “How much did that father tip you?”

“Five dollars at first, but after I bent over to pick up that toy for his kid, he slipped me a fifty.”

“Fucking pervert,” he snarled.

She pulled the fifty out of her bra. “Worth it. He had a merry Christmas, and now we can have a merry Christmas, too.”

“I can’t believe we worked here for an entire fucking month, and we still didn’t catch the toad shifter. What a waste of fucking time!”

“Oh, don’t worry, he turned himself in. Problem solved.”

Jackson frowned. “He did? When?”

“Ummm... maybe we should get going.”

“Carly!” he growled menacingly.

She smiled sheepishly. “December 8th.”

“What?! You mean we’ve been working here for nothing!”

“Not for nothing.”

“So you did it so lecherous assholes could look up your skirt and give you money?!”

Carly gave him a hurt look as her fox whined. “No, I did it so we could work together. We rarely chase after skips together these days.”

“Oh, foxy, I...”

“Plus, you know, the sex. All this Santa sex has been really hot.”

Jackson chuckled. “Well, I can’t argue with that.”

“And the manager said we can keep the suit if we slip him fifty bucks.”

“Really?”

Her eyes flashed with excitement. “What do you say?”

Jackson pulled his mate down for a kiss. “I say, ho, ho, ho.”

Grrr, mine.

The end