

Substitute Santa

Melanie smiled as her mate grumbled. He was always cute and grouchy, but at Christmas time, when everyone else seemed a heck of lot jollier, he seemed to be even worse – he was on a seesaw with the rest of the world. When they went up, he went down... further down. Not that Melanie minded really; she just enjoyed teasing him.

“C’mon, my little candy cane, cheer up.”

Hans glowered. “Little?”

“Okay, c’mon, my enormously endowed candy cane, cheer up – better?”

He grunted and she snickered. Her wolf shifter mate gave her no end of amusement.

Melanie counted the gingerbread cookies as she packed them into the Tupperware. A particularly chirpy member of their wolf shifter pack called Keri had organized a ‘Santa experience’ for the pups of the pack in the town square – or for any of the town kids really, everyone was welcome. She had members of the pack build a small grotto, and had enticed many members to donate toys as gifts, and had talked the most portly member of the pack to don a Santa suit for the occasion. She had even managed to talk Hans into baking dozens of gingerbread cookies to hand out both the kids and the parents. Well, Keri asked Melanie, when she was certain Hans wasn’t around. Melanie agreed to it and then persuaded Hans – because Melanie really was the only person in the pack who could get him to do something he didn’t want to do.

Hans was an angry wolf shifter, with a tempestuous wolf and Melanie loved him to pieces. Just about all of the rest of the wolf pack could take him or leave him, but they all loved Melanie.

She picked up a gingerbread wolf and took a bite; she moaned at the flavor. Melanie turned to Hans who was giving her a hungry look – a look she knew all too well, she saw it about fifty times every day.

“Have I ever told you that you’re a god in the kitchen,” she cooed in between scarfing the rest of the gingerbread.

She wasn’t kidding either. She was a passable cook, but he was amazing – and he didn’t even seem to care enough to brag about it.

Hans’ sour mood eased and he folded his arms, his lips curling into a smirk. “I heard you say I was a god in the bedroom once.”

“Was that when you were putting up my new shelves?” she teased.

Hans growled and darted forward to snatch her into his arms. Melanie giggled as he nuzzled her neck and nipped her bonding mark.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!”

Keri appeared at the door to the kitchen and flushed mightily on seeing their playful cuddling.

“Oh, no, Keri, it’s fine – we weren’t doing anything,” protested Melanie as she extricated herself from his arms.

Hans growled in objection but didn’t say anything - he just glared at Keri, who gulped a little. Under his glare was not a good place to be.

“Come in, we’ve almost finished the cookie,” said Melanie.

“Oh, I’m okay, I just wanted to see how it was going,” said Keri, hovering at the door, loath to enter.

Melanie had a shrewd suspicion that the reason for Keri’s reticence was the male who had just been pawing her butt thirty seconds ago – Melanie’s butt, that is, certainly not Keri’s. Pack females had never shown much interest in Hans – they knew him too well.

“Two minutes,” said Melanie smiling.

Keri beamed. “That’s great, and I really do appreciate this, it was really kind of you... kind of both of you.”

She gave Hans a doubtful look and he sneered.

“I’ll see you out there,” she said as she scampered away.

Melanie narrowed her eyes at Hans and pouted playfully. “What did you do to her?”

Hans shrugged, unconcerned. “Can’t recall. She’s friendly with my sister, Noa, though. She used to come by the house.”

“Probably just a campaign of attrition then,” she suggested cheekily.

Hans growled and made a grab for her but she danced away, laughing.

“Nuh-uh. We need to deliver these cookies. There’ll be time for fun and games later.”

“There better,” he grumbled.

“C’mon, my little... my enormous Christmas wolf, it’s for the kids – it’s to make sure that they have a happy Christmas.”

“Humph.”

This didn’t seem to sway him.

“Then it’s to make sure I have a happy Christmas.”

Melanie blew him a kiss, grabbed some of the packed cookies, and set off for the North Pole aka the town square.

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“Oh, it looks amazing, Keri!” breathed Melanie as she took in the lavish display.

It wasn't just some makeshift wooden shack like she was expecting, it was a wintery façade, and Santa had a throne, and there was a sled and eight plastic reindeer had been found. A couple of teenage wolf shifters were just finishing the lights – pretty twinkling lights adorned just about every inch of the huge display.

"Isn't it wonderful?" agreed Kayleigh, beaming.

Kayleigh, like Melanie, was a witch, and mated to one of the pack wolf shifters. Unlike Melanie, she had a very easygoing mate called Don whom everyone adored. She also had twins who were adorable and aggravating – according to Kayleigh at least. Now that they were walking, she could barely keep up.

Melanie leaned down to the twins – who were firmly strapped into a double stroller with no chance of escape.

"Hey, cuties," she cooed.

Hans grunted in disinterest and set the cookies down. Kayleigh rolled her eyes but Melanie just smiled. He wasn't a baby person. To be fair, he wasn't an 'any age' person – he didn't discriminate against the young or old – he didn't like any of them.

"Keri, it's fantastic, well done," said Melanie with feeling. "Right, Hans?"

He huffed and started trying to make his escape back to their pizza restaurant. Melanie grasped his arm and pulled it around her. He frowned but she smiled, and well, he wasn't about to object to holding her. They spent half their time entwined – that way his hands couldn't be pummeling anyone or wrapping themselves around anyone's neck.

She snuggled against him and he softened a little, nestling her against him.

"It was a group effort," said Keri modestly.

"Just one thing," said Kayleigh, "where's Rudolph? There should be Rudolph."

Keri looked stricken. "We tried to get another reindeer but everywhere had sold out. Do you think it's really noticeable? Do you think it ruins the whole effect?" she asked with genuine worry.

Hans snorted in complete disinterest.

"Well..." started Kayleigh.

"Not at all," said Melanie soothingly. "I'm sure the kids will love it," she said pointedly to everyone around her, "and no doubt the parents will all appreciate the effort."

Keri breathed out and nodded in relief. "Everything just has to be perfect. We're opening in ten minutes."

"Yep, and I'm first in line," said Kayleigh smugly. "I can't wait to get a picture of my kids on Santa's knees, and then one with me on his knee. Don will get a kick out of it."

"Really?" Melanie looked up at Hans. "Maybe I should get a picture on Santa's knee."

“You do and that’ll be the last thing he ever does with that knee,” rumbled Hans into her ear.

Melanie snickered and rubbed his arm.

“FYI, the twins are both going through a bitey stage,” said Kayleigh as she nodded down at them; they were trying to chew through a pair of matching rattles. “So Santa probably shouldn’t stick any fingers near their mouths. Where is Santa by the way? He’s cutting it fine.”

Keri chewed on your lip. “I know, Walter was supposed to be here half an hour ago to get into his costume.”

Walter was an older member of the pack, and a grandfather of six. He was usually very reliable. She looked up and down the road, as if hoping he was going to appear any second.

“I’m sure he’ll be here,” said Melanie reassuringly, but even she had her doubts.

After another couple of minutes, during which Hans huffed in irritated boredom and Kayleigh played peek-a-boo with her chomp happy twins, Keri’s phone chirped to life.

Keri snatched it up breathlessly. “Hello... hello! Oh, Walter, thank goodness... oh no! Well, are you all okay? Well, that’s the main thing. Yes, yes of course, absolutely, no problem, I’m sure we can find a replacement.”

She turned her phone off and quickly told them that Walter, his daughter, and two grandkids had been in a car accident – they were all fine, but the kids were being checked for injury as they didn’t have their wolfy healing abilities yet. There was no way he could make it within the next eight minutes.

“Maybe we should cancel,” murmured Keri, as she worried her thumbnail.

Kayleigh shrugged. “Do you have the costume?”

Keri nodded.

“Then get someone else to wear it – easy.”

Keri shook her head. “People are already starting to arrive; there’s no time to call someone else - we need someone now, and only you guys...”

She looked at Hans; she took on a deer in headlights look. Then she looked at Melanie, then Kayleigh, then Melanie again, then her two teenage helpers who were finishing the lights, then Kayleigh again, before finally returning to Hans.

“Uh, Hans, I don’t suppose...”

Hans growled in alarm.

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Hans scowled at his mate. She responded by wiggling her peachy rear, making her bells jingle. He enjoyed the sight for a moment before swallowing some more hairs of his fake beard and spluttering. Melanie shook in unspent laughter. He scowled again.

How, how, how had she talked him into this? His inner wolf cocked his head and whined. How did their lovely, perfect mate talk them into anything? By being lovely and perfect and yet somehow still wanting to spend her life with him – that’s how!

One moment he was howling that there was no force on earth that could get him into that Santa suit, and the next, Melanie was leading him away for a quiet word. A few coos, a handful of naughty promises, some eyelash fluttering, and just moments later, he was being pushed and pulled into this damn itchy suit.

Hans grunted and leaned back on his throne. Yeah, he knew he didn’t deserve his mate, and he knew he had to make concessions to make her happy, but surely there were limits.

“Here we go, Santa,” cooed his elfy helper.

Yes, apparently Walter’s daughter was going to be the elf. He kind of hoped that on hearing that, Melanie would be put out, but no, she had happily donned the elf costume – tights, bells and all. She defied logic by looking incredibly sexy in her costume, but then, there wasn’t much she could wear that wouldn’t make her look attractive – nothing, in fact. He always preferred her in nothing. Rawr.

His wolf growled happily, but his thoughts were cut short as his grinning mate unceremoniously dumped a snotty-looking kid on his knee. The boy immediately wiped his nose on his sleeve and regarded Hans suspiciously from underneath a hat, two scarves and a red, running nose. Though, he couldn’t be half as bad as Kayleigh’s cannibalistic twins – she wasn’t kidding about the freaking biting! He now had two sets of teeth marks in his arm, and she had a picture of him yelping in pain while her babies chowed down on his limb.

“What do you want?” he asked roughly.

“Santa means, what would you like for Christmas sweetie?” said Melanie quickly.

“Are you the real Santa?” asked the suspicious little boy.

“Of course he is,” trilled Melanie, in the face of all the overwhelming evidence.

“You’re not very jolly.”

“Santa’s had a cold recently,” said Melanie with big, serious eyes. “Isn’t that right, Santa?”

She nudged Hans encouragingly.

“Cough,” he muttered.

“But don’t worry, he’ll be fine on Christmas Eve for when he delivers all the presents.”

The boy considered this and Hans' inner wolf huffed impatiently. "What do you want for Christmas... little boy?" he asked, and when Melanie motioned to her mouth, he forced a painful smile on his face.

"Well... I want a bike, and a hoverboard, and a TV for my room, and an iPad and..."

Hans rolled his eyes – it was going to be a long day.

"And why don't you have Rudolph? What happened to Rudolph?"

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Melanie let out a sigh of relief as the last happy child giggled and ran away. She'd be glad to get out of the elf costume. As much as she enjoyed the look on Hans' face whenever she wiggled and jingled, she generally preferred a pair of boots and sneakers to tights and pointy shoes. Plus, it was now dark and starting to get a little chilly.

She was a little surprised at just how well it had gone. Hans would hardly be mistaken for the real Santa, but he had relaxed a little, and in spite of the fact that he wanted to be a million miles away from there doing anything but that, he had made a lot of kids very happy. Melanie always loved her mate, but today, she was proud.

"You guys!" gushed Keri as she rushed over, "you were brilliant. I can't thank you enough."

"True," grumbled Hans as he pulled the beard off, revealing his usual irritated expression.

"Would you mind getting us some coffee?" said Melanie. "I'm a little thirsty and I'm starting to get cold."

"Of course, anything for you."

Keri rushed away and Hans rumbled in annoyance.

"If you were cold, you should have said. I'd have taken you home."

Melanie smiled mildly. "That's why I didn't tell you. Besides, I've only gotten cold since I stopped moving."

Hans grunted and started to get to his feet.

"Oh no," she said, "I think it's my turn."

He frowned but rolled his eyes when Melanie gently pushed him back onto the throne and perched on his knee.

"Oh, Santa, what big teeth you have. No wait, that's Little Red Riding Hood."

Hans chuckled and wrapped his arms around her, burying his head in her shoulder. She kissed his temple and ran her hands through his hair.

"Thank you for today," she murmured.

“Humph. Only for you, sugar. I’d only go through this for you.”

Melanie beamed. “I know.”

And knowing it made her feel so special and warm inside.

“You were really great with the kids.”

“Sure,” he scoffed.

“No, you were,” Melanie insisted, thinking of the pup who burst into tears the moment she landed on his lap. Hans panicked and growled and she went very quiet and then squealed with laughter.

He had also managed to field the Rudolph questions quite well – of which they received fifteen. In general, he hadn’t minded them pulling at his bear, though it was rather a close call for the one who threw up on his shoes.

“They say it’s different when it’s your own,” she said softly.

“Humph.”

Melanie traced a finger over his ear. “Aren’t you going to ask me what I want for Christmas?” she teased.

Hans chuckled. “Fine, what do you want?”

“A boy or a girl will be fine,” she said casually.

“Hmm... What?!” Hans pulled back sharply – pure shock on his face. “What?” he repeated. “You’re joking? You’re... you’re joking...”

He searched her face for clues, but she just smiled and shook her head.

“I think he or she will be here in about seven months.”

Hans stared at her, dumbfounded.

Melanie ran a thumb over his cheek. “Can you believe it? We’re going to have a baby, our baby – our perfect baby. I can’t wait.”

He nodded slowly. They sat in silence for a minute. Hans stared off into space while Melanie pressed gentle kisses to his cheeks.

Finally, he said, “I hope it’s a girl. I hope she’s just like you. I don’t want a boy like me!”

Hans burst into laughter, and Melanie squealed happily. He dragged her lips to his for a thorough kiss.

“Oh my god, look at Santa – he’s kissing his elf!” called a young voice.

“Where’s Rudolph?” cried another.

Melanie chuckled against her mate’s mouth. It was going to be a very merry Christmas.

The end