

Flying Home for Christmas

December 20th

“That’ll be thirty dollars,” demanded the cab driver as he pulled up in front of the airport. He was wearing a festive Santa hat, but his demeanor was hardly anything approaching jolly.

“Thirty?!” squawked Hilda as her inner otter bared her tiny fangs. “Two months ago it was only twenty dollars.”

The bored cab driver rolled a shoulder. “Time of year,” he muttered, as if this was a good excuse for taking advantage of people during the busy holiday.

Hilda grumbled under her breath and pulled out the desired amount. It wasn’t like she could really argue. She needed to get to the airport, and she was at the airport, so now it was time to pay up.

She handed him the bills and was about to get out when she paused to ask, “Aren’t you going to help me with my bags?”

He glanced outside the window disinterestedly. “Nah, it’s snowing. Looks pretty windy too.”

“Ugh.” She started pushing at the door.

“Hey! How about a tip? It is Christmas, you know.” He wagged his eyebrows.

Hilda glared at him. “Sure, don’t eat yellow snow.”

She ignored his curses and let out an eep as the freezing wind beat at her face. Clinging to the side of the cab, she pulled herself around to the trunk and pulled out her enormous bag. The moment it hit the sidewalk, her cab started pulling away, spraying her in a tsunami of wet sludge.

“Oh, really?!” she called after the cab.

She shook her fist, as did her inner otter, but it did no good. He was long gone, and by standing there she was just getting buffeted by the many people who wanted to get past her and into the airport.

Hilda sighed and started dragging her luggage. Perhaps she could have packed a little less, but she wanted to be prepared. She wanted to look fabulous at any given moment. No, she had to look fabulous. Yep, she was going home for her ex-boyfriend’s wedding.

She was an otter shifter, and grew up with Kyle. Hilda always thought they would mate and be together forever. Except when she came home from college and found that he had decided that he preferred her younger sister, Sandy. Since then, Hilda finished college, and landed a job as far away from her otter lodge as possible. It was bad enough being in love with a guy who didn’t love her back, but having to put up with everyone’s sympathy, and constant reassurances that she’d get over it were too much – particularly as most of them came from her mother.

But now, the inevitable had happened. They were getting married, and she was expected to attend and congratulate them and be oh so happy for them. Grrr. So yeah, she was making a mad dash to

get home and attend their Christmas Eve wedding. Honestly – who got married on Christmas Eve?! Attention, hogging dicks – that’s who? She had to attend, look amazing, show him what he was missing, pretend she desperately didn’t want to be in Sandy’s shoes, and also cover up the fact that she had lost her job a week ago. Yeah, as if things weren’t bad enough, her company had needed to downsize, and it was last in, first out. She’d find a new job... hopefully. The last thing she wanted was to have to move home so she could witness Sandy and Kyle’s lovey-dovey marriage first hand, and lord, they’d probably give her a niece or a nephew within a year – that would be unbearable!

Hilda’s eyes lit up as she saw an abandoned luggage cart. “Oh, yes, mine!”

She grabbed it and pulled it over to her luggage, and just as she was trying to pull her enormous bag onto it, someone whisked it away from her.

“Hey, that’s mine!” she called irately, but her voice was lost in the whipping wind.

Hilda sagged as an airport employee pulled it over to a car so fancy and European looking that she didn’t even recognize it. Her otter howled as loud as she could – which admittedly wasn’t very loud, and she soon hushed as the occupant of the car got out.

“Here you go, Mr. Davenport.”

“Thank you,” rumbled the incredibly tall, incredibly handsome and just incredibly incredible man.

“Ooh.” Hilda let out an involuntary coo as she shivered in her wet clothes.

The man was tall, broad, muscled and looked like he’d just walked off the set of James Bond movie. His jaw was square and a little bristly, while his dark hair was wavy and just the right side of messy.

She watched perhaps jealousy, or maybe awe, though possibly misery, as he easily jogged around his car and opened the door. A tall, leggy woman unfolded herself and smiled at him. Neither of them seemed to be shivering or bothered by the dismal weather beating against them. Hilda let out an eep as a gust of wind hurled her to the ground, or at least to fall on her case.

“Be careful with my baby,” purred Mr. Davenport as he handed over the keys to the impossibly lovely woman.

Hilda pursed her lips and her otter huffed. Men who referred to cars as their ‘baby’ did not impress her. It was just a car at the end of the day. True, his was pretty impressive... and sleek, but it was still a freaking car!

The beautiful woman tinkled with musical laughter. “Just behave.”

She kissed him on the cheek and nimbly hopped into the car. The tires squealed as she tore away and Mr. Davenport winced.

“That’s an awesome car, sir,” said the obsequious airport employee.

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” he chuckled.

“Ugh.” Hilda let out a sound of disgust, though part of that might have been because people were currently trying to step on her to get into the airport.

“Hey, I’m sitting here!” she called out, though no one paid her any mind.

They, like her, were rushing to get somewhere for Christmas, and in their rush, nothing else mattered. Given the crowd, she might be on the ground for a while. Though, she was pleasantly surprised that a moment later, the airport employee – who had been kissing Mr. Davenport’s butt a minute ago – appeared and, not only pulled her to her feet, but offered to carry her case for her. Mr. Davenport was nowhere to be seen, and she found herself a little disappointed about that, but at least she had a chance of catching her flight. Though, she doubted this was going to be a very merry Christmas.

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“Yes, Mom, I know... I know, Mom. Yes, I’m very happy for them,” Hilda ground out.

She kicked her case along the floor as the line moved. She was waiting to check in, while enduring a mom call. Her mom couldn’t find a good balance of being excited for Sandy while sympathetic to Hilda, so she settled for being very excited and exceedingly guilty, and constantly calling Hilda to talk about the wedding while enthusiastically telling Hilda that she was a catch and would find someone more suitable.

“Yes, it’s going to be lovely,” she sighed and then frowned as she realized the person standing behind her was standing just a little too close.

She turned her head slightly. “Do you mind?” she whispered. “No, not you, Mom.”

Her inner otter, rather than growling, mewled shyly. Huh. She scrunched her nose and suddenly noticed the most delicious smell – it was like fresh cinnamon buns with a hint of orange zest – it was unbelievably yummy. She whipped her head around, hoping to see a Spice Hut – purveyors of the most sinful buns on the planet, but no, all she saw were harried travelers who mostly smelled like wet dog. Most of the people traveling on her flight were wolf shifters – the airline was owned by a wolf pack and did good deals – it was called Wolf Air. Hilda just got any ticket she could. But, oh, this smell...

“Yes, yes, I’m still here,” she replied to her mom. “Aha, yes, pink sounds like an amazing color for a wedding dress.”

The person behind her chuckled, and brushed against her. “Seriously?” she hissed. “No, not you, Mom, and yes I’m still listening! No, I’m not taking a tone. No, I’m not angry,” she ground out, and then kicked her case a little harder than necessary, though that just resulted in a stubbed toe and some limping for her.

“Oh, yes, yes, I’m very happy, who wouldn’t want to be the maid of honor when her ex-boyfriend marries her younger sister!”

There was a definite guffaw from behind her and she spun around to give the person a piece of her mind, but on seeing whom it was, she stuttered.

“Ah... oh...” Her otter yipped almost coquettishly. “Uh, Mom, I gotta go,” she mumbled and quickly hung up.

“Sorry,” he rumbled, smiling pleasantly, and in a way that suggested he wasn’t in the least sorry. “Couldn’t help but overhear.”

Hilda flushed, wishing that she wasn’t currently wearing an oversized sweater that said ‘otterly adorable,’ baggy jeans and a pair of worn out sneakers, and dearly wishing that her outfit was covered in sludgy streaks thanks to her cab driver. She dreaded to think about the state of her hair – which was never very tidy. Her goal of looking fabulous at the wedding was pretty lofty.

Urged by her coy otter, she considered trying to flirt, but on considering her appearance – weighed against his drop-dead sexiness, and adding in the goddess she saw him with earlier, she decided there was no point in trying. So, there was no point in holding back.

“Maybe because you were breathing down my neck,” she snapped.

He canted his head and looked thoughtful. “Maybe,” he agreed almost cheerfully.

Her nose wrinkled and she almost moaned indecently out loud – her otter did it inside instead. The delicious smell was all him. Oh, Christmas cookies, she just wanted to lick him all over. Hilda flushed profusely and tried to focus on the other thing she smelled about him – namely that he happened to be a wolf shifter. She should be wary of him. True, she was technically a predator too, but really, come on, who would you want to meet in a dark alley in the middle of a night? An adorable otter or slavering wolf? Her otter’s mewls suggested that if the wolf looked like him, she wouldn’t mind at all...

“Humph.”

Hilda firmly turned her back on him, though, despite the fact that he was at the end of the line – and had as much room as he wanted – he was still unbelievably close to her. She tried to pretend that the incredibly close presence of him, being all hot and smelling so good, wasn’t doing strange things to her, and looked at her phone. Inwardly, she groaned – her mom had already sent her seven text messages about the wedding.

“That’s gotta suck.”

She ignored him and as the line moved she pushed her bag with her foot.

“Really, that’s gotta suck.”

Hilda sighed and turned around. He didn’t back up and she almost found herself with a mouthful of deliriously hard chest. She growled and stepped back, tripped over her case. She would have fallen to the ground in an embarrassing heap were it not for his steadying hand on her arm.

“Careful,” he chided playfully.

Hilda’s mouth dropped open in disbelief, even as her shy otter cooed. “But that was your...”

“So, like I was saying, it’s gotta suck.”

“What has?!” she snapped, feeling like her last nerve was about to explode.

He rolled a massive shoulder unconcernedly – like he wasn’t the most irritating and sexy man on the planet!

“Watching your sister marry your ex.”

Hilda breathed in and out and tried for nonchalance. “I’m fine with it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes,” she said calmly.

He was quiet for a few beats, and she hoped he was dropping it, but no, of course he wasn’t.

“Really?”

“I said I’m fine!” she howled.

Her otter tried to hide her head in her hands. The people in front of her moved as far away as possible from her – the crazy lady. They were almost climbing into the suitcases of the people in front of them.

“Well, I can see that you’re fine with it.”

“I am,” she breathed and turned around.

Hilda started flicking through the pictures on her phone her mom had sent her. They were all of Sandy in her wedding dress, and – sigh – she looked like a princess. She concentrated on her phone, but she knew it was coming - she knew he was going to say something, but when it did, it still startled her.

“Nice dress,” purred a voice in her ear.

“Gah!”

She jumped and smashed into him – it was like hitting a brick wall, and again, a hand clamped on her arm, steadying her, holding her. Mmmm, her otter was enjoying it just a little too much.

“But I just can’t understand it,” he continued.

She didn’t reply and he repeated it.

“Understand what?” she demanded grumpily.

“Your sister seems plenty cute, but what kind of a guy would willingly give up you for her? I can’t imagine any man giving you up for another woman.”

Hilda looked at him over her shoulder. He was smiling kindly – suggesting he might actually mean it - but she just couldn’t help herself.

“Don’t make fun of me,” she snapped.

He pulled back, startled, the smiling dropping from his face. "Excuse me?"

Hilda pursed her lips. She didn't need this right now – she didn't need some handsome stranger teasing her. She already felt pretty crappy. She didn't consider that maybe he was paying her a compliment. Her otter did, but she was too steamed to pay attention.

"You're mocking me."

"I am not," he denied, seemingly insulted.

Hilda tapped her foot impatiently. "Sure, because I'm such a great catch! You only noticed I existed because I happened to be standing in front of you; usually, you're too busy sticking your tongue down the throat of six feet goddesses who trample women like me underfoot."

His mouth gaped at her outburst. Most of the mouths of the people around her gaped, apart from those attached to the people who were trying to film her. Sure, crazy woman goes nuts in an airport!

He was about to send her a retort when a squeal caught his attention. He turned just as a gaggle of powder blue clad stewardesses descended on him.

"Eric!" they cooed.

They virtually elbowed her out of the way as they surrounded him and trilled about how wonderful it was to see him again, and how it had been too long.

Her inner otter mewled at the bevy of beauties surrounding him, but Hilda just let out a sound of disgust. Figures. He'd probably attended the mile high club with every single one of those perfect females.

Hilda huffed, ignored him as he tried to call wait, and finally managed to get herself checked in.

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"Is that seat taken?" Hilda asked.

The terminal was virtually packed to the rafters, but she had spied a lone seat in between a heavysset woman traveling with five children and an older gentleman with a white beard and a bowl full of jelly. He was very Santa-like in appearance, but the irritated look he gave her as he reluctantly removed his bag from the seat was anything but merry.

Hilda squeezed herself into the seat and clutched her hand luggage on her lap. The woman with the kids was reading a magazine while the kids ran around screaming loudly. She did nothing to stop them and elbowed Hilda every time she turned a page. The Santa-like gentleman coughed every ten seconds, buffeting her shoulder. She just closed her eyes and pretended she was anywhere else in the world.

She frowned as she suddenly felt an absence of heat and jostling on either side of her.

"That's awfully kind of you," rumbled a familiar and devilishly sexy voice.

Hilda snapped her eyes open to find that the woman and Santa had apparently vacated their seats, and now she had him – the wolf shifter – Mr. Davenport – Eric – by her side. Her other side was now free, but, in spite of the standing room only state of the airport, no one seemed keen to sit down.

Eric shuffled in his seat, rubbing his arm against hers. He seemed a little closer to her than absolutely necessary, though, that didn't really surprise her after the way he behaved back in line. He smiled at her and she scowled, making him chuckle.

"Now, now," he said smoothly, "no need for that. I wasn't making fun of you."

"Sure," she muttered, though her otter was pleased to hear it.

He held out his hands. "I mean it. I was paying you a compliment."

"Humph. I saw you with that woman earlier."

"Woman?" He appeared confused for a second until his face almost cracked with a smirk. "You were watching me earlier?"

"No!" she denied hotly, though, even she could tell it was a lie.

She hadn't meant to watch him - he was just... watchable.

"To be clear, all of the cabin crew..."

"I mean I saw you getting out of your car. That luggage cart was mine until it was stolen for you. That was why I was watching – I was wondering who the big cheese was that they needed the cart I was using."

His eyes flashed. "I am sorry to hear that." He seemed furious for a moment but it quickly passed.

"As to the woman, that was my bratty little sister. She insisted on taking my car while I'm out of town. She's always coveting the things I have." He cocked his head to one side. "Sound familiar?"

Hilda blinked at him, taken aback. "It's not like that."

"No?"

"No."

"Ladies and Gentleman."

They both looked up as a voice resonated through the airport. Everyone around them hushed, even the woman and her five screaming kids.

"Unfortunately due to adverse weather conditions, all flights are indefinitely delayed."

"Damn," murmured Eric mildly.

"At this time we cannot state when the flights will be reinstated, but hope they can be rescheduled for tomorrow."

"Oh no," muttered Hilda.

“Should anyone wish to make alternative travel arrangements the car rental services are located on floor C. There are rooms available at the airport hotels should anyone need them but will be allocated on a first come first serve basis. Thank you for choosing Serpens City Airport and Merry Christmas.”

It seemed to Hilda later that there was a long moment of silence after the announcement, which ended when, suddenly, as one, everyone started running toward either floor C or to one of the exits toward the hotels or the taxi cabs waiting outside for fares.

Hilda would only remember the next ten minutes in her nightmares, for as she tried to get up, she was swept away by the crowd. She was being pulled away by the crowd, yelping as her otter squeaked, as she considered how ignoble it would be to be trampled to death on the way to her sister’s wedding – particularly as her sister was marrying Hilda’s ex.

But no, before that could happen, two strong, starting to be familiar arms grasped her and held her tight. Even as people swarmed through the airport, none of them careened into him. Despite everyone’s panic and agitation at being stranded for Christmas, they purposefully moved around him.

Hilda just sheltered in front of him, waiting for the herd to thin. When it did, when it was nothing but a few stragglers – those who were already asleep, or those contemplating just sleeping in the airport anyway – she looked up, surprised to find the worry and concern on his face.

“You okay?” he rumbled.

Hilda nodded. “Thanks to you.”

He hands gripped her arms tightly. “Thought I lost you there for a second.”

“I thought my eulogy was going to be all about me dying in an airport stampede. If I’m going to be stampeded, it’s going to be at a shoe sale or nothing.”

He grunted softly, but his good humor didn’t return very quickly. He seemed super pissed while she was actually feeling a little happier. It was certainly a role reversal for their relationship thus far. Near death experiences would do that to a gal.

“Hey, ah, I’m sure you’ll catch your flight tomorrow.”

He stared at her for a few beats, not quite understanding, and then finally grunted again.

“Sure. What are your plans now?”

Hilda sighed. “Well, I really need to get there as soon as possible, so, I suppose, if there are any cars left I’ll rent one.”

Though the thought of driving all that way was not enticing. Not only could she arrive miserable but also now she could be exhausted and frazzled. Whoopee.

Eric’s usual sunshine smile returned in a heartbeat, and yes, her heart may have skipped a beat or two on seeing it.

“Great, we can share a car.”

“Uh, we can?”

His smile seemed to grow by the second. “Yep, absolutely.”

“But... but don’t you already have a car?” she spluttered, mildly alarmed at this plan and not sure why. No, she knew why – it was that wolfish grin he had spread over his face.

Eric shrugged. “My sister has it. It’s probably halfway to Vegas already. No, this is great, we can rent a car together, and share the driving.”

“Oh, ummm...”

She should definitely say no, right? Getting into a car with this strange man was only going to lead to trouble, right?

Eric beamed. “C’mon, Hilda, it’ll be fun.”

He grasped her arm, and she didn’t do a darn thing to stop him. He could pretty much lead her anywhere at this point. Though, she did vaguely wonder how he knew her name when she hadn’t told him.

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“Hello, welcome to Z Car Rentals, how can I help you?”

Hilda bit back a sarcastic reply. It was a car rental place – what did the guy serving think she wanted? To borrow a lawnmower?

“I’d like to rent a car,” she said as pleasantly as possible.

Patience was once again in short supply as they had already tried all the other car rentals and not one of them had any cars left. Though, it seemed to Hilda that a few of them had cars left in their lots, but they assured her that they were either broken or already booked.

“Yes, of course... ah.”

He paused as Eric arrived at the counter and gave him a huge smile.

“Oh! Right, a car! Of course, yes.”

The guy winked at Eric, who narrowed his eyes, and then the guy said he had just the car they needed.

“What’s happening?” asked Hilda.

Was there something going on with these two guys?

“Let me show you to your car,” he trilled.

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“We might get there faster in a horse drawn carriage,” grumbled Hilda as she pressed her hands to the heater. Even her upbeat otter was shivering.

“This car’s a classic,” chuckled Eric.

“It’s a clunker. I’m amazed they’re legally allowed to rent it out to anyone. I’m amazed you can stand it after driving your own car.”

Seriously, the car they were in wouldn’t look out of place in Fred Flintstone’s garage, and not just because there was a hole in the floor.

“I don’t drive that car for the speed.”

“Is it because it’s a chick magnet?” she asked sourly.

“Only if it was the nineties,” he replied cheerfully.

Hilda scowled and shifted in her lumpy seat. It was impossible to find a comfortable position – the car was all one big lump. Eric didn’t seem to mind. Nope, he seemed plenty relaxed in the driver’s seat.

“I’m sure women love it. I’m sure the naughty stewardesses love it.”

Her otter cursed her for allowing her pettiness to seep out, but she was tired, cold, and hungry, and still on her way home for a wedding she wished she didn’t have to attend.

“You think they’re naughty, really?”

“Aren’t they?”

“How would I know?”

“They way they jumped on you I assumed you did,” she muttered just a tad petulantly.

He flashed a smirk at her and she sagged.

“I’m sorry, I’m not usually this mean.”

“Really?” There was a lot of doubt in that voice.

“Yes!” she squawked and then added in a much calmer voice, “I mean, yes.”

He chuckled and she folded her arms. Was it just her, or could she not be normal around him? Either she was irritated or spiteful or both.

“Are you usually this annoying?”

“Yes, just ask my sister, and speaking of sisters...”

Hilda rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t like they planned it. I was away at college, and sometimes these things just happen.”

She flinched as he growled. The sound surprised her, but he was a wolf so what did she expect? Or maybe she was just more surprised by the fact that the noise kind of made her insides flip, and a certain, libidinous part of her sit up and take notice.

“Is that what he told you?”

“Pretty much,” Hilda admitted. “But my sister wouldn’t deliberately... she thinks he’s her mate – that they’re destined to be together. But she also said that if I wanted it, she wouldn’t be with him.”

“But you couldn’t say that,” Eric said in a gentle voice.

“No, I had to be the bigger person – if I hadn’t, then instead of me being miserable, we’d all be miserable.”

He snorted. “Sounds like he’d probably find someone else.”

Eric almost sounded bitter about it, and she wondered if he was speaking from experience, and the idea that it did really pissed her off. She didn’t like the idea of him pining over a female who didn’t want him. What kind of crazy numbskull wouldn’t want him?!

“Did this kind of thing happen to you?” she asked carefully, fearing the answer.

Eric flashed her a look of surprise. “No. But it’s obvious that it sucks.”

“Yes, it does,” she agreed sullenly.

“I try to avoid being the bigger person – taking the high road. It’s the low road all the way – gets you there quicker,” he told her cheerfully.

“Good thinking.”

“Works for me. You still love this dick?”

Eric turned to look at her, interest written all over his face, and clear disinterest in the fact that he was no longer watching the road.

Frankly, the question surprised her. A month of ago she would have said yes in a heartbeat. But, now, the more she thought about Kyle and what kind of relationship they had...

“Holy Kringle! Is that smoke?!”

“Shit!”

Eric swerved to the side of the road as smoke billowed out of the front of their vehicle. Hilda wondered if Fred Flintstone had this kind of trouble back when he owned this damn car.

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“Hello, and welcome to The Cozy Inn, how can I...”

“Two rooms,” growled Hilda. “Two rooms now, please, pretty please.”

They had to walk a mile to this hotel, and she was in no mood for niceties. Her feet were freezing and she was damn hungry. She wanted a room, she wanted a bath, she wanted food, and she wanted a bed – and not necessarily in that order.

The receptionist smiled. “Oh course... ah.”

Her eyes widened as Eric battled against the wind to get through the door. He had carried both their suitcases, for which she was incredibly grateful. If faced with carrying it herself it still would have been sitting next to the now dead car.

“Oh, yes, of course,” said the receptionist in an odd voice. “But unfortunately we only have one room left – the honeymoon suite.”

“What?!”

“We’ll take it,” said Eric, smoothly handing over a credit card.

“The honeymoon suite?” squeaked Hilda. Her otter mewled in shyness.

Eric shrugged indifferently. “It’s just another room.”

“But... but...”

“We’ll figure it out,” he said cheerfully and grabbed their bags.

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“What’s all this?”

Eric smiled. “I thought you might be hungry.”

The table was covered with a huge variety of foods, and in that moment, they all looked frankly mouthwatering. She wanted to try them all. When they got to the room it was just as honeymoon-y as she feared - the bed was a big heart, and all the décor was pink and velour. But, he hadn’t given her a moment to worry over it. Nope, he had bundled her into the bathroom, suggesting she have a bath and relax. It was what she wanted – it was like he read her mind.

“Did you order everything off the menu?”

“Almost – there were a few salads on there that I thought I would give a wide berth.”

Hilda nodded approving. “Good thinking.”

He got to his feet and pulled out a chair for her. “Sit down, eat.”

Hilda self-consciously picked at her snowman pajamas. Hey, if she knew she would be sharing a meal and a room with a guy who would make Adonis jealous, she would have packed something slinky and sexy in her luggage. But, as it was, she didn’t plan on anyone seeing her nightwear, which is why she was in ratty old pajamas. Still, there was nothing to be done about it now.

She sat and immediately pulled some waffles onto her plate, drowning them in maple syrup and tearing them apart with her teeth. Hilda moaned and groaned as she ate, delighting at the

wonderful taste. It was only when she was working on her fifth waffle that she realized that Eric was watching her with a hungry look. Her otter quivered at that look.

“Oh, ah, did you want some?” she asked a little sheepishly.

“Not waffles, no,” he rumbled.

Her otter cooed, but Hilda wasn't quite sure what was happening. Her inner beast seemed to think that Eric – the big, bad wolf – was interested in her, but... surely not? She was just a curvy little otter shifter. Surely, he was way out of her league... right?

“So...” she started.

“So,” he agreed.

“Ah...” that was pretty much all she had until divine inspiration struck. “Umm, what were you going to do in Playa Lunar anyway?”

“Personal reasons,” he replied vaguely.

“Oh.”

Her suspicious mind wondered whether it was a girlfriend, or jingle bells! Maybe he was married! She found herself very unhappy at the prospect that he was.

Eric watched her for a few beats. His usual smile was gone, but he wasn't annoyed or angry. No, he just seemed to be weighing her up for some reason.

Finally, after a few tense beats, he asked, “So, are you still in love with your ex?”

Hilda almost choked on the blueberry she had thoughtlessly popped into her mouth. See – fruit is never a good idea chided her inner beast. After much wheezing, some water, and a couple of slaps to the back, Hilda finally managed to get a hold of herself.

“What?” she gasped.

“Are you still in love with your ex? The one who's marrying your sister,” he clarified.

“Yes, I know who you mean.”

“We never finished this conversation in the car.”

“And you're interested in the answer?” she snorted.

“Yes,” he replied simply.

Hilda felt a stirring of arousal as his eyes shimmered amber. She could sense his strong beast close to the surface. She imagined he was really something when he shifted.

Heat started spreading through her body, even more so when she scented his own burgeoning desire. He desired her? Was this really happening?

"I... thought so," she admitted.

His eyes swam with amber. "You still think so?"

"No," she breathed.

Hilda swallowed. Her mouth felt dry – it was so damn hot in there. Why was it so hot?

"When did you stop thinking that?"

Honestly, all thoughts were wiped of her selfish, insipid ex the moment she spied Eric.

"Recently?" he probed.

Hilda nodded and gulped.

"Maybe because you found your mate," he suggested carefully.

"My mate?" she repeated faintly.

Her heart started thumping like a freight train. Was this real? No, surely not – surely there was no way. But maybe... but surely not... but maybe...

Eric took her hand and brought it to his lips. He kissed the knuckles in turn, smiling in between each kiss as he squeaked. Her otter had already fainted in delight.

"You're not serious," she murmured.

He cocked an eyebrow in amusement, and in between kisses asked, "Aren't I?"

This couldn't be happening. This kind of thing didn't happen to her. No, she was the type who got sprayed by sludge, who got trampled by people who barely noticed she existed – she wasn't the type to get seduced by sexy wolf shifters in pink hotel rooms on a heart shaped bed that appeared to have its own set of handcuffs built in!

Maybe that was it – he just wanted sex. But then her inner animal wondered why he would target her when he could have just about any woman. Her last smidge of self-esteem threatened to go completely kaput. Her ex had made it clear that she was lucky to have him for as long as she did, that it was inevitable that he left her for someone better – and he was a total tool! So why would this wolf want her?

"You're just trying to get me into bed," she argued weakly.

Eric grinned – it was all teeth and wolfish charm. "Oh, I'm definitely trying to get you into bed. It's working too."

"You arrogant..."

But the little amount of fire in her words was extinguished when he half-dragged her over the table and pressed his lips to hers. In that moment, she could care less whether it was just a night of fun he wanted, because, heck knew, it was Christmas and she deserved a little fun, and oh my, she was going to enjoy herself.

*

December 21st

Eric beamed down at his little darling. She was snoring. It was a squeaky little sound, but it was a definite snore. His inner wolf howled in pleasure. His little mate.

He'd never known where he stood on the idea of fated mates. It was one of those things that were so indistinct and hard to come to terms with – like the legal agreement when buying a new car. So many friends who claimed to have found their own fated mate had told him he would know when he found her. While others had simply said it was nothing more than attraction.

But, from the moment he saw her, sprawled on the ground and scowling that adorable, wrinkled nose scowl of hers, he knew she belonged to him. His wolf roared in satisfaction. Now, she was his. It had taken a little work to get to this point, but it was well worth it.

What a beauty she was too - all curves and softness and pouty lips. How could she not see her own attractiveness? His expression dimmed. That was something to do with being cheated on and dumped for her younger sister. Grrr.

No matter. If it weren't for that, then they wouldn't have met, and her life would have been infinitely worse for never having met him. He chuckled softly at his own pride, but he couldn't help himself. He was in a good mood, and why wouldn't he be? He had his little darling pressed naked against him – the snowman pajamas had been hastily ripped off last night – literally ripped off as he had been slightly impatient to seek out the soft flesh she was hiding beneath. He had already called room service for more waffles – he looked forward to seeing her mouth wrapped around some more waffles – and maybe wrapped around something else later he thought with a lascivious chuckle. They could spend all day in bed, making love, eating waffles, and be well rested enough for their flight this evening. Yes, this had all worked out splendidly.

Hilda's eyes snapped open. "Gah!"

Eric beamed. Her skittishness was rather entertaining.

"Good morning," he crooned.

Hilda squinted at him through sleepy eyes. "What time is it?" she grumbled.

"Eight."

"Ugh."

"Not a morning person?" he queried in amusement as he planted kisses along her shoulder.

He was starting to think she wasn't an 'any time of day' person. It was rather entertaining. He was usually surrounded by dozens of people who forced themselves to be cheerful around him, who agreed with him no matter what. Her stubborn grumpiness was very refreshing.

"No. You seem to be though," she said accusingly.

Eric couldn't help the guffaw.

"Humph."

He nibbled on her collarbone and she twitched. He did it again and she let out a spurt of giggling laughter. So, naturally, he did it again until she was openly squeaking with laughter and begging him to stop. His inner wolf smirked.

Hilda looked at him and sobered. "I half-expected you to be gone."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said firmly. She blinked at his tone, and he softened marginally. "I mean, I'm certain that we're mates, so splitting up really isn't an option."

He beamed at her as she gaped in stunned disbelief. He allowed her some time to come to terms with it, so just settled for pressing kisses to just about every inch of her while he let the wonderful news sink in.

"Mates?" she said eventually.

"Yes, indeed," he agreed enthusiastically. His wolf roared in agreement.

"But... but...mates?" she stammered.

"Oh, yes, I was sure of it the moment I saw you playing around on the ground in front of the airport."

Her brows knit together. "Wait, you saw me? And I was not playing on the ground! I fell over in shock because..."

"Of how handsome I am?" he quipped, thinking it a joke, but given the way she flushed, he might have actually hit the nail on the head there.

"No!" she denied.

"That's it, isn't it?!" he crowed.

"No," she repeated doubtfully.

Eric chuckled and she slapped his arm. "Why didn't you come over and say anything?"

He caught her hand and kissed her, making her flush even more.

"I sent someone over to help. I had to make other arrangements."

"Other arrangements?" she grumbled.

"Yes. I couldn't just run over and howl at you that you were mine." In spite of his wolf's vehement demands that he do just that he couldn't. "I needed to approach you delicately. So, I simply found out who you were and booked myself a place on your flight."

Hilda sat up a little, her eyes widening in shock. "You weren't supposed to be going to Playa Lunar? You booked yourself onto the flight just for me?"

“Indeed. Are you impressed? Are you amazed? Are you aroused?”

The tiny growl she shot at him suggested it was the latter though she wasn't happy about it. His wolf certainly enjoyed the adorable growl though.

“Where were you going then?”

“Frankport – for a business meeting. But I called and had someone else go in my place. It's no problem.”

“Oh, no problem he says.”

Eric grinned. “No. It was just unfortunate that the flight was canceled. I thought I would wow you on the flight, still, having to rent a car and ending up here worked out even better.”

“But you couldn't have planned for the car break down unless...” Her voice slowed until it came to a suspicious stop. “The rental agencies had plenty of cars, didn't they? You somehow bribed them into saying they didn't and into giving you this lemon.” Her forehead creased for a few moments until her eyes flashed to the dark brown of her inner animal's eyes. “Then you bribed the hotel into saying they only had this suite left!”

“Yes, it all worked out rather well, didn't it?” he asked cheerfully.

“You're unbelievable!”

“Yes, I recall you said so several times last night.”

He growled lustfully and she blushed, then smiled, and then scowled again.

“Hey, stop that, I'm mad at you.”

“Of course.”

“And... and I don't know if I really believe you are my mate – this is all so sudden!”

“Yes, yes it is.” He rolled onto his back, bringing her with him so she was sprawling on his chest.

“Take all the time you want to be mad and to come to terms with us mating, darling. Until nine pm tonight.”

Hilda squirmed on him and let out a few grunts of annoyance. “What's at nine pm?”

“Our flight to Playa Lunar.”

“They've been rescheduled? The weather's better?”

“Yes and yes.” He ran his hand up and down her back. “But this is actually a flight on my private jet, so as long as we file the flight plan in advance we can go whenever we want.”

Hilda propped herself up on his chest. The confusion on her face just seemed to increase. “Private jet? You have a private jet?”

“Oh yes,” he said nonchalantly. “My pack owns Wolf Air.”

“Wolf Air? Your pack owns Wolf Air? You are someone who belongs to a pack who owns Wolf Air? And you think you are my mate?”

“No, darling.”

Hilda flinched in disappointment and looked away from him, and he quickly cupped her to bring her gaze back to his.

“I know you are my mate. I knew it the moment I saw you. I am sure. As much as I instantly despise your sister and he whom we will never talk about...”

“My ex?” Eric and his wolf growled. “Sorry.”

“If they felt even a tenth of what I felt the moment I saw you, then I’m not really surprised that the two of them got together. Because I could not possibly stay away from you – even if I want to, which I definitely don’t want to,” he added to appease his inner beast.

He ran a thumb across her cheek, and growled happily as both her cheeks blossomed red, and she smiled.

“You know what, since we met, you have been absolutely unbearable. You keep tricking me...”

“I did say I like to take the low road.”

“And you are insufferably arrogant. But yes, since the moment I saw you, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. Maybe there is something to this whole mate thing.” Hilda pouted those unbelievably soft lips and her eye twinkled. “I especially think so ever since I heard about the private jet.”

Eric and his wolf howled in laughter and he pulled her down for a kiss.

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“What are you doing?” Hilda hissed at him. “People are starting to stare.”

Eric was running his paws up and down her horrifically ruffled maid of honor dress. She looked like one of those little ladies that her grandma used to put on the top of toilet rolls. They had fascinated her when she was a kid.

Yes, Eric was her date to the wedding. Everyone was shocked, a little in awe, and many were pretty jealous of her. She didn’t really care one way or the other. Any thoughts about wanting to show her ex what he was missing now seemed utterly ridiculous. Kyle and Sandy were in love and happy – feelings she was starting to enjoy too – and when Hilda congratulated them, she truly meant it.

“Eric!”

His hands had started taking a long, luxurious path over her rear.

“I’m looking for the zipper,” he muttered as he continued his distracted quest.

“Why?” she sighed.

“The moment I get you to our room I plan to have you naked within two seconds. I just didn’t want the dress to slow me down. I thought you might get angry if I ripped it apart with my claws.”

His eyes flashed amber and her inner beast cooed, thinking it might be worth it. By Santa Claus’ beard, they had been together a matter of days, and already she was smitten. Oh, who was she kidding? She was smitten the moment she saw him.

“Well, why didn’t you say?” She took his hand and placed it on her side. “Hidden zip, right here, big guy.”

“Convenient,” he growled as his eyes flashed.

They looked into one another’s eyes for a few moments. Both of their heartbeats started racing and each could scent the other’s arousal.

“Race you to the bedroom?”

“Yes.”

This turned out to be a very merry Christmas after all. Her beast mewled excitedly. Mine.

The end