

Earning a Christmas Bride

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Chapter One

Fritz listened to the conversation in his little sister's room with an expression that looked like he was in pain. Poor little Faith never seemed to be able to get away with anything. What was worse, was when she was caught, she didn't know any of the right steps for keeping out of a spanking.

Not that there was any way that she could keep out of *this* particular punishment. She would be lucky if their parents didn't *really* lose it like they did the Christmas the year before.

"Merry Chris—" Berry, Fritz' younger brother came through the door with a cheerful season's greeting on his lips, only to get shushed by four of his siblings, including Fritz, immediately. Berry stepped back, a little aghast, but quickly heard the muffled yelling from one of the rooms. He cocked his head to the right. "What's going on?" he whispered to Adele, who was closest to him and pretending to be working on her sewing.

"Faith was caught making a magical device that would help her see that Edward fellow," Adele whispered back. "Oh, it's beginning to sound ugly."

"They can't spank her!" Berry said, looking sympathetically towards the hallway. "It's Christmas *Eve*, for goodness sake!"

"They whipped her *last* Christmas," reminded Elizabeth, who was straining her neck to hear better. She sighed and shook her head. "We shouldn't be listening to this."

Berry sat down and grabbed a book he could pretend to read. "Well said. It's wrong to pry." Still, he didn't hide the fact that he was facing his own ear in the direction of the room, where their father, normally even tempered, was barking.

"I am absolutely ashamed!" their father said. "You promised us that this matter was closed!"

"You wouldn't let me see him any other way, Papa! I didn't mean to make you angry!" Faith's little voice defended.

"I bet you all a crown that she's going to say something stupid in the next two turns," Michael said mischievously, grinning with delight at all the excitement.

"Michael..." Fritz tisked wearily.

"I'll take that bet," Berry quickly said. "She's already going in the right direction, which is quite good for her."

"Shh!" Elizabeth hissed.

"Of course I wouldn't let you see him any other way! He's a cad! With his reputation, I wouldn't let you in the same room alone with him for five seconds. And now you're trying to see him behind our backs?"

"I don't know why I have to see him, but I do, Papa. Please understand—I never got to say goodbye to him. If I could even if just for a moment... I can't get him out of my mind! I've never felt so good in my life than when I was with him... I love him."

"Awwe..." Faith's sisters both sighed at the same time, both sticking out their bottom lips in sympathy for her.

At the same time, however, all her brothers rolled their eyes and groaned. "She'll say something even *stupider*," Michael clarified.

"You've only ever met him for one day! Hours! Forget it, young lady. And if you think you'll get the opportunity to see him ever again, you've got another thing coming! Your mother and I can't even trust you now after something like this!"

There was a sharp pause, as if a whip was reared up to lash, before Faith burst with fury. "How can I trust you, you mean! You're the ones rifling through my things!"

Michael snorted out a laugh. Berry put his hand over his eyes. "How could it go so wrong so *quickly*, though?" he asked, digging in his trouser pocket for a crown. "I'm lost, I'll admit," he admitted, turning in the direction of Fritz, talking over the carrying on in the next room for a moment. "What's so wrong about that Edwin?"

"Edward," the room chimed.

"Right, right. What's so wrong about *Edward*? I'm quite out of the loop, I daresay!" he flipped a coin over to Michael's direction, who smoothly caught it in the palm of his hand.

"He's human, for one," Elizabeth replied.

"Well, that's not so bad! Aren't we all, deep down? We're certainly not one hundred percent elfish, as my wife likes to point out. She says it's why we're all so odd," Berry said with a shrug. "A couple of years at the North Pole, and he'd turn quite elfish himself."

"Edward's an aristocrat," Fritz sighed. "I don't imagine he'd leave everything to come up here, and you know Faith—she's so in love with human culture, she wouldn't hesitate to leave us behind."

"She certainly loves to help the poor things, just like Papa does," Adele reminded with an affectionate tilt of her head.

"Papa, I'm too old to be spanked! I'm eighteen, now! I'm not a child!"

The room snorted all at once.

"Well, that's a nice dream while it lasts..." Elizabeth said dreamily. "But..."

"You act like one, you get punished like one." Mrs. Claus chimed in sternly. *"Get the paddle, now."*

"Papa, please... Don't..."

"Didn't you hear your mother?"

The door of Faith's room open and closed. Faith looked already miserable beyond belief—or so it appeared so in the peripheral vision of all her siblings, who were sitting there in the parlor, avoiding eye contact. "Fritz," she sobbed, trying to collect some support from the oldest. "Can you talk to them? *Please?*"

Suddenly, all eyes were on Fritz. He looked around the room as if to say, "mind your own business!" but no one got that message. Fritz sighed slightly before he explained regretfully, "Oh, Faith. You know I can't... Not about this. You know how resolute they are."

Faith squinted out tears, which fell past her cheeks and right onto the floor, before she walked the not-long-enough distance to her father's office, which was by his workshop on the other side of the house. There, a very old, well-used, wooden paddle would wait for her, hanging on the same peg it had rested on for the last two hundred years.

As soon as she was out of the parlor, however, Berry turned towards Fritz. "So, besides the humanity, which can't be helped, what's with this... Edgar that's so bad?"

"Edward," the room chimed.

"Right, right," Berry waved his hand in the air dismissively. "Edward the aristocrat. Continue?"

Fritz hesitated in answering for a short moment, but finally, he sighed and straightened himself in his chair. He leaned over and whispered something into Berry's ear.

Berry's eyes widened. "That many women in *one lifetime*? Isn't the man *exhausted*?" He paused. "How do you even *find out* information like that?"

“Father’s done a full inspection—he has ways to find out anything! The man was a long-time occupant on the naughty list, anyway,” Michael explained shortly.

“Until this year,” Fritz argued, raising his finger for the point. “Faith might be right. She seems to have inspired him to turn his life around.” Fritz shrugged. “The poor little thing is in love—I thought it was just a short-term infatuation that wouldn’t survive last winter.”

“But here we are, a year later,” Michael noted. “Father thinks ‘too little, too late’ about Edward’s sudden appearance on the ‘nice’ list... And I don’t quite blame him for being skeptical.”

“Well... Certainly, I wouldn’t want my daughter *sitting next to* a man with such a record!” Berry said, obviously still disturbed by whatever Fritz had told him. Adele and Elizabeth did their best not to pry for information that was not appropriate they know.

“I’m impressed she’d even try seeing Edward again,” Elizabeth admitted. “After last Christmas... Remember—”

This time, Berry waved off the explanation. “Oh, I remember last year. Unfortunately.”

It was impossible to forget what had happened last year—a spanking of such epic proportions that all of Faith’s siblings, all who were aged from two hundred to thirty, had to admit that it was a punishment that stood out in their memories, even though it wasn’t their own. None of them had anything to do with it.

The last Christmas Eve, Faith had snuck onto the back of their father’s sleigh on Christmas Eve. It was bold—certainly none of Nicholas’s other children had the gall to ever do such a thing, but Faith—ever interested in humans— simply would not be told ‘no’ about seeing London. Probably because their parents had let Faith read too much about it—about balls, and parties, fine dresses, dancing, music... Wonderful things that were held supposedly so different from Elfish celebrations, that Faith would dream about it. It was only a matter of time before the girl went and did something stupid.

Faith had snuck out of the sleigh and then proceeded to immediately slip and fall off the roof, which was covered by ice. She was young, only seventeen then, and barely knew much magic—certainly not enough to save her from injury. Luckily, Edward Grimm, a young English Lord who was visiting his sister’s home over the holidays, was busy avoiding his sister’s Christmas Ball by sitting outside on the upstairs balcony.

Edward broke Faith’s fall perfectly. She got not a scratch on her.

Surely the man was confused after nearly having his neck broken by a pretty young girl falling on his head. Not only was he confused, he was furious. The anger mostly came out of the fact that such a slip of a girl could cause him so much pain: the glass of the brandy he had been consuming had done a good job of piercing his elbow during the fall.

Faith was mortified by what had happened. As she had never been in the human world before, she had a bit of a cultural faux paw when she tried to heal him despite his rage with her. Presently, the rage turned into fascination as Faith merely had to kiss his arm to heal his wound, not even realizing she was doing magic.

Finally, Edward Grimm was able to see Faith without being in pain, and because of this, he was able to realize how wonderfully unique she was. Faith was beautiful with porcelain-like skin and large, round doe-eyes. He didn’t have the heart to remain angry with her, and found himself soothing her out of the guilt she felt from falling on him.

The two spent the whole night together; dancing, playing chess, giggling like naughty school children. Neither of them had ever had a better time—they never separated. They wrapped up with each other before the fire in the upstairs parlor and fell asleep.

That's where Old Saint Nick found his sleeping daughter the next morning; wrapped in the arms of a sleeping, strange man. He had come to find her as soon as he had come back to the North Pole, where Mrs. Claus quickly screeched out that Faith had disappeared.

Needless to say, it didn't go over well. He woke Faith up, and before she could say a word, he rushed her up the fireplace and onto the sleigh, leaving Edward still asleep.

The siblings remembered when she got home that morning. The whole house was still up: everyone was looking at each other with worried expressions, hoping nothing had happened to their baby sister. She was so small, was so incredibly naive, and her magical abilities were so weak, that everyone had feared that she had gone to London and gotten herself murdered.

Instead, she got a spanking that made it sound like she was being murdered. She didn't even get allowed the privacy of her own bedroom to get punished—she was lucky that her father waited until she was in the house before he started switching the daylights out of her while all her siblings watched with guilty fascination.

"She certainly knows how to ruin her own Christmas," Adele hummed.

Faith came back through the parlor on the way to her bedroom, crying harder now than when she had left. She carried the wooden paddle in front of her as carefully as if it was her own, tiny coffin.

Faith's door opened and closed.

"I feel bad for her," admitted Elizabeth with a sigh.

"Papa never decides on a spanking lightly," Adele reminded them all loftily. "You know he would rather spoil her. She just knows the exactly wrong thing to do... Besides, poor Papa then has to work all night with this on his mind..."

"That's good and sympathetic of you, Ad," Michael chuckled lightly. "But I know *I* wasn't thinking 'poor father' when it was *me* in there with the paddle as a child. But, you know—women take a whipping better than a man, so what do I know?" Michael shrugged, and then shushed, as it would now begin.

Faith didn't know what was worse—the paddle, or the switch. Either way, she had never taken a graceful spanking in her life, and she didn't expect to do well that night, either. She had seen the elf-children get spanked without them admitting even a sound or struggle. She decided that they weren't getting spanked as hard as she always was.

It was humiliating to be caught in the middle of running away. But what choice did she have? She was in love with Edward Grimm—it felt like she had a string around her soul pulling her in his direction. It was possible she would have gotten away with it, too, if she could have found one of her siblings to help her. All of whom seemed much better than her at creating magical objects—their skills had been refined with age. She was the baby of the family at eighteen.

When she walked into the room, she saw her father, with his sleeves rolled up, sitting on a chair in her bedroom with no arms. Her mother was watching her with very close, skeptical eyes, lecturing her with a stern glance.

She swallowed nervously. "Can't we do this another night?" Faith pleaded, hoping that a later punishment would calm them into giving her a far lesser punishment. "It's Christmas!"

"No, Faith. It's time to put an end to your foolish antics once and for all," Nicholas told her, trying to look as stern as he could, even though the tears falling down her cheeks were tearing him apart. "Come here," he said, pointing to his knee.

Faith hung her head, finally resigned to her fate. She handed her father the paddle as if it was a gun he expected to shoot her with, then she carefully allowed herself to be pulled over his lap.

She remembered when she was a child—which wasn't very long ago, really—and she used to sit on her Nicholas' knee every evening, just chattering on while he listened to her and indulged her—it was surely his favorite part of being a father. It seemed like, since last year, they had been butting heads so much anyway, that she was frequently being put in *this* position—she had some small hope that her birthday last week would make him less quick to punish her like a child, but that hope was growing smaller by the second.

She felt her skirt being raised in the back, leaving only the thin, worthless protection of her bloomers and stockings. She gripped Nicholas' leg tightly, already wincing in anticipation of the pain that she was suddenly remembering much more clearly than she had not five minutes before.

CRACK! She howled in response—marveling at how such a simple, non-magical object was able to cause so much pain.

CRACK! Supposedly, her brothers didn't cry when being paddled when they were "tots" (which, in Elf-time, is any time under the age of twenty), or so they claimed. The liars!

She was screaming already, and she wasn't even on the fifth CRACK of the paddle. She had no idea how many more were going to come, either. She wasn't given a count, which wasn't a good sign—probably, if she knew how long he planned to paddle her, it would have just made it worse somehow.

"...Mischief on Christmas Eve! Of all times to be sinful, and naughty, and spoiled, and ungrateful!..." her father lectured over her cries, or the sickening smacks the paddle made upon contact. She had just realized he had been talking.

"You're killing me, Papa!" she screamed.

"No, I'm not. And not seeing that boy won't kill you, either!" he assured, bringing the paddle down again and again.

Surely the whole North Pole could hear what was going on—especially because the Elves were out tonight! Christmas Eve was the busiest time of their year! For the next two weeks, there would be nothing but celebrations going on, and they were out, hanging holiday wreaths, party lights, cooking delicious foods... listening to 'Santa' (as they called him), their "King", give his daughter a merciless spanking on this most important of nights.

She had not been counting how many strokes of the paddle she had so far endured, but she feared the count would have been heading into the thirties, which meant that she was acquiring a new family record.

She resigned from struggling, or kicking, or screaming. The paddle was now louder than she was—her voice was course from crying: she just sobbed.

This is when her punishment ended. Her bottom seared with pain even when it was over—she couldn't stop crying—her bottom simply *throbbed*.

She hadn't died, which was all well and good for her family, but for her, she wished she had in a way. She would never see Edward ever again—by the time she would earn back her parent's trust, he surely would have found and married someone else. That is, if it didn't take a hundred years for Faith to be forgiven—Edward would surely be dead of old age by then.

Nicholas helped her to her feet, but was quickly standing with his arms around her—mostly so she couldn't see the tears in his own eyes. He hated being the disciplinarian! He didn't want any of his children to fear him, or flinch away like Faith was doing.

But it was what Faith needed—a firm hand from the head-of-household. It was why he didn't want her to be with that human—he hadn't ever had responsibility to anyone, not even himself. How could he protect his daughter from the world? From herself—she was so foolhardy and reckless! It was better that she would stay in the family home for a few more decades, like her sisters were doing, before Nicholas could find a man worthy of her...

His wife put a hand on his shoulders, her eyes filled with gratefulness and sympathy. "Nicholas," she said. "You should get going. It's getting late."

He nodded and squeezed Faith tighter. "You're very important to me," he told her, but she didn't respond beyond continued sobs.

Her parents left the room—Mrs. Claus to help her husband get ready for his biggest night of the year. They were somewhat surprised to see all of their children in the parlor... Reading.

"Is Faith okay?" Fritz finally asked, snapping his book shut; quick to give up his charade. "Mind if I go in and speak with her?"

His parents nodded and, in a heartbeat, Fritz knocked quietly on his sister's door and let himself in.

Faith was lying on her bed, face down, looking catatonic.

"Faith," Fritz said, just to get some acknowledgement from her.

"Urgh," she replied, exhausted.

Fritz was slow in his movements as he sat down on her bed next to her. "You're very brave, you know," he told her softly.

"Urgh," was her muffled response.

"You know, I fell in love once," Fritz told her quietly, knowing that their siblings would be watering at the mouth to infringe more on Faith's privacy. "With a human girl."

Faith lifted her head up. "I didn't know that," she said, wiping her face on her dress' sleeve.

"It was many years ago... Probably about a hundred years, now. Annabelle LaCriss!" he sighed sadly and shook his head. "She was beautiful—so, so... beautiful. I met her Christmas Eve at a party. I was pretty much doing exactly what you were doing, only I was much older than you were. I didn't require permission" He chuckled at his sister's amazed expression. "I didn't fall off the roof or anything, but I fell for her instantly, anyway. It was... Love at first sight. I courted her, wooed her—I would have done anything for her..."

"What happened to her, then?" Faith sniffled.

"Well, I couldn't get her parents to let me marry her and take her back here before Epiphany. Then I had to go home, of course, before the way was shut. I told her I'd be back the next year, and she was supposed to marry me then."

"But she was already married?" Faith guessed.

Fritz' expression became still as stone. "No. The plague came into her village that summer, and they all died. The only thing left was a couple of old women and a bunch of empty houses."

Faith looked horrified. "Why would you tell me a story like that?" she cried, breaking into a sob. There might have been no hope at all if she waited until next year—they had to be back at the North Pole by epiphany, or else they would turn into mortal humans!

"I'm just explaining why I'm going to *help* you, baby sister!" Fritz informed her quietly, reaching deep into his coat pocket—a pocket that was beginning to seem that it didn't have any bottom. "He must prove he is worthy three-fold, or else—at the end of the twelve days, you will

simply come back here. If you can no longer stand him, you can come back anytime you wish—just shake this three times...”

Fritz revealed from his pocket a small snow globe, which was a new sort of human toy. This one, however, had a miniature of the North Pole inside. She could see her father’s workshop, and the house... and he and mama walking hand-and-hand over to the stables—it WAS their house!

She gasped, “Fritz, this is beautiful!” She stared a moment in awe as he swiveled the globe in his hand, blowing snow about the globe. In the same instance, she heard a snow flurry blow mightily against the shutters outside.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said, gently putting it in her hands. “Because it was very, very difficult to make. Be *very* careful with it. You cannot marry him until he proves himself to you, or else you will be brought back,” he reminded. “And... well, I’m sure everybody would be quite furious with me.”

“Won’t Papa just know I’m gone?” she whispered.

“You leave Father to me,” Fritz told her firmly. “You just worry about your Edward.”

“What if he doesn’t actually love me at all?” Faith fretted.

“Then, you’ll be brought home in twelve days. Twelve *days*, Faith, is all I can give you and Edward to make this work. Twelve days for Edward to prove himself, twelve days for him to want to give up everything for you. *Twelve days*—if I knew a way to give you longer, I would.”

She looked down at the snow globe and swallowed. “I only made you a pair of shoes for Christmas...” she sighed.

“Well, thanks for spoiling the surprise.”

“Why would you do something like this for me?” she asked, looking awed by his kindness.

“Because the days where I feared the paddle are about two hundred years *behind me*,” he laughed. He leaned over and hugged her. “Now, sleep tight. And good luck.”

“How can I sleep?” she said excitedly.

He stood up and shrugged. “That I can’t help with,” he told her, and winked. “Merry Christmas.”

Fritz quietly left the room, and walked face-to-face with his mother, whose eyes were filled with concern even as she took off her coat from where she walked her husband to his sleigh. “I was going to go in and speak with her,” she informed. “Maybe give her some cookies?”

“She’s tired. We should just let her sleep,” Fritz suggested, buttoning up his coat lest his mother see something glowing in his vest pocket.

“Oh,” the woman looked a little disappointed by that, but walked away with Fritz’s suggestion. “I’m just worried about her infatuation with that human boy,” she went on. “It just breaks my heart.”

“Don’t worry, Mother,” replied Fritz, calmly shrugging his shoulders. “I’m sure she’ll be better after Christmas.”

“You think so?” Mrs. Claus asked hopefully.

“I’m quite sure,” Fritz nodded, and grinned. “She can’t cry about him forever.”

Chapter Two

Edward Grimm did not sleep well on Christmas Eve. Actually, he had slept quite poorly all year. It was probably due to a lack of intercourse, which he used to use like a drug of choice, but exactly a year ago, that changed. Ever sense, he couldn't find the heart to sleep with another woman—his damn mind started getting in the way every time he tried.

It was Faith—that wonderful dream he had last Christmas Eve. At first, he thought she was some naughty little pre-debutant who was wandering around his sister's house when she should have been downstairs with a chaperone. However, the night became much stranger, and he realized he was either completely wrong, or simply dreaming her.

Quite possibly, she was the first pretty girl he had ever met that he didn't immediately try to bed. Of course, her using magic was quite a distraction, and before that—the deep cut on his arm was distraction enough. He was so angry with her at first for falling on him, but she was so repentant and sorry that even the anger faded to exasperation. He actually let her see the wound she caused, and upon seeing it, she merely picked up the palm of his hand and kissed it ever-so-gently with her lips.

And then he was healed, as strange as it was, and as strange as it felt. She had healed him so effortlessly, that he felt she had to be an angel... A very, very overly-curious angel that had to ask questions about everything, from what the house was made out of to how to use a box of matches!

Though, the more he explained, the more questions she asked, and then she wanted to leave and explore the city of London... by herself... in the night. It was then Edward's turn to be concerned, and his turn to ask the questions.

Possibly because Edward's brandy was laced, mixed with his nephew and niece's blathering about Santa Claus, Edward discovered in this dream that Faith wasn't an angel at all. She was the wayward, severely disobedient daughter of Saint Nicholas himself, which explained why she was on the roof—she had freshly climbed out of the sled she had stolen a ride on.

He believed her—why not? It was a dream, anyway! Still, he couldn't seem to be able to let her leave the house. He worried over her. "I don't want to see anything happen to you," he explained, locking them both in the room that she was so adamant on leaving. "A young lady has no purpose gallivanting throughout the city of London. There are murderers, drunkards, thieves, and rapists out there, and they're not likely taking the holidays off!"

"What's a rapist?" she asked curiously, though it was obvious she was quite put-out with Edward's worrying.

Edward stood up, straight and nervous, at a loss of how to answer. He didn't want to answer—he didn't want to put such visions in her head, even if they were for her own good. She was so delectably innocent.

Normally, he would have liked nothing more than to act the 'teacher' to the ways of the world. But this time, maybe because of her doll-like expression, or the way she looked at him with complete confidence and faith in his goodness, he found himself hedging. "It's not my position, young miss, to answer every single one of your questions!" he chided her in response. "Just believe me—it's too dangerous outside for girls like yourself. I would worry for you, and I'm really not a good worrier."

“Give me one good reason why I should stay here,” she told him snappishly. “Besides your paranoid notions? You know I am certain to be punished when I return home, and I want it to be worth it!”

“Because I’m not done getting to know you,” he said, not really having a reason that wasn’t dipped in horrible, paranoid visions of her dying. “And I would really enjoy your company this evening. Won’t you stay? For me?”

She looked extremely disappointed for a moment, but in another, she looked resigned. “Alright then, Edward,” she said. “I’ll stay.”

But damnation! Getting to know her was the worst thing in the world he could have done! The more he got to know her, the more he fell in love. He wasn’t listening for a way to get under her skirts—he was listening to *her*. And she was wonderful—incredibly naïve, and clumsy, and mischievous as all get-out. But wonderful. He had never had so much fun—he had never felt so complete! They talked the night away, played chess, chuckled like naughty school children over their stories.... And then they fell asleep on the sofa in his sister’s parlor, holding each other tightly, and—Edward would be the most surprised to admit—*chastely*.

And then he woke up, and Faith was gone... And Edward, for the first time in his life, found himself completely... empty. He didn’t know if he had ever been so sad before in his life, and soldiering on through the next year was nearly impossible. He knew she couldn’t be real; he knew that he must have made the whole thing up in his mind, but he still felt that he should be looking for her. He just didn’t know where to start.

Edward woke up to the smell of peppermint candy—that’s what Faith smelled like. It seemed to linger around him even as came more and more into consciousness. He sighed—it was probably something they were making downstairs; something cruel and Christmasy.

He sat up and put on his slippers and his robe, heaving a heavy sigh as he walked to the tall windows that were thickly curtained to keep any light out. He walked past the sleeping girl on the sofa and opened the curtain to look out at the thick blanket of snow outside.

Edward raised an eyebrow, suddenly wondering if, indeed, he was insane. Was there a sleeping girl on the sofa? Right behind him? But when-how-why... No... He had to have imagined it.

He took a deep breath, anyway, and turned around, expecting to find an empty room behind him, looking much the same way he left it the night before.

Sleeping very still, her petite body twisted protectively around a crystal globe in her arms, was Faith. She didn’t look different at all—nothing about her had changed in a year except that her thick, auburn braids were now unwoven and flowing past her waist.

He felt faint—probably because he hadn’t breathed in some time, now. Maybe a whole minute. There was only one thing to do: he pinched himself. Hard—so hard, it was sure to bruise. He would not let his hopes get too high if he really was dreaming her. He couldn’t live through that twice.

He blinked, and shook his head, and pinched again, but Faith remained there: her eyes darting about in a dream under her closed eyelids.

He knelt down next to her. “If you’re real,” he explained quietly. “I’m marrying you. There’s nothing on earth, heaven or hell that can stop me. If you’re *not* real, hopefully you’re not actually something scandalous, because I’ll be marrying you anyway.” He would never fall asleep again, he decided. He would stay awake, and watch her. She wasn’t going anywhere this time!

He lowered his face close to hers and breathed in the smell of her locks. Peppermint.

He carefully brushed her hair with his fingers, delighting in the feel of her. He brushed her cheek with his hand until he watched her long eyelashes flutter open slowly. "Faith?"

"Edward?" she mumbled, both sleepy and dazed. In the next moment, her eyes were opened wide. Quickly, she threw her arms around his neck tightly. "Edward!"

He picked up her body and pulled her down to the floor, onto his lap, and he cradled her for a long moment. "Are you real?" he finally asked her, finally, putting his hands on her shoulder and giving her a firm shake.

She nodded happily, sniffing—she had never been so full of emotions. In fact—unless a spanking was part of the deal, Faith didn't ever cry. "I didn't think I'd ever get to see you again!" she breathed.

"Why did you leave me?" he asked her, nearly crushing her.

"Papa," she explained with a single word. "Papa made me go home. I didn't even get to say goodbye! It happened so *quickly*."

He began to dry her eyes with his sleeve. "You're here now," he reminded her gently. "Thank God!" He looked around the room, becoming more and more curious by the moment. "How did you *get* here?"

"My brother, Fritz, sent me." She wondered if she had ever been so grateful for anything before in her life. "I'm not sure how I got here! And I don't care."

He didn't care, either—he cared more about how she was going to get ripped out of his arms again once she was discovered missing by her parents! Could they appear from nowhere? Could they disappear the same way?

Still—she was here, in the flesh. He had never gotten a better Christmas gift.

He looked up and saw the strange globe she had left behind on the sofa. "What's this?" he asked curiously, about to pick it up.

She gasped, turned, and put her arms around it. "Don't touch it! It's magic!" she warned, then carefully brought it to her lap and revealed it. "Fritz gave it to me."

"This brother of yours is extremely generous," Edward noted kindly, then saw someone walk out of the miniature house in the globe. "What the devil?" he said, jumping slightly in his seat.

"No—that's Michael," she said, looking closely at the globe. "He's another brother, he—he's *smoking a cigar*!" she gasped and then giggled. "He told us all he'd quit! His wife is going to kill him!" She looked up with her bright eyes, only to see Edward staring at the globe, horror-stricken.

"This is... this is *your home*?" he clarified, wondering how much further down the rabbit hole he was going to fall. Not that he could do anything about it.

She nodded, and bit her lip apprehensively. "My house—and Papa's workshop, too."

He leaned over to stroke Faith's hair for a thoughtful moment, and then helped her up to her feet. "We'd better hide that before any of the staff sees this," he explained.

Faith nodded in agreement. "They wouldn't take the magic well?"

"It'd be a lot for them to swallow," he explained.

"Where do you want to hide me?" Faith asked curiously, looking up at him.

Edward lowered his eyebrows. "What do you mean?" he asked, confused.

"Well, don't you want to hide me somewhere? If you're hiding all magic in this house, I thought I might be included. I did come from nowhere," she explained, shrugging her shoulders. She brought the snow globe carefully to Edward's bed, getting on her knees, pushed it as far under the bed as she could. "Won't your servants be curious?"

He watched her bottom squirm about as she tried to push the snow globe under his bed. He adjusted his pants slightly, his member easily stirring from the sight. He walked to the bed and helped her back to her feet. "I don't want to hide *you* from *anyone*, Faith. The staff won't ask details, and it's not their business." He played with her fingers. "You can't use your magic, though. Not at all—not for any reason!" he decreed as if it was obvious. "The staff can be superstitious, so they spook easily."

Faith's mouth twisted down. She didn't think the prospect of not using magic would make her so unsettled—but she hadn't gone very long without doing something. "I don't like that rule," she admitted with a pout, crossing her arms tightly across her chest.

He playfully tapped her nose. "Think of it as a learning experience about the human world," he told her. "Live like one of us lowly creatures." He winked at her as he raised her hand to his lips.

Just then, the bedroom door opened. "Ah, Joseph!" Edward spun around, looking at a very well-dressed man with a very, very shiny pocket watch chain hanging from his pocket and a tray full of breakfast. "I was wondering how early I got up!"

"Very early, sir," Joseph nodded, his eyes never leaving Faith for a moment. "Merry Christmas. You have... *company*, I see."

Joseph, in turn, saw something in his master's face that was plainly elation. "Yes! Yes I do! So you noticed!" he cried merrily. Joseph raised an eyebrow, wondering if the man had lost his senses completely.

But it was clear now—Joseph saw Faith, too. She wasn't a paranoid delusion!

Edward calmed himself down before he began to do something extremely foppish. "Yes." He cleared his throat. "Young Faith Claus here is very, very good about sneaking in places—just came in this morning to *surprise* me for Christmas. She's a very dear friend of mine, and she'll be staying with us... indefinitely. Please prepare the guest room at the end of the hall, there. And give her anything she needs—dresses, any room changes, anything at all. Make sure everyone knows."

Joseph noticed, of course, that Edward hadn't had any visitors for over a full year at this point. Not since the Duchess of Ashbury, but even so; he didn't invite even that woman to stay. Edward used to have many female visitors of all classes, constantly moving through the house in those days. None of them stayed 'indefinitely'. None of them just *showed up*, sneaking into the house at all hours.

And certainly none of them looked as curious and wide-eyed as this girl. She was young, too—barely a debutant, looking like she should still be holding the hand of her nanny. He had hoped Edward had turned a new leaf, but obviously he had changed his desire for conquest to a more innocent, hard-to-come-by type.

"Does Miss Claus take lemon in her tea?" he asked, raising his eyebrows, looking resigned to his master's lack of conscience.

"Oh, please call me Faith," the young girl smiled warmly and approached. "May I help you with the tray?" she said, pointing to what was in his arms.

For a moment, he was only confused by the offer. "No," he said.

She backed up a foot. "Oh. Alright. Might you point me to the kitchen, then? I could grab something to nibble on myself."

"I'll bring you anything you'd like." Joseph's stare at Faith was just as curious and intent as the way she was staring at him.

“Oh... I don’t drink coffee or tea,” she said unsurely. “I do like cider—or cocoa, but only if it’s very, very sweet, but... Really, you don’t have to. I can make it myself.”

“I insist,” Joseph assured kindly, then looked up at Edward as if to say with his eyes, *Shame on you!* “I’ll be right back with that—I’ll also make sure the fire’s started, if you plan to spend your morning here.”

“Thank you, Joseph,” Edward dismissed with a nod.

Faith watched as Joseph left, looking exceptionally curious. “So,” she said when she heard the door close. “Who was he?”

“Joseph runs my household affairs,” Edward explained, thinking how much Faith acted like a creature from another world—she took nothing she saw or heard for granted. “Sort of like an elf, I would imagine, would be to your father?” he guessed.

She snorted, a smile creeping on her face. “Oh, you’ve read too many picture books. I’ve read them too—where elves have little bells on their shoes, and pointy hats. I showed such a book to our head foreman at the factory once—he laughed himself silly. He wears a pointy hat now, time from time, just to be ironic.”

Edward was laughing, too. It was, of course, a silly assumption he had made. “What do they look like, out of curiosity?” he asked her, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

“Like you or me. Even the *full* elves, that is,” she added. “But they’re not servants. They’re helpers.” She stole a sugar cube from his tray and popped it into her mouth. “They do love my father, though. That’s why they help with the toys and everything else. They rarely come by the house, though.”

She clapped her hands, and a fire appeared in the fireplace. She grabbed another sugar cube and popped it into her mouth. She reached for another, but Edward took her hand. “Did you do that?” he asked, nodding towards the fireplace.

“It’s cold,” she reasoned with a full mouth.

“Turn it *off*,” he demanded firmly. “Joseph said he’d send someone.”

“That makes no sense to wai...” she began to argue.

Edward’s eyes only darkened with impatience.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she said flippantly, and gave another clap. The fire promptly vanished, and in the next moment, two men walked in with firewood in tow.

As they weren’t alone, Edward didn’t say anything. He merely watched her—she was a stubborn little thing, no doubt. And it was understandable—she was finally out of her father’s stern rule and probably thinking she could take on the world. But she could not take him on—he would have to be her match.

As soon as the men closed the door upon their exit, Edward said, “I told you, no magic, young lady.”

“That was *barely* magic, Edward,” she assured. “Besides, I only know a little. I’m only eighteen.” She stole another sugar cube.

He took a deep breath and decided to be patient. He didn’t know how her year had been since the night they had met, but if it was anything like his had been, then she had been through hell. Still, she did have the same look upon her—like a girl who had managed to get away from her nanny—that she’d had the first time. There was a mischievous glint in her eyes that begged for adventure, and at the same time begged to be restrained and controlled, to feel watched and cared for. “Faith, you don’t *need* magic. Trust that I’ll take care of you now. Don’t punish me by trying my patience—you won’t like the consequences.”

"You sound like Papa," she huffed angrily. She glared at him for a moment like an angry kitten who mistook herself for a lion. "I can take care of myself."

"See that you do. If not, *I'll* take care of you," he retorted. He made it sound very clearly like she wouldn't like that at all. "My Faith—I love you," he divulged tenderly. "I would love nothing more than to make you my wife—I couldn't imagine anyone better. I don't want you starting life on the wrong foot. I don't want anything to happen to you."

She blushed, but his words didn't surprise her. She still looked quite resolved about the issue-at-hand. "Edward—in case you haven't noticed, your home is in the middle of nowhere," she said, pointing to the outside. "Your servants are noisy—they wouldn't sneak up on me! Now, I *promise* not to use magic, but I can hear your worry, and it's very unnecessary!"

Edward smiled wearily. "Just as long as you use your head."

"What else would I use?" She fluttered her eyelashes at him.

He took a deep breath, and exhaled. She was right. There was a chance that he was just being paranoid—he just didn't want anything to happen to her! He felt like his whole life-force, in one way or another, was tied to hers.

God help him.

It had been a wonderful day—Edward was just as lovely as she had remembered; he was really quite the gentleman. His eyes were always on her, watching her carefully. Patiently—oh, so, so patiently—he had answered thousands of her questions. She was sure they were all mundane to him, but she was curious. And he was smarter than she had given him credit for.

Edward was a scholar—a skilled one. He could have become a professor! He had read practically every book in his large library; a collection that she was certain would have taken her a hundred years to read, and Edward wasn't even thirty. It wasn't a wonder how he was rich: it didn't take him much effort, which was why he seemed to have so much time on his hands. He was a businessman—an investor.

But business certainly wasn't a challenge for him. Faith couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't bored. Certainly, he acted like she was the most interesting thing he had ever seen in his life, and she didn't think she was that interesting.

She had a wretched time sleeping that night—she was quickly realizing she had never been gone from home so long—she had never slept in a strange bed, a strange room. Edward had given her a private room down the hall from him; one with no fireplace—it was heated by the kitchens below, but it was still a bit cold, especially in the silky sheets, which felt alien against her skin at night.

Homesick, she pulled out the globe that she had carried to the room before the end of the night and sat it on her lap to look at it, trying to peer through the nearly microscopic window of her house, trying to see any of her family. She didn't see anyone, but it put her mind at ease, and steadily, she fell asleep.

Edward also had trouble sleeping, but for very different reasons. He wondered if he had ever been so sexually frustrated in his life! There was a girl—a gorgeous girl with a bubbly bottom and supple breasts—just a door down from him. Last night had been torturous, but at least there was no one there to tempt him.

He had been battling with his erection all day—luckily, she asked enough questions to distract him, but still his urges were practically primal. He had been hunting her all day, wondering what she looked like under her dress, wanting to kiss her mouth hard with his...

Joseph's expression constantly came into his mind—it hadn't washed off that quiet butler's face all day. It said, "You lecher. You should be hung off the ground by your own testicles. Whatever you're doing with that girl is wrong."

Joseph would never openly say anything to him, of course, but he didn't have to. One of the reasons Edward trusted that man with everything was because Joseph was so amazingly easy to read.

Joseph already suspects that you've taken the girl in your bed already, Edward dangerously reminded himself. The damage to her reputation has been done, as far as the staff is concerned. What keeps me from just going into that room? It's her fault I haven't been satiated in so long! If it wasn't for her, I would surely have a girl—many girls! — just as pretty, just as young, sharing my bed. She's the one that ruined me!

Edward found himself jumping decidedly out of bed, growling and stalking his way to the hall like a predator would. Slowly, stealthily, he opened the door to the room at the end of the hall and peaked in.

The girl was twisted around in the sheets, sleeping on her stomach and looking uncomfortable as she slept.

She looked so delectable. He wondered what it would be like if he crawled into those sheets with her, began to tease her with his hands, feel her luscious mounts, play with the warmth between her legs that she probably was barely even aware of before that night.

He wouldn't have to take her—she trusted him enough to let him touch her how he wished. She was so eager to please him, so excited about becoming his wife, becoming *his*. She wouldn't know what was going on until it was over. She would enjoy it, too—she would be too embarrassed to show it, certainly. She would be confused by how her body acted to his touch, how her nipples tingled when he pinched them, how hot and moist she was becoming in her most tender parts.

There would only be that tiny pinch of pain that would make her his, and fill her eyes with that look of betrayal as her innocence, before she knew it was even in danger, was gone....

Edward sighed grouchyly.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't lead her astray. He couldn't take the innocence that was not yet his. She may not have known enough to keep him away from her, but *he* knew better. He would not betray that trust she had in him. For once in his life, he would be chivalrous.

He slouched wearily and skulked out of the room. He couldn't believe himself! There was a perfectly beautiful little plaything sleeping helpless on the bed and he was walking away?

Yes. And not only that—he turned and very quietly locked the door behind him and shoved the key in his pocket.

As soon as he was out of his wing, he wasn't so quiet. He was slamming doors, stomping, and kicking walls all the way to the servants' quarters until he was to Joseph's door. There, he thumped angrily at the door.

Joseph answered the door, confused, and very much freshly-woken. "Yes? Oh!... Sir? What's ever the matter?"

"You take this," Edward ordered, pulling the key out of his pocket. "Don't just leave Faith's door unlocked where I can just... Just go *in there*! Do you know what someone like me's capable of doing? It's not pretty, Joseph!"

Joseph shook his head, wondering what had come over Edward. Was this truly his master? Trying to keep away from a girl? Asking for help keeping away from this girl? "Why, Sir, I'm sorry, I just..."

“You just thought what, Joseph? You keep her away from me, you hear? You lock up her room every night until breakfast before I do something uncouth! You hide that key, as well. Even from me—hell, especially from me.”

“Yes, sir...” Joseph promised, gripping the key in his fingers. “It would be my pleasure to do so.... Are you... *alright*... sir?” He turned his head slightly to stare at Joseph carefully.

“No,” Edward assured, and stomped off, wondering if throwing snow down his shorts would give him any sleep.

Joseph found himself chuckling to himself. “Well, I dare say,” he only said, and stared down the hallway. “That is quite a thing, indeed!”

“That is quite a thing, my lad!” Fritz claimed, drumming his hands on his desk as he watched his own snow globe in front of him shine with brightness only either the actual sun or his personal magic could achieve. This one, however, didn’t show the North Pole. It showed everything going on in Edward’s mansion, where the other snow globe was.

“Quite a thing!” He was pleasantly surprised. As soon as Edward crawled into bed with Faith, Fritz was going to cause Faith to disappear before his eyes and be brought right back home.

Fritz had sat through a whole morning of the two necking like doves, and then a whole afternoon of watching Faith ask about how a fireplace worked. It was either unsettling, or very boring.

This had been an unfortunate change of scene, and Fritz was glad to see it come to this. Maybe now Edward would go to sleep. Or shirk off all night—Fritz didn’t care just as long as Edward kept his aristocratic manhood away from his sister’s body and confined in his trousers.

“What’s this?” said his little sister’s voice from above him.

“Ahh!” he yelped, turning around so quickly in surprise that he fell off his chair and hit the floor. “Elizabeth! You nearly stopped my heart!”

“Well, with all your hooting and drumming and foolishness, you were easy to sneak up on!” Elizabeth assured, putting her hands on her hips. She looked at the globe he was looking at. “What’s this?” she repeated, her eyes full of wonder. “This looks like some sophisticated magic!”

Fritz sighed. “Can you keep a secret?” he asked.

“Nope. She can’t.” Michael was suddenly leaning against Fritz’ open doorframe, folding his arms. “I heard your hooting from my office,” he added, nodding towards the next room.

Fritz slapped his forehead with exasperation. “Okay, okay, get Adele and Berry, then...

You might as well know what I’m doing here...”

Elizabeth was quick to grab her absent siblings and round them in. They closed the door of Fritz’ workshop and huddled around his desk secretively, where Fritz told them all what he had done with Faith.

“That’s wild!” Berry exclaimed, struggling to keep his voice hushed. “I just saw Faith this morning.”

“That’s not Faith,” Fritz said, rubbing his neck anxiously. “That’s a toy.”

“A toy?” Adele echoed, looking incredulous.

“A toy.” Fritz shrugged. “I made it out of glass and clay. It should last about two weeks before it starts to look pretty torn. It only says about... twenty phrases or so... She does Faith’s chores and keeps to herself.”

“I don’t believe it,” Michael replied, shaking his head.

“Trust me. She’s not real. The real Faith is at Edward’s.”

“I think that’s awful of you,” Adele voiced. “If Papa wanted Faith to be with Edward, she would be with Edward.”

“Yes, Adele, and I heard you sighing right along with Elizabeth when you heard poor Faith saying that she was in love!” grumped Fritz.

Adele squinted slightly. “Yes, well, I feel bad for her, but this... This is quite wicked. What if Faith stays there forever?”

“The only way that could happen is if Edward passes every test—chivalry, leadership, and sacrifice.” Fritz counted down on his fingers to illustrate his point. “But he just passed chivalry. He had the chance to slip right into bed with Faith, and *didn’t*. He thought about it, but he turned away.”

“And you were just going to watch?” Berry asked, disgusted.

“No. I am her failsafe. Her safety net. I can bring her back with a snap of my fingers, as long as I’m in this room. I think, between us all, we can keep this going. We’ll take turns with chores and take turns watching. And girls—I need sweets. Lots of them. I can’t produce this much magic on an empty stomach.”

“I’m not quite sure I agree,” Adele huffed stubbornly.

“Adele, come, come!” Elizabeth argued. “This is our sister, we’re talking about! Her happiness! Her white prince! Oh, how can we *not* help?”

Adele and Berry rolled their eyes. Michael merely shrugged, “Well, I’m not going to be the one to tell Father. And besides, this is damn good magic. I’m curious to see what happens.”

“Fine,” Adele sighed, elbowing Berry, who was her closest sibling and confidant. “We’re in. But if anything happens to poor Faith, be it on *your* head.”

Fritz, in response, nodded. “Thank you, all of you. I really appreciate your support, and so does Faith... I just want to see her happy, and I want to try to get Father to understand that Edward’s a good man...”

“This is lovely! I love a good intrigue,” Elizabeth chirped, clapping her hands together excitedly. After which, she was practically dancing in the direction of the kitchen to start cooking.

“This is going to be a long, long twelve days,” Fritz sighed, and grinned at his siblings—his best friends, who, after two hundred years, all found themselves playing a game on the same team.

Chapter Three

Faith was spying on Edward—watching his tall figure hunch wearily over his large stack of paperwork. In truth, she felt bad for him. She was under the impression that her father didn't like him because he had too much "fun". Now, she saw the truth—he *never* had fun! He worked, and worked, and worked...

She decided that he was more stereotypically an elf than anyone she had ever met! And he was the only human she knew!

He still had things to prove to her family before he could marry her, that she knew—and she felt he would. But still, she felt it was a duty to give him something else to focus on.

She crept out of her hiding place unnoticed and stood next to his desk. She snuck close to his side, and looked over his shoulder, unnoticed until she said, "What do you like to do?"

He jumped in his chair and whipped around to see her. "Ho! Where'd you come from, you little..." He playfully grabbed her and pulled her onto his lap.

She giggled a second, but then quickly repeated while there was still a playful smile on his face, "What do you like to *do*?"

"Do? What do you mean?" he retorted, looking down and grabbing her hand so that he could kiss her fingers.

"For fun." She shrugged and nodded toward his work. "You work most of the day away, did you notice?"

He looked down at the work. "I enjoy working," he sighed, though he didn't mean it.

Faith laughed at the bold-faced lie. "You do *not* like working!" she argued.

"Well, I don't like paperwork, but I like working. I like... getting things done, I suppose. No other way to say it," he admitted, shrugging. "Have I been ignoring my sweet lady?"

"No." She shook her head. She grinned. "You and Fritz would get on well," she teased. "Fritz is always working, too—I always thought he was insane! But he seems to *enjoy* what he does, at least."

Edward laughed, "Yes—he also inspires you into mischief, like seeing *me*! Your other brothers ought to horse whip him for his foolishness! Sending their baby sister like a lamb into the lion's den..." He smiled mischievously and kissed Faith's forehead.

At this time, Michael and Berry were pummeling Fritz after listening to Edward's suggestion—with pillows from his bed. "Come on, you fools! That hurts!"

"You're lucky we don't horsewhip you!" Berry gave a particularly hard pummel to the side of Fritz' face.

"You're lucky we're too lazy to go and get it!" Michael added.

Fritz finally grabbed the pillow and started to defend himself avidly. "Shush! Now we're missing their conversation," Fritz lectured as he slammed Michael backwards playfully. Then he grumbled, "Keep horsing around and we'll break the damn globe. THEN what would we do? Force her to come home?"

He watched as Edward's butler walked into the room.

Joseph, the butler had come in at that moment. Fritz' brothers finally quieted. "Can't we... see what happens later?" Michael asked, looking bored at the globe.

Fritz turned and looked placidly at his brother. "How do you think this works, Michael?" he asked monotonously. "I'm not a *wizard*."

Michael shrugged. "Could have fooled me."

"Oh, Miss Faith," Joseph said with a bow of his head, looking surprised to see her on Edward's knee. "I didn't see you there. I meant to tell you—whatever you did for Rose seems to have worked! She's feeling much better."

Faith ignored Edward's confused look and blushed, "Oh, it was nothing."

"What's this?" Edward asked, sounding quite annoyed already.

"Oh, just one of the young chambermaids, Rose—she had turned her ankle in the courtyard today, and young Miss Faith here... I'm not sure what she did—but just the right thing! Rose had fallen so awkwardly, yet she was walking properly within the hour!"

"She... Um, just... Fell better than it looked," Faith replied, keeping her eyes down as she felt Edward's hand come and grip her around the waist.

"Indeed, that could be. Still, she thinks it was you, and she's grateful, and wanted me to pass that on to you if I saw you before she did," he noted kindly, then turned to Edward and passed him a small packet of correspondences under his arm. "The mail, sir," he said with a bow of his head. After which, he turned to make his leave.

As soon as the door closed, Faith tried to sit up. "Well, still lots to do today. There're a few books..."

Edward didn't let her go anywhere; including off his lap. "One moment, young lady," he told her firmly. "That story sounded very much like you used magic."

"Edward, I just helped a little..." she replied. "And it was for a good cause."

"A turned ankle?"

"Broken," she snapped. And then, looking into his exasperated expression, added, "Possibly just sprained... Definitely quite swollen."

Edward raised a suspicious eyebrow.

She huffed a sigh. "I'm sorry, Edward—it's instinct."

He pinched the bridge of his nose with frustration. "Alright, you naughty thing, you. Into the corner."

"Huh?" she asked, looking suddenly very worried.

"Corner, *now*," he let her off of his lap and pointed wearily into the corner. "I'm sorry, my sweetness, but you have to learn to obey me."

"Obey, Edward, *really*," she rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips. "*Obey*," she scoffed.

Edward felt his own cheeks grow hot. He glowered at her scoff. "Yes," he said, standing firmly gripping his hand around her arm and leading her into the corner. "Obey," he said. "When we're married, you'll promise to do a lot of it."

"We're not married *yet*, though!" she complained. "Edward, have patience with me." She pouted out her bottom lip as she found herself being stopped in the most boring corner of Edward's study.

"Faith, I've been patient all *week*! And I will continue to be patient when we're wed. Patient about... you giving the servant girls roller skates... Patient about you stealing all my sugar cubes in the mornings. Patient about you asking me how candles and ocean *tides* work.

"What I will absolutely *not* be patient about is magic," he clarified. "You have to act human like the rest of us. You will spook and alienate the staff, even if you continue to use your magic only to be nice."

Edward was very tall compared to Faith—she felt like he was looming over her. Still, she didn't like being treated like a child, especially by Edward, who was *not* her father. She tried to push past him, though he grabbed her arms. "Edward, I'm not standing in the corner like a naughty child. Now, get out of my way."

Little did she know, she was only twisting Edward in a direction neither of them wanted to go. He cleared his throat so he wouldn't growl at her outright, but his voice was still so menacing, that Faith actually thought he might mean what he said, "Faith, if you don't obey me this moment, and stick your nose in that corner, then I will spank your disrespectful little hide until you see stars, is that clear?"

Edward watched as her face fell, trying not to feel glee as she blushed at his threat.

He had thought about it on the second day she was there when she seemed determined to ice skate on the deep yet shallowly frozen pond outside—well, actually, he thought about it on the first day they'd met: Faith needed a firm hand or else she would quickly get out of control.

He just couldn't bring himself to threaten it until just then. He didn't want Faith to be upset with him, after all. He had never spanked anyone before, outside of bedtime-play with a mistress or two. This would be quite different. But if he let her just continue on her own devices, she was going to get herself hurt, or going to get the servants scared to death of her.

Suddenly, her face turned from embarrassment so that she was shaking with anger.

That's when her hand shot up to slap his face. He was so shocked by the sudden change in emotion, that he just let it happen. What was more shocking was that, as soon as she assaulted him, she looked *satisfied*.

Michael gasped as he watched Edward try to collect himself after he was slapped. "She *didn't*."

Berry began laughing nervously, then said flatly, "We need to bring her back, right? He'll kill her."

Fritz just watched, putting his hand to his chin, grinning. "No he's not. He's calming down."

"He doesn't look calm. He looks... angry," Berry said, looking a bit nervous.

"I tell you what—if my wife slapped *me*... *Oooh*," Michael shuddered.

"Shut up," Fritz hissed, watching intently, suddenly finding himself cheering on *Edward*.

The satisfied grin wiped off her face after Edward wheeled her out of the corner and towards a chair. There was a very clear, horrifying moment when she realized what he had in his mind.

"Edward, don't do this..." She warned as if she had anything to threaten him with.

She wasn't given the option of obeying him now—he sat down in the first chair he came to and dragged her over his knees. "Edward, this is ridiculous! Don't you love me? How could you do this?" she demanded as she struggled with him. He was bringing up her skirts. "It's indecent!"

"*It's justice*," Fritz *shrugged*, *not looking nearly as nervous as his brothers, who were practically biting their fingernails*.

"This, my girl, is justice," Edward echoed as he pinned down her kicking legs with one of his and with his free hand pinned her struggling arms to the small of her back. "Who do you think you are? Queen?"

"I like this man," Fritz said, pointing at the crystal ball at the man who just echoed out his exact phrase, void of all sympathy for his sister, who had surely lost her mind when she had pushed her beloved so.

"Edward, this is humiliating! Not my skirts, *please*," she begged miserably.

Her plea fell upon death ears. For a moment, he considered pulling down her undergarments and completely baring her. Hopefully, he wouldn't regret not doing so, and he didn't want to risk the temptation her bare bottom would present. He just wanted to give her a reason to obey him. Without any more ceremony, the flat of his hand came promptly down.

Her eyes widened with the surprise of how much just his hand hurt! It felt nearly as firm as her father's paddle! Now was the time to really start apologizing—certainly, he didn't realize how hard his hand was!

"Edward!" she gasped. "Please, stop it! I'm sorry for slapping you!" She gritted her teeth to keep from screaming.

"You're not sorry *yet*," he assured her, gritting his own teeth.

She didn't like the sound of that very much at all. She struggled with a new fury, but it was futile—Edward was very strong, especially for a man who worked behind a desk as much as he did. "Please, please..." she began to cry as he continued a new volley of spanks. "I'll do anything," she begged. "Just stop!"

"You had your chance of just standing in the corner like a good girl," was his response, never breaking for a moment in his resolve. "I wasn't going to spank you until you decided to be a defiant *brat*."

That was a horrible thing to hear: the fact that this could have been avoided. At this moment, she would have loved to be standing in the corner. Nothing would have been better. But how could she have predicted this? She had no way of knowing what would happen if she disobeyed anyone else besides her father...

She began to cry, wondering when the humiliation and pain was ever going to end. Somehow, this was worse than her father's spankings. Even though she would occasionally have the whole house as a witness to her shame at home, at least she wasn't getting spanked by the handsome, kind-faced Edward! Would he ever look at her the same way after this?

Certainly, she would look at him differently! She had no idea he could take her in hand so easily.

"Now," he said, her tears slowing his resolve until, with a couple of extra-hard spanks, he stopped. He didn't comfort her yet—he merely helped her off of his knees and stood her up to look right into her tear-stained face and her sad, pouty eyes. "Now, young lady, I want your nose in that corner until I tell you to come out. Perhaps when you do, you'll be more well-behaved."

Much to her brothers' surprise, she actually did what she was told for once. She scurried to the corner.

"Skirt *up*," he demanded firmly.

She looked around to argue, but closed her mouth when she saw how serious Edward looked. Leaning her forehead into the corner, wishing for her own death, she hiked up her skirts in the back. "You're humiliating me on purpose," she sniffled quietly.

"Humiliation helps young ladies think more clearly about their actions," Edward replied, sitting down at his desk.

Faith gave a despairing sigh towards the wall. She wasn't thinking about what she had done—not in the way he meant. She was too busy feeling sorry for herself. Certainly, not all

wives or lovers were spanked this way; it had to be her luck to find the only one who felt the need to use childlike discipline to control his sweetheart.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much to be done. She still loved him, unfortunately, and going upstairs, shaking the globe, and sending herself straight back home was still far from her dreams, especially because of the strange way she was feeling about that discipline...

She felt as light headed as when Edward kissed her the first time—her body was tingling all over from being controlled, and even getting his bad attention. Her bottom was throbbing still with pain, her skin was hot to the touch even through the cotton of her pantaloons, and the pain was not unfamiliar. After all, she was certainly her father's most-punished (although probably also his most often comforted) child. But she had never felt this way, this shallow-breathed, after one of his disciplines.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot anxiously. "Can I come out of the corner now?" she asked. She felt like she had been there her entire life, already.

"No," he replied curtly. "I'll tell you when you've been punished enough."

She sighed again, this time loudly enough for him to hear.

He shook his head and watched her fidget. The sight of her smoldering in her own shame was actually strangely delightful to him. When he had sufficiently made her Mrs. Grimm, he could imagine putting her constantly in the same position—nose against the wall and skirts raised in the back, her face bright red and sniffling from the humiliation she had caused herself.

The only difference would be that she would be properly bared during her punishment. Her pantalets would be where they should be—around her knees or on the floor. The next time she slapped him, he promised himself, she would be in that state. In the gentlemen's parlor after a dinner party, where all the men would retreat for cigars and brandies, he had often heard other gentlemen giving each other advice on how to handle mischievous wives. "A spanking," one of those duke's said, "Should always be on the bare bottom. You see how much damage has been done, and she will try to avoid the humiliation twice as much. The spanking needs to be an experience..."

It was so strange to him that when he had heard that advice, Edward didn't think he would ever marry. Now, he felt quite in a hurry to do it.

Edward checked his watch and sighed. It had been about a half-hour, now, since her punishment. "Have we learned our lesson?" he drawled curiously.

"Not to slap you and to do what you say." Her words sounded rehearsed—she had been going over the answer to that question in her mind.

He smirked at how chastised she sounded. "Good, now, come and sit on my knee for a moment," he invited, patting his leg invitingly.

She turned around quickly and readjusted her skirts, not able to look at his face after he had been able to stare at her bottom for that long. She shook her head. "I'd rather not," she admitted, her voice small.

"Come, Faith," he insisted. "I didn't spank *that* hard."

She came closer to him, but still stopped a couple of feet away. "I beg to differ," she simpered. "Sitting seems like agony."

He reached for her arm and had her sit on his knee nonetheless, despite her chirp of protest. He wrapped his arms lovingly around her. "You are a naughty little thing," he grumbled in her ear before gruffly kissing her cheek. "I'm lucky to have a soon-to-be-wife that's so cute when she's pouting."

"I'm not pouting. I'm angry," she clarified, sticking her nose high in the air and turning her head from him.

"It's lucky for you to discover that I have a firm hand," he said, resting his lips against the back of her neck.

"Lucky?" she scoffed with an irate snort. "*Lucky*? Pray tell, how so?"

"Because you now understand that when I marry you—which I will do *very* soon...." His voice had a hint of warning. "I will be even stricter with you. I have let you have quite a long leash this week, because I wanted you to feel comfortable."

"*Long leash*? Don't talk to me like I'm a spaniel," she chided snappishly.

He put his nose in her braid. "You know I only want the best for you. You're so... *important* to me."

He felt her tense under his touch at those words. He had no idea that that's what her father had told her so often after a whipping, but her expression was suddenly very sad and thoughtful. "I know. I'm sorry, Edward. I'll be better," she promised sincerely.

Fritz and his brother were nearly blinded by the sudden flash of blue light that twinkled out of the snow globe. Fritz quickly shielded his eyes as he realized what was happening, but Michael and Berry just looked blankly ahead at the globe, obviously blinded by the light.

"What was... that?" Michael asked flatly.

Fritz grinned, but was confused at the same time. "Two out of three..." he replied.

"Which test was this? Making sure he can properly embarrass our sister into behaving?" Berry asked, waving his hands through the glowing dots in his vision.

"No," Fritz replied. "That, my brothers, is what it looks like when our sister respects somebody. When she accepts a man's *leadership*."

Michael looked doubtful. "Well, hell. I'm glad that doesn't happen often," he muttered. He threw up his arms. "What do you mean, she *respects* him? Didn't she *respect* him *before*? How do you agree to marry someone without respecting them?"

Fritz raised an eyebrow. "People do it all the time, Michael. Seriously man; were you born yesterday?" He looked down at the globe, where Edward and his sister were cuddling. "He hadn't earned her respect once until now. He'd just been letting her do whatever she wanted because he was afraid of losing her. And you can't be a good husband without your wife's respect."

"You should be careful, Fritz," Berry told him, looking quite annoyed. "What if he passes the last test and poor little Faith's stuck on Earth forever?"

He had heard this question before, but Fritz still shook his head with resolve and said, "If Edward's a good husband, I don't see why that would be bad." Fritz shrugged. "That's her decision. It's selfish to drag her away from the love of her life just so we can keep her here for company."

"What's the third test?" Berry asked, rolling his eyes at Fritz. He hated when his brother was right.

"He has to put her life above his own," Fritz informed.

Michael snorted. "You might as well ask him to grow a fluffy pink tail while he's at it!" He began to heartily laugh. "He's only got until Epiphany, or less! What sort of scenario would even let him prove that? Father's already getting suspicious, you know. You'll be lucky to get two more days out of this charade."

Fritz cracked his knuckles. The glint in his eye was more mischievous than any other expression either of them had ever seen before. "Oh, I think everything's in line. Who do you think's controlling the weather out there? They'll be snowed in for the next two days if I have anything to do with it..."

"Yeah," Berry drawled. "And... that will make that final test even more unlikely, won't it?"

"Have you *met* Faith?" Fritz asked. "Have you *seen* her during a snow-in? She starts to lose it if she can't get out of the house for two *days*. She's been at Edwards for almost seven days now. She's not a half of a day away from London. Guess her next steps?"

"You've put a lot of thought into this, I'm sure," Berry assured. "But still, I don't think Faith is stupid enough to want to risk going to London in the middle of a snowstorm."

Michael certainly wouldn't take that bet. "Fritz, don't let something bad happen to her!" he exclaimed.

"Shh!" Fritz hushed, leering over at the door. "I won't let anything happen to her. If something bad happens, I'll just bring her home." He looked respectfully at the globe. "But I won't have to. I have a good feeling about this human."

"You'd better," Michael grumbled. "Putting our sister's life... Ridiculous... I..." He sighed as he realized that Fritz rarely made any mistakes with magic. "I bet you *three crowns* that human will do exactly like aristocratic humans do: disappoint."

"Oh, my poor little brother..." Fritz grinned. "How poor you'll soon be..." He chewed his cheek suddenly. "I hope."

Chapter Four

“Please! I’m *so* bored!” Faith begged, but it didn’t seem like she planned at all to be denied. She was already set to go out, with her coat and mittens on.

Edward hated to see Faith disappointed, but had already looked outside that day. It was an absolute blanket of snow—he couldn’t even see the road. Even the servants were getting anxious. “I thought I told you *no*. Not until the weather clears. I’m not risking a driver in this weather just so you can go to London. It will still be there next week!”

Faith jammed her fingers into her pockets resentfully. “You can’t keep me prisoner here forever,” she grumbled.

He rolled his eyes. “Faith, Darling, I am not. I’m keeping you *safe*. It’s too slippery out there, and the visibility is nearly nothing. I’ve never seen such bad weather this time of year!”

It was now the ninth day there, and Faith still hadn’t felt like she had seen anything of importance, besides Edward. She felt like a sponge that had observed most of everything about Edward’s house, and the staff was becoming a bit weary of her following them into every room, asking questions about everything they were doing. Now, she wanted to see the larger world: starting with London, and then on to everywhere else!

“Edward, you’re more high-strung than my mother,” she chided, adjusting her gloves. “Now, go ask to get the carriage ready.”

Edward didn’t move, merely stared at her. “Faith, I said ‘no’,” he reminded. “Go busy yourself with one of the thousand wifely duties I wish you’d become accustomed to.”

All those wifely duties—essentially overseeing the house and studying finer arts—simply weren’t comparing to London. Of course, when did chores compare with fun and adventure?

In the North Pole, even though it snowed constantly, she still always had something to do in the nearby Elf City—there were always celebrations, and parties, and feasts... Most of the time, her and her sisters’ schedules were found so full, that they barely felt they had time to tie their shoes around midday!

Something also was beginning to weigh heavily on her heart: reality. As far as she knew, she would be drawn right back home on Epiphany—nothing in her snow globe made it look like Edward had proven anything to her. Then it would be a whole extra year of trying all sorts of magic spells that would get her back to Edward, if that would ever happen.

“Edward, if you don’t take me, I will be quite put-out with you,” she warned, her cheeks flushing.

“And if you ask one more time today, my sweet one, I will assume you need your bottom warmed. Do I make myself clear?”

Faith blushed in response, but he could still tell she was upset.

He kissed her nose and lifted up her chin to look at him. “I’ll tell you what—as soon as I’m done with work today, you and I are going to cuddle up in front of that huge fireplace in the den, and then I am going to do quite a bit of worshipping of you. I’ll even teach you a few card games.”

She slouched all the more. “That doesn’t sound very much like going to London,” she replied.

“You’re stubborn,” he said with a smile. “But, my sweeting, I must get back to my work.”

“Work, work, work,” she sighed, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, on *this* terrestrial plane, my beauty, we can’t put food on the table with magic,” he teased.

“I don’t think you know how magic quite works,” she chided softly, playing with his vest buttons absentmindedly. “But... If you take me to London, I’ll explain on the way...”

“I don’t think you quite know how *snow* works. Surprising for someone who lived at the North Pole,” he chuckled as he lead her to his study door.

“You’re kicking me out of your study, then?” she asked astutely.

“Depends—will you let me work?” he asked, though she could tell that he confidently already knew her answer.

“I will... On the carriage on the way to London.” She fluttered her long eyelashes.

He gave her a playful swat on the bottom. “Brat.” He gently pushed her out of the room. “I’ll see you this evening. Behave until then.”

“What’s she doing now?” Elizabeth asked, looking at the crystal orb as Fritz worked on another project in his workshop. She pulled her knees to her chest.

“What’s it look like she’s doing?”

“I don’t know—but she’s got that look like she’s up to something!” Elizabeth giggled, getting up to steal a cookie from Fritz’ plate.

“Stealing my fuel, are we?” he smirked. “You know, it takes a lot of work making Faith’s little folly run properly. Magic runs on sugar, not air!”

“I’ve been making you the most sugary treats I can think of all week!” Elizabeth rebuked, flicking Fritz’s head with her fingers. “I’m running low on energy myself. It makes me wonder how Faith is doing. I haven’t noticed her eating any sugar for a couple of days now—not even cubes!”

“Yeah,” Fritz shrugged. “Humans don’t need it like we do. She probably doesn’t have enough magic left to fill a thimble. But she doesn’t need it—if something happens, I’ll watch—”

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

Fritz and Elizabeth exchanged nervous expressions and Elizabeth dutifully ran to throw a sheet over the snow globe, hiding it from view as Fritz opened the door.

“Father, hello,” Fritz said with a bow of his head.

“Ah, good. You’re both in here,” Nicholas said, petting his long, white beard. “I have an errand I must send you children on. The North Pole has been running very short on supplies; particularly sugar. I need you to travel to Wickelf and back today.” He pointed in the direction of the larger elf city which was a few hour’s journey to the west.

“*All of us?*” Elizabeth asked, doing her best not to looking longingly in the direction of the snow globe hidden within Fritz’ bed linens.

“Yes, all of you but Faith—she’s been acting incredibly odd since Christmas. You wouldn’t know if there’s anything especially wrong, Fritz?” Nicholas asked, his eyes glassy with concern.

“No, Sir,” Fritz replied with a shake of his head, trying to echo Nicholas’ concern as best he could. “I haven’t noticed. She seems fine to me—she’s been moping around here much less since Christmas, in fact!” Fritz had designed the toy that was impersonating Faith to be perfectly well-behaved; he hoped his father wouldn’t give her any attention at all.

“She’s acting irregularly,” Nicholas confirmed with a hard nod of his head. “She must be up to something.”

"Papa, I don't think it's fair to make judgments for Faith just... behaving," Elizabeth replied with her usual small voice. "Isn't that what you wanted? You probably spanked the mischief out of her last week."

Nicholas seemed to consider this, but not for very long. "I really didn't spank her that hard, my dear," he replied, chiding Elizabeth in her lack of faith about his fairness. "Just hard enough to get the message across. Last year was far worse, and yet she had that... twinkle in her eye sooner than now. Now, her eyes are... dead. There's no other way to say it! I think she must be ill..."

"I don't think so," Fritz replied surely. "I know her very well, and..."

"Better than me?" Nicholas raised his bushy eyebrows.

Fritz faltered slightly before he straightened his shoulders. "No, Father. Of course not better than you or Mother." He swallowed and found himself looking guiltily down at the floor.

"I asked the doctor to come in from town today while you were gone to have a quick look at her," Nicholas said softly. "It would be nice to rule out any problems, or maybe give her a third party to talk to. Not that she's been talking much to anyone lately."

"About me going Wickelf..." Fritz began, feeling as though his pulse was in his ears. "I really am in the middle of too much work."

"I know, you've barely left your workshop, my boy!" Nicholas chuckled kindly. "You should go most of all, and get away from work for a change. Get out with your brothers and sisters and relax. Besides, I'll need everyone's help for proper supplies. You've never *not* gone."

Fritz cleared his throat, pacing over ideas that would help him take the snowglobe with them. He couldn't leave it now! The last bit of magic he performed was making a large snowstorm fly around Edward's area... Faith might be heading out into that, and who would look out for her?

"Now, Fritz. Elizabeth," Nicholas ordered, sounding a little exasperated by their lack of excitement about the chore. They were always so excited to go to Wickelf... Why were all his children acting so horribly odd lately?

Fritz looked a bit startled by his father issuing an order. "Just a moment," he begged.

Nicholas shook his head. "No, you need a break before you get whatever sickness has become Faith. Right now, Fritz."

Fritz wiped his fingers through his hair under the duress but, under his father's watchful eye, found himself cautiously leaving the room. "Hurry," Fritz told Elizabeth under his breath. "We need to get this chore done as soon as possible. The sooner it's done, the sooner we can get back and look after Faith..."

Elizabeth nodded and rushed to put on her coat.

"Fritz, this is the worst idea you've ever had!" declared Michael, feeling himself sweating despite the cold. "You better hope Edward does the right thing if Faith does something stupid. How could you lose this fail-safe?"

"She's going to get hurt," Adele agreed, looking the most disappointed in Fritz, who she thought was even more responsible than she was... Until now. "You know she doesn't have the sense of a rabbit!"

Fritz was making the horses pull the sled towards the elf city as quickly as he dared. "She might just obey Edward, there's no guarantee that she'll..."

"It doesn't matter. Do you think the doctor won't notice that the Faith back at home is made of glass and clay? I have a feeling that it won't take him long. When we get home, there'll

be hell to pay,” Berry rubbed in, looking angry with himself. “If we’re lucky, Father will find out what happened and go and get her himself.”

“He knows Faith doesn’t know that sort of magic. He’ll wait for us to return—he’ll think we sent her somewhere. Though, I doubt he’ll think we sent her to Edward,” Elizabeth assured with a shake of her head. “The magic is too advanced for her, and sending her to Edward is too atrocious for *us* to do.” She wrung her hands thoughtfully under her muff. “Maybe we should take our time. The longer it takes for us to get home, the longer it will take for Papa to find Faith. The longer Faith gets with Edward.”

Michael snorted. “If Faith isn’t dead. Lost in the snow. Or raped by that... that human!”

Adele gasped. “Don’t say things like that, Michael! It’s unsavory!”

“That man had taken over one hundred women into his bed within ten years,” Berry finally admitted to the women. “Ten years! One hundred *different* women—including married women— and we think Faith is his exception?”

“I know she is. I made a test,” Fritz said firmly. “And he passed it. He won’t take her without wedding her. The man’s changed!”

“Oh, ho! Well, that makes me feel *so* much better,” Berry crowed through gritted teeth. “Last time I checked, there’s many a time a man could succumb to temptation!”

“Berry, give Edward a chance,” huffed Fritz, though he was already thinking about going back and admitting everything.

“I hope you’re right about him, Fritz, because our baby sister’s life hangs on his dedication,” Adele snapped.

“I hope so, too...” Fritz admitted, leaving a wake of silence around him as the troop of Claus’ trudged quickly towards Wickelf.

“Damn Edward!” Faith found herself muttering, angry that the tall man, who was now warm at home, had been right. The snowstorm was bad.

Faith had rarely seen snow like this in her days—it stung her eyes. Yet, she knew London wasn’t far. She had read a map—it was only ten miles. It would only be a two hour journey by horse.

The horse was easily rigged up—it was Edward’s stable boy that she had to drug with her last sliver of magic she still had in her veins—she put a sleeping spell on a cookie she gave him. The spell never worked on elves or her own half-blooded kind, but it DID work frighteningly well on humans: the boy only took a single bite of her cookie before falling face-forward into a bale of hay.

After that, she had the stable to herself, along with any horse she wanted.

Then she went out into the storm. Once in London, she knew, the storm would be inconsequential. She would take some of Edward’s money and get a hotel, watch a ballet, maybe an opera, and then watch people on the streets, or in the sitting parlors of the hotels, eavesdropping on conversations... It sounded like heaven.

Unfortunately, she had to wade through hell first to get there.

Her horse was not happy—it couldn’t see any better than she could, and all she saw was a blanket of white haze coming at her from every direction. Her nose was cold, and her fingers were cold, and the air was such that it felt difficult to take a breath!

Her horse whinnied at her, uncomfortable with walking through snow so deep. “No, we’re not going back,” she told it firmly. “It’s only been a half-hour, and we’re close. Just a little bit longer.”

The horse trudged through an extra hour with her, but London was nowhere in sight. She had the most horrible feeling that she was going the wrong way, which is certainly the feeling the horse got, as well, because it struggled with her to go back.

“No, wait,” she said, fighting against the horse’s reins. The horse, on the other hand, was having none of it—it was struggling for its own survival. All Faith was thinking was how angry Edward would be with her when she got back.

She wasn’t afraid of his wrath when she was leaving—the pain from his last spanking was just a memory; it was two full days ago already! Ever since, he had been just as kind with her as always, just as patient. She was beginning to think, in fact, that the chastisement she received was because he was having an off-day. He wasn’t normally a firm-handed man... Surely.

Now that she was again so deserving of it, she wasn’t so sure of that perception.

“Please, stop it!” she begged the horse, who was now beginning to hop threateningly.

A sudden gust of wind unsettled her from her seat anyway, and on the next slight bucking motion, she toppled off the side of the horse into a snow bank.

She struggled out of it, just in time to watch her horse take off back to the stable without her. Much quicker, she would dare say, than the horse moved bringing her here.

Now, cold, wet, and miserable, she was alone, with certainly no more means to get even to London. Swallowing her pride, she wrapped her cloak tightly around her and began to trudge back through the snow.

“Maybe *five hours*?” snapped Edward, incredulous, jumping up from his desk. He waved angrily at the window covered in white behind him. “Five hours in this?”

“I tried to stop her, Sir, I swear it!” the stable boy said, wringing his hat tightly in his hand as he trailed along behind Edward to the study’s door. “And she didn’t even seem too determined to go... And I jus’... I dunna what happened, sir—I jus’ woke up on the floor. I mus’ have fainted, I think, because when I woke up not a few minutes ago. But the horse was gone, and... there’s no sign of her, so...”

“Joseph, my coat!” Edward yelled into the hallway, swinging the heavy doors open. “Are you sure that it was five hours ago that she left?”

“I had jus’ done lookin’ at my pocket watch, here, sir...” His face contorted in pain. “I am so sorry, Sir. I don’ know why she’d want to go out into this mess—”

“Prepare my horse for cold weather,” demanded Edward, breaking off the stable boy’s yammering.

Blushing profusely with shame, the boy bowed and rushed off in the direction of the stables.

“Sir,” Joseph said, approaching quickly with coat and glove in hands. He had moved so quickly it was as if he counted on the order. “It’s too dangerous to go out, sir. It will be night soon, and it will be even worse! Tomorrow morning we’ll send everyone we can out there to look for her...”

“And leave her out there all night? We’d be doing a search party for a corpse, Joseph,” replied Edward, putting his arms through the presented jacket. Joseph had never been so determined.

“Sir, it’s better one corpse than *two*,” Joseph found himself saying, much to his own disgust. He felt even worse when Edward turned to give him a horrified expression. “You don’t even know which direction she went!”

"I'm not leaving the little fool out in the snow," he said decisively. "I'll head in the direction of London first. I will find her if it takes me all night."

"Sir..." warned Joseph, swallowing down his fretting with difficulty. "At least let some staff members go with you."

"And risk *your* lives as well?" Edward asked, raising his eyebrows at Joseph. He shook his head and marched toward the stable, putting his gloves on and then securing his fur hat to the top of his head. "No. This folly is of my own making. I knew her better than this—I should have taken proper action. She would not be told 'no'... I will endure the consequences alone."

Joseph followed him to the end of the house, but then swallowed. "Well... Well, good luck sir. I do hope Miss Faith is alright." He extended his hand.

Edward took a deep breath and returned the handshake. "See you this evening," he promised, then turned out of the house, tying his scarf better on himself.

"Your horse is ready, Sir," the stable boy panted, out of breath. Obviously, the boy had broken a speed-record in favor that he might be forgiven for allowing himself to be bewitched.

"Good man," nodded Edward, secretly feeling sorry for him. He didn't know exactly what Faith had done, but he assumed it was not anything that the boy could control.

If he did find Faith... She had a lot of explaining to do.

"What is that?" he asked, looking through the snow and seeing something moving.

The boy squinted and then rushed out a bit through the stables. "It's Palatine!" the boy shouted in response. He led the horse into the stables, the horse huffing up a storm. It was saddled and bridled, but it carried no rider.

Edward, charged up with fear that something might have happened to her, jumped up on his horse and, without another word, sped out of the stables.

He had promised her that he would protect her... From herself, even. And he had let her wander off into the snow, with the night nearly fallen, with no horse. What had he done...?

Faith put her hand to her nose as if she was curious if it was still there. She had never been so cold, or so lost. She couldn't find the road... She couldn't even find the hoof prints of her horse any longer! The storm had blown over them finally, and she was again dependant on herself for any direction.

She remembered her father and Edward both saying that the human world was unpredictable and dangerous, but she didn't expect this. "So this is how it ends..." She sniffed to herself as she sat down right where she had been walking—it was just as good as anywhere else. The snow wasn't shallow anywhere, and she had been in these elements for eight long, long hours now. "I was really hoping I'd die with me being *right* for a change..."

She was tired—her feet hurt, and her lungs hurt from the cold. The cold, in fact, rang through her ears and seemingly went straight to her brain. She couldn't even think straight anymore. "I didn't even get to see London."

If only she had brought that damn snow globe with her. She had nearly forgotten about it—she only looked at it when she was homesick, but never for its intended purpose: to send her home. She didn't want to go home. She wanted to go back and rest her face against Edward's warm, firm chest. The night he had promised her, full of fires, cuddling, and cards seemed so lovely now, when she wouldn't even stop for a moment and consider it before.

She imagined that's what it would be like every night when they were married—if they were ever able to marry, that was. She would never stop being his world. He would never stop trying to make her happy.

Too bad she didn't deserve it. This was obviously fate intervening on Edward's behalf—some ulterior force was obviously trying to protect him from her.

She wrapped her cloak around her head, trying to wrap herself up in a ball. She would rest only a little while—she was so *tired*. Afterwards, she could only pray that her father would come and find her, before it was too late.

"Do you see her?" asked the Baron Lysham of Wickelf, who was a very tall elf in person and who had a constant smile on his face. He looked endlessly amused with Fritz, who was quickly using his instrument with a sense of urgency the instrument had never been used with before.

None of the children could go eight whole hours without seeing what had become of their sister, which is what it had been. Elizabeth had the idea to beg any boon that was needed to use the Baron's help—who was easily the most powerful elf in the North.

It wasn't an easy decision—elves didn't easily do favors without payment, which wouldn't be a problem, except that there was nothing that their family had that such a powerful elf would need.

But Fritz found himself dragging his family over to the elf's mansion and asking him anyway. At first, it looked unlikely that the Baron would ever let a half-elf use his precious magical objects... Until he saw Elizabeth. Within minutes, Elizabeth had entranced him with her worried, motherly demeanor. The Baron agreed that the Claus' could use his magical mirror to help their baby sister on one condition: that he be allowed to write Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, startled at the sudden infatuation the mighty ruler had for her, was so stunned, she didn't know what else to say but 'yes'.

Fritz was watching through several images of several humans in the mirror. "No," Fritz replied. "Not yet."

"You have to visualize her to find her," the Baron taught patiently. "Take a deep breath," he said, putting a comforting hand on Fritz' arm.

Elizabeth was blushing under the very powerful elf's gaze, and his smile. "And calm."

"What if she's dead?" Adele asked, putting her face in her hands.

"That's... not quite the calming influence he needs," the Baron admitted solemnly. He looked up at Elizabeth, who was biting her lip apprehensively. "Don't be concerned, my dear one," he told her. "Your sister will be found."

"You better hope so, Fritz," Berry threatened from behind him. "Or else, I will pummel you to death with the first *object* I can get my hands on!"

"Not after I choke him to death with my bare hands," Michael added, squinting his eyes. All the children were, at this point, complete wrecks—the more that they thought about what situation they had woven for Faith to get snared in, the more sick about it they felt.

"Alright, I understand that I need to be beaten to death," Fritz grumbled. "Just inform me the final plan after I get Faith?"

His brothers continued to stand behind him, fuming.

Finally, the images that were beginning to appear in the mirror began to make sense. There was a little blob of cloak sitting in the middle of the road. "That's her," Fritz said, pointing, getting the mirror to get closer to her. "I know it."

"Is she dead?" Berry stammered

“No, she’s sleeping,” the Baron said wisely, skimming the picture. “I’m sure she’s fine. Where’s that lad she’s with?” he asked, and pushed Fritz aside, looking invested in this mystery himself. “Ah...”

The image had become clear—Edward was very close. He just couldn’t see her. The snow was blinding him just as much as it was blinding her. “Faith!” he called out, but the wind was too loud for his call to even carry very far. His face looked determined, but obviously frightened.

“Do you want her back? Or do you want her with him?”

“We’ve already taken too many risks, Fritz,” Adele stated angrily.

“But she’s so close, Adele...” Fritz sighed exasperatedly. “Shouldn’t we give her a chance?”

“You nearly got her killed,” she retorted, sticking her nose up in the air. “Father would have never forgiven you.”

“It’s far easier to send her back here than to help,” agreed the Baron, though it was easy to determine that the Baron meant, ‘easier for *him*’.

“Poor little thing,” Elizabeth sighed, staring at Edward’s forlorn face. “Oh, please. Just let him find her.” She put her hand on the Baron’s wrist, pleading.

“It’s a lot of...” Baron Lysham began to argue, turning his head.

“What do you want to help?” Elizabeth asked calmly.

The Baron blushed for a moment, knowing that Elizabeth knew how much he liked her already—it was hard not to with those glassy, round, perfectly human eyes. They were beautiful. “I will help your sister for a kiss,” the Baron replied mischievously, his innermost desire popping quickly from his mouth.

“Elizabeth, *no*,” chided Fritz, spinning around on his heels “We’ll just bring her home.”

“No, Fritz, it would break my heart for them to fail now. Let them have a few more hours together,” Elizabeth begged. She turned to the baron and flipped her hair aloofly over her shoulder. “You may kiss me, but you must help them.”

“Don’t let her do this! This is scandalous!” Adele seethed at her brothers.

But it was too late—the baron was quick in succumbing to payment. With a fluid motion, he put his finger under Elizabeth’s chin and raised it to his lips. Then, moving his hand to her cheek, he kissed her tenderly, and extremely long.

In fact, the rest of her siblings were beginning to feel quite awkward. “That’s really enough,” Michael finally muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets, looking insulted. “Trading kisses for favors... indecent! Only an elf...” he continued to grumble.

When the Baron ended the kiss, he looking longingly at Elizabeth’s expression—she looked like she was nearly glowing. The kiss was everything he had hoped for in his thousand years...

“Alright,” Baron Lysham finally said, turning back towards the mirror and cracking his knuckles. “I’ll help, I’ll help.”

Edward’s image was still trotting his horse through the snow, his expression looking helpless. Until finally, he saw a blue, glowing light come from the northwest.

“That seemed like it took limited effort,” Fritz argued, still horrified at himself that he would let the elf just kiss his sister so passionately. What was more horrifying was how Elizabeth obviously enjoyed it.

“How would you know how difficult it was? You make toys for schoolchildren,” the baron reminded with a taste of disgust. “You barely have enough magic to change the color of

your socks.” Still, the elf watched closely as the human man approached Faith, following the light blue glow curiously to the source.

Edward jumped off his horse and ran to her. “Faith?” he lifted her cloak from her face.

She was shivering heavily in the cold, her face looking so miserable, she couldn’t even contort her face to reveal her relief. “Ed..Edward-d-d! I-I’m-m.... S-s...”

“Shh,” he calmed, putting his arms around her and hoisting her up into his arms. “Let’s get you home.” He lifted her up on the back of his horse so delicately; it was as if he believed she was made out of glass.

Truthfully, that’s how she felt: breakable.

He climbed up behind her before he grabbed a blanket that was rolled to the back of his saddle and threw it over her shoulders. He winced as he hugged her body close to his chest—she wasn’t just cold—she was freezing, and soaked to the bone. Just holding her felt like he had plunged his body into cold water.

“So...” Lysham raised an eyebrow and turned around to Fritz. “This is what you set up, eh?”

“Fritz didn’t mean to,” Elizabeth said. “It was a good idea at first—we just wanted Edward to prove himself worthy.”

“Such dangerous games you changelings play,” Lysham mused, using a childish name for those who were born with human blood. “Well, hopefully you don’t use those sorts of games when I come to visit.”

Elizabeth blushed. “Come to visit?”

“I could have you come visit *me*,” he added to Elizabeth plainly. “But I want to more properly court you than your baby sister was courted. I do have honor. But I warn you...” He held up a stern finger. “I would not stand by and let you participate in your sister’s destruction like your...” He looked like he was tasting out the name. Their father was very famous among the elves. “*Saint Nicholas* lets you. You would not find me as... patient.”

Elizabeth, and none of her other siblings for that matter, had anything to say to that. They all seemed to look at the floor like children who had broken their mother’s window while playing cricket in the house.

“Thank you, Baron Lysham,” Fritz finally said, beginning to escort his brood from the house. “For your help.”

“May I ask you a question, Fritz?” Lysham drawled curiously.

“Sir?” Fritz asked respectfully.

“Now that his human has passed every one of your silly tests, what will you do?”

Fritz pursed his lips for a moment, his eyebrows lowered. “I don’t know,” he said, sounding sad but resigned. “Edward’s proved himself to be a very good man for my sister. He has my blessing now—our blessing,” he rephrased, nodding toward his siblings. “But now we have to have a very, very long talk with my father. I guess it’s one obstacle at a time.”

Lysham laughed, wondering what Fritz, who looked so confident, thought he was going to say to get Saint Nicholas to change his mind. “Well, good luck to all of you, then. You will need it!”

Chapter Five

As soon as it looked like Faith was going to be alright, Edward wondered if he had ever been happier. He was afraid that she had been possibly frost-bitten, but warming her up seemed to do the trick well enough. He still couldn't understand how he found her after nightfall, but he had realized how dangerous it had become.

Now, he was stripping off his wet, cold clothes in his closet, eager to get into something warm. He could still feel his heart racing, and he was nearly dizzy with the realization of how badly the night could have turned. Faith could have easily died. Hell, if he had to be out there all night, he might have faced the same fate himself, but the image of himself dead wasn't even a fraction as terrifying.

He had just gotten Faith into his life, damn it. He was just beginning to feel complete and happy, and it was almost taken from him. That morning, his greatest fear was her father taking her home without speaking with him. Now, his greatest fear was her disobeying him spitefully enough to do something amazingly foolish to herself.

Edward simply wouldn't let that happen. He would have to find it in himself to give her the discipline she needed to *survive*. And just think—two days ago he had spanked her for using magic. Now, he thought grimly, he was going to have to do it because if he didn't, she was going to do something like that again.

Turning his head curiously, he eyed a leather strap that was hanging from the peg on the far side of the closet. He remembered when he first inherited the chateau and saw it hanging there; he was startled. It had certainly not been used on him as a child; the look of it showed its intent, and that was to chastise another adult. A wife, specifically.

He couldn't have imagined his father using it on his mother, who was such a kind soul, or his grandfather on his grandmother, who was so humble and compliant.

It wasn't until just now that he even considered it was the men in their lives that guided them into the wonderful women they became. Faith was so wonderful, that he hadn't thought she would ever need to be chastised with that piece of leather on the wall. Surely, she wouldn't do anything so wrong. But Faith had the ability to become even more wonderful—he just had to be strong enough to guide her.

He finished dressing, and then grabbed the leather from its peg.

Although Faith had felt pretty sorry for herself on several past occasions, tonight she found it impossible to even look into the eyes of Edward's servants, let alone Edward himself.

Not that, when she eventually did try, the expression they held in their eyes said anything other than how stupid she had been, and how spoiled she was.

She had spent easily ten minutes putting on her stockings—her mind was so distracted. Edward had to be having second thoughts as to marrying her. She had been so impossibly reckless, and why? To see London? She was lucky to have seen anything else ever again.

Deep down, she always felt perfectly cared for. Like someone had been watching and protecting her, just like her siblings had always done when she was back at home... That if she had really screwed up, she would suddenly be at home.

But she obviously wasn't being watched... Except by Edward. She should have known that Edward would be her guardian angel through all of this. She had greatly disappointed him,

and disobeyed him, and was nothing but a pain in his neck since she had arrived on his doorstep. But he had still gone out into the snow for her.

It was hitting her like a brick: he didn't need to prove anything to her. She needed to prove something to him. Something she never could; she failed every test he threw at her. *She* was the one that didn't deserve *him*.

She got her globe sadly out of her wardrobe.

Should she shake it? After wanting Edward so badly for so long, for seeing how Edward was everything she dreamed she could be, how could she just go home?

Swallowing bravely, she shook her head against her desires. She had to go home, this time not for her own sake, but for Edward's.

She spun the snow around her house once—the lanterns in the room flickered in warning. She took a deep breath and shook it again. The walls rattled... She gave a single sob; tears streamed down her cheeks. "Goodbye, Edward," she thought solemnly and shook it once more.

And then, there was silence.

Nickolas was pacing as he glared at the doll on which the doctor was clever enough to find the off-switch. He felt so ridiculous. Certainly, this was beyond anything Faith could have done on her own. This sort of magic only matured with time and practice—Faith used magic more carelessly, and it was weak when she did.

No—this had to have been the mischief of one of her brothers. They worked in the workshop all day; they were very skilled in magic. Fritz most of all, who loved his work as a hobby more than anything else.

He was amazed at how close the siblings were in friendship when they weren't close in ages. Most of the time it was a blessing that they could all be such close companions. Other times, it just seemed like they got each other into mischief.

Which was all fine and good for the boys—he stopped taking the paddle to their hides when they were all fifteen. Now, Berry was the youngest at fifty. They had long looked at him more like a boss than a father, and obeyed him only to that extent. Most of the time, they were quite responsible—Michael and Berry had their own families to try to control. Fritz was always the most responsible, even as a bachelor.

Adele and Elizabeth were angels, as far as he was concerned. Faith had long been his problem child—but strangely, that endeared him to her the most. Faith was the most innocent out of all of them, yet always the most eager to grow up. She was always 'bigger than her britches' as he would always lecture her, but still—he loved how she never gave up on trying to prove to him that she could do bigger and better things than she was expected to. Although the other girls didn't work in the workshop, he desperately always hoped that she would—she would keep all the elves that worked there on their toes with her steadfast attention and energy.

He didn't know what, or why, her brothers would hide Faith from him, but there was going to be hell to pay for encouraging Faith into more mischief than she even came by naturally. Even more so if she was in danger...

"Nickolas, sit down and have some supper," his wife begged. Mrs. Claus was a storm cloud of emotions just waiting to erupt. Nickolas knew that his wife was hurting—she didn't like being lied to or made a fool out of.

He huffed out a sigh.

"It will all be alright," she told him softly.

Just as soon as he made contact with the seat, however, he heard a door in the house open and close, and then he heard sniffing. He knew that snuffle. “Faith?” he asked, standing up at a speed that caused the chair he was sitting on flip over.

Faith, at the sound of her father’s voice, found herself practically flying into the kitchen to hug him. “Papa!” she sobbed, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

Even though he was angry enough to stomp any and all of his children into the next century when he saw them, that melted away in an instant when he felt how tightly his youngest was holding onto him. She was shivering and shaking, her hair was all wet.

“Faith! What *happened to you*? Where have you been?”

“I was just horrible to him,” she cried. “He loved me, and I was horrible! I nearly got him killed!”

“Who?” her parents chimed, horrified.

“Edward!”

“Dear lord,” he sighed angrily, but held his daughter tighter even as he exchanged concerned looks with his wife. He carefully led her over to a chair and had her sit on his knee and said, “Just calm down, and tell me what happened...”

And she did—she told him everything he could have possibly missed. The story seemed to go on forever as she rambled, occasionally stopping to rub her eyes sleepily or to dry them. She didn’t miss a detail; she admitted her first kiss, the way Edward held her, and everything else that she did and didn’t regret—even her first spanking, which seemed to end up into a second tale of how she wasn’t obedient, and how she wasn’t ready to be a wife, and how she was a horrible person who needed to be caged for her own good, as she was too stupid to live on her own.

“You are not stupid, Faith,” he father sighed. “You’re just... Well, like your mother, really.”

“*Nickolas*,” her mother chided, frowning with her entire face.

“It’s true. You know, when I first met your mother, she didn’t do anything she was ever told, either. But I didn’t fall in love with her obedience—I was able to change how obedient she was with a firm hand.”

“*Nickolas*,” Mrs. Claus chided again, her face a deep hue of red.

“What I fell in love with, was how charitable she was. How beautiful. And how she made me a better man. You know, delivering gifts to children wasn’t my idea in the first place.”

“No?” Faith innocently asked.

“No—she was giving gifts to children long before me. She would make them scarves and sweaters and little toys and put them out on doorsteps on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning all over her village. Before you know it, she’s inspiring me to do it. And then, little did we know, we were inspiring elves to do it, and wanted us to help them do it better. That was history. Yes, she had faults... But...”

“But I had a good man,” Mrs. Claus added with a nod. “A good man will not only be made better by his wife, but inspire even more goodness in her.”

She swallowed hard, looking shocked. “What have I done...” she whispered lowly. “I didn’t want to leave him, Papa. I thought... I just thought I had to.”

Nicholas sighed and put his hand over his eyes for a moment. “Sweet one, please trust us to do what is right. Let me look at that snow globe, because I’m too curious to wait. And then I want you to get to bed, you cold, wet little monkey.”

She walked away, looking extremely torn, and then quickly returned from Fritz' workshop with her snow globe in her hand. "I can't promise that I deserve him, but I can promise that he's done more than enough to deserve me. He saved my life," she reminded with a small voice.

He smiled softly at her. "Goodnight, Faith."

It wasn't more than an hour later that Nicholas' other children came in through the door. When they saw him sitting in the parlor stooping over a magic snow globe, they all found themselves pausing in their tracks. "Ah," Nicholas said sternly. "So you were all behind it!"

Fritz nervously took off his cap and rotated it nervously in his fingers, though they all did anything but look their father in the eye.

"Who was in charge of this mutiny?" Nicholas asked lightly.

"I was, Father... I just..." Fritz stammered quickly.

"This is a good piece of magic, Fritz," Nicholas told him. He sounded somewhat proud yet conflictingly disappointed.

Fritz was silent, looking back down at the floor, at a loss for words. "Nothing really turned out like I planned..."

"Dear lord, I hope not!" Nicholas retorted. "You're lucky that Edward passed those horrible little tests of yours, or else something horrible could have happened."

"Well, I was watching it pretty closely from my workshop," Fritz admitted.

"We were watching, Papa," Elizabeth offered, immediately taking some of the blame. "We wouldn't have let anything horrible happen to her."

"Until today?" Nicholas asked.

His children all looked at the floor again. "We got there in time before it got too bad. From Baron Lysham's mirror."

"Baron Lysham let you use his mirror?" It came out more like a statement than a question. There was a lot of doubt behind his words. "What could you have possibly traded for *that* offer?"

"I said he could write me," Elizabeth replied quickly, and then looked back and forth until she caught her sibling's eyes.

"Write you, will he?" Their father seemed more curious than angry about the statement.

"And he kissed her," Berry erupted.

"Only once!" Elizabeth sputtered nervously.

Nicholas closed his eyes. So—now Elizabeth had a man,. It seemed like all his birds were finally leaving the nest. "Alright," he allowed, looking quite resigned.

"Father... How'd you know about the... tests?" Fritz revisited, raising his eyes from the ground with an amused air about him.

"I don't just know about the tests. I know what they were... Chivalry, leadership, and sacrifice. But here's what I liked best..." The red-faced man tapped the globe with his callused finger.

In the image, Edward was tearing the whole house apart, searching every room. There was absolute terror on his face. He couldn't find her. He couldn't find her snow globe. He couldn't find any trace that she had ever been here. Even the servants no longer knew what he was talking about... They had no memory of "Faith".

The five young Claus' grimaced. "Well," Fritz said, clearing his throat. "At first, I really didn't understand how much he liked her... I thought this would be a way to clear everything up when the spell was broken..."

"That's a learning experience, no doubt. Especially since now he knows exactly what he lost and didn't deserve to lose. Faith shook her way back into the house tonight."

The five opened their mouth, but Nicholas cut through the air with his hand to silence them. "I think it's only fair Faith had a test—one she really needs to learn."

"Please, Father... No more tests," Fritz begged, unable to fathom causing more suffering.

"It won't be my test. Unlike you, I believe in *privacy*." He winked. "Goodnight, Children."

With that, he disappeared right in front of them.

Most of the children gasped. Fritz only shook his head and grinned. "I love it when he does that."

"Where'd he go, Fritz?" Elizabeth asked, looking back and forth.

Fritz had a pretty good idea. "We'll see in the morning. Let's go to bed, Liz," Fritz invited, pushing his brothers in the direction of the front door that would lead to their own houses.

Faith traced a pattern on her bed sheets with her finger. She was glad to be home, in cotton sheets instead of silk ones. She wasn't a very good aristocrat.

But she already missed Edward horribly. Would there ever be someone like him?

She missed the way he looked at her—like she was someone special. Someone beautiful; wonderful. Edward didn't see her for her... Edward saw her for who she *wanted* to be.

It had been an emotional road for her since Christmas; last night she easily cried herself to sleep in seconds.

Maybe her parents were right; maybe she wasn't old enough to be a wife. She thought she would have been wiser by the time she was eighteen, but maturity had yet to sink in. Possibly, there was nothing magical that was going to make it appear.

"Faith! Breakfast," she heard her mother call from the kitchen.

She sighed and got herself out of bed and began to braid her hair absentmindedly. She didn't want to leave her room just yet—she was actually quite ashamed at the grief she had likely put her parents through. Still, she decided that she would try to be more obedient.

She focused on her feet, which shuffled across the scratched wooden floor of her parent's home. She looked up at the stove, expecting to see her mother there, but she didn't. She saw only Edward—sitting at the kitchen table, grinning at her.

Her eyes widened, her mouth dropped. The man was always surprising her.

"*Edward?*" She looked like she expected him to vanish into thin air at any moment, afraid to touch him.

He stood up from his chair, his eyes intent on her. He opened his hands just a little bit to embrace her.

She ran into his arms and threw her arms around his neck. She volleyed thousands of kisses across his face. "What are you doing here?" she asked, pressing her nose against his. "Fritz?"

"Your *father*, actually. I told you I'd talk to him," he said teasingly. "I also told you I wouldn't let you leave me again," he growled playfully, kissing her lips. "Do you have any idea what sort of complicated trickery your horrible siblings had put us through?"

"I've had twelve wonderful days with you, Edward. Nothing was horrible," she replied, combing her fingers through his short hair. "Now you get to be *my* Christmas gift."

"Well, actually, my dear," he told her with a sigh, finally putting her down on her feet. "We have a thing or two to discuss."

The little fool she was, she thought he actually meant *talking*. She didn't notice the sudden straightness in Edward's posture, or his suddenly resolute expression. "What did Papa say? Where is everybody?"

"Out," he said simply. "Where's your bedroom?" He looked up and down the hallway.

"That way," she pointed cautiously down the hallway. "First door before the parlor."

"Good." He took her hand firmly into his and led her down the hallway in that direction.

"Edward..." she asked cautiously as she hurried to keep up with him, allowing him to shut the door behind him without a fuss. "What are you doing?"

He pulled something out of his coat pocket, and then discarded the coat on the bed and began to roll up his sleeves dutifully. "You mean, what am I *going to do*?" he asked. His expression actually looked quite dark now.

"Oh, Edward. Don't be wroth with me! I'm happy; please don't spoil it," she begged, suddenly realizing what he took out of his pocket. It was a very unfriendly looking leather strap.

"You had me near sick with worry last night, my little Faith. You nearly got yourself killed. VERY, very close. Don't think because you shook your little globe and came home, you get to escape a reckoning."

She put her hands behind her back, her mind reeling.

"I had a very, very rough night," he assured firmly. "But that was not a very good start to it."

"I am sorry about trying to go to London against your wishes." She bit her lip apprehensively. "I know it was wrong. And... And I'm grateful you came after me."

"You don't have to be grateful," he told her tenderly. He put a warm hand on her cheek. "I love you. I'll always come after you."

"But I didn't deserve it," she admitted.

"That's where you're wrong. From the moment I saw you, Faith, I've been a better person. I feel better. I feel... happier. Of course you deserve being *saved*. If something happens to you... What happens to *me*?"

She smiled warmly at him. "I'm sorry," she promised again. "I'll do better."

"I know you will." He dropped his hand from her cheek and walked to the desk, pulling out the chair and sitting on it. He grabbed the leather strap as he said, "Starting with accepting your punishment."

Her cheeks flushed instantly. "Please, I know I was bad... But..."

"Do you not deserve punishment?" he asked curiously.

"No," she sighed, dropping her hands to her side wearily. "I do deserve it, but..."

"Then why don't you let me do it, Faith? Do you not trust me?"

There was a very long silence in the room. Finally, Faith shook her head, horrified at the prospect that he would consider that being the reason that she was trying to talk her way out of a strapping. "No, I trust you... I'm just afraid."

"There's no reason to fear me, Faith. Just come here, kiss the strap, ask for your punishment, and then we'll get this over with."

Faith's eyebrows narrowed slightly. "Yes, well, that seems easier said than done."

“Faith, if you don’t trust me not to hurt you, then I won’t marry you,” he promised her. “I wouldn’t have you marry a man you fear.”

She sighed loudly and shuffled slowly towards him, knowing that there was no other way to get out of this punishment without losing him, which wasn’t an option she would allow on the table. “This is ridiculous,” she said as she watched him raise the strap.

“This is called obedience,” he clarified.

She gulped and leaned over to kiss the strap. She was slow about it, and even slower to begin to manage words, as she was shaking with apprehension by the time she made out the quiet words. “Will you punish me?”

“Why should I punish you?” he asked, watching her fidget.

“Because I did you wrong...” she said, feeling about an inch tall. “And I deserve a spanking... From you.” She grimaced. “But does it need to be with the strap, Edward?”

Edward shook his head and pulled her over his lap. “Yes,” he replied, flipping up her bed gown. “It does, you naughty thing. And believe me, your punishment could have been a lot worse. When I was told you were gone, I was very creative about punishments, and thought of lots of ideas.”

“Moment of weakness,” she explained, squirming to try to get as comfortable as possible while she still could appreciate it. “I was insane, Edward.”

“No, that’s what *I* was going,” Edward assured, grabbing the waist of her pantalettes.

She screeched as soon as she felt the cool air of the room sweep across her bare skin. “Edward! Please! Not like a child!” She began to struggle, but he pinned her down with twice the quickness he did the time before. He swung the strop in the air, and it came down on her skin with a sickening smack.

It was a good thing he asked for obedience. If he had asked her to take a spanking bravely, he wasn’t going to get it. She *screamed*. Her skin seemed to sizzle under the leather. Even the noise of it was horrifying.

“Edward, I’ll be *so good*, Edward...” she panted quickly, her words coming out in desperate, quick-paced chirps.

The leather came down again, and continued to come down quicker and quicker. Her brain felt like it checked out. Instincts came on—she struggled against the tight hold on her hands, and kicked her feet quickly, trying frivolously to make contact with the floor.

She was light headed, and she figured in a moment that the reason for that might have been the fact that she hadn’t stopped screaming long enough to breath. Breathing simply didn’t help the pain, but neither did the screaming. Nothing was helping—nobody was going to come and stop this.

Edward didn’t lecture her this time. She knew what she’d done. His jaw was set tightly as he focused in on his duty, which presently was turning the bottom over his knee a bright, cherry red that certainly would feel tender throughout their honeymoon.

She’d thought last year’s switching was the most awful spanking imaginable, but she was wrong. Very, hideously wrong. Edward’s hand was much firmer than her father’s, and he wielded his implement with no mercy.

Her voice cracked as she screamed and she began to release large, breathy sobs as her body worn down against her struggles. There was no need to struggle. She deserved this—she couldn’t imagine the hurt she would feel if Edward had been the one lost in the snow.

“Sweeting, if you do anything so foolish or reckless again, you will wish you weren’t born, I promise you,” she heard him threaten as the swats slowed. “I love you too much for you to risk your safety.”

She wailed some gibberish in response.

Finally, he put the strap down and put that hand on her bottom. Her skin was swollen and hot to his touch. He looked down and saw what was soon to be his—a wonderful, firm, red, naughty little bottom. And he was going to use it—fully and completely, just as soon as he could. There was so many ways to get her to flush with embarrassment, and being spanked was merely one of them.

He stopped fondling her—he would be back to doing it in a few short hours. He would be patient.

He let her off of his lap and put his arms around her to kiss her tear-stained face, ignoring the fact that she was still crying. “You’ve now passed the test of obedience, Faith. Which is all the test I wanted of you.”

Faith took deep breaths, trying to calm herself. “I didn’t obey you.”

“You obeyed by submitting to my discipline, which is all I ask of you.” He carefully wiped some tears from her face. “Come now—don’t cry so hard on your wedding day, Faith.”

That was probably the only sentence that could calm down Faith. She merely sniffled. “My... My... Wedding?”

“Your father and I spoke at length. He gave us his blessing, and I asked him to marry us as soon as possible. Which, little did I know, was today. The twelfth day of Christmas...” He sighed and shook his head. “I wish you told me that if I didn’t marry you by Epiphany, I would have to wait another year. How could I possibly wait until next Christmas?”

“I thought it didn’t matter,” she mumbled. “If I stayed in the human world.”

“So I take you away from your family, Faith? I couldn’t.”

Faith cocked her head to the side. “You would come *here*?”

“I *am* here,” he reminded with a grin. “I’ll give my sister my estate the next time I’m in town. Joseph will keep it for me until then.

“But why would you leave so much behind?”

He took her hand and stroked it with his thumb affectionately. “Well, your father *was* quite persistent, and offered me some exciting work in the toy industry. Besides, I’m not leaving much behind. I’m gaining *everything*. I’ve seen every girl in England, you know, but none of them moved my heart as you did the first moment I met you.”

She let Edward rock her soothingly back and forth, feeling so good—despite a horribly sore bottom—that she felt like a whole new person.

“Papa’s setting up the wedding then?”

“And your brothers are trying to get us some sort of living arrangement. I told them they’ll want us far away on our honeymoon; I don’t want to shock them from what they’ll hear,” he chuckled, wondering if she got the meaning of that.

“Could I request you don’t spank me when we’re married?” she asked, ignoring his crudeness.

He snorted out a laugh but then hugged her more tightly. “You can keep wishing on that.”

“I think I have everything I can wish for already,” she said, sounding quite content. It had been a very hard year, and a very wonderful Christmas.

The End

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