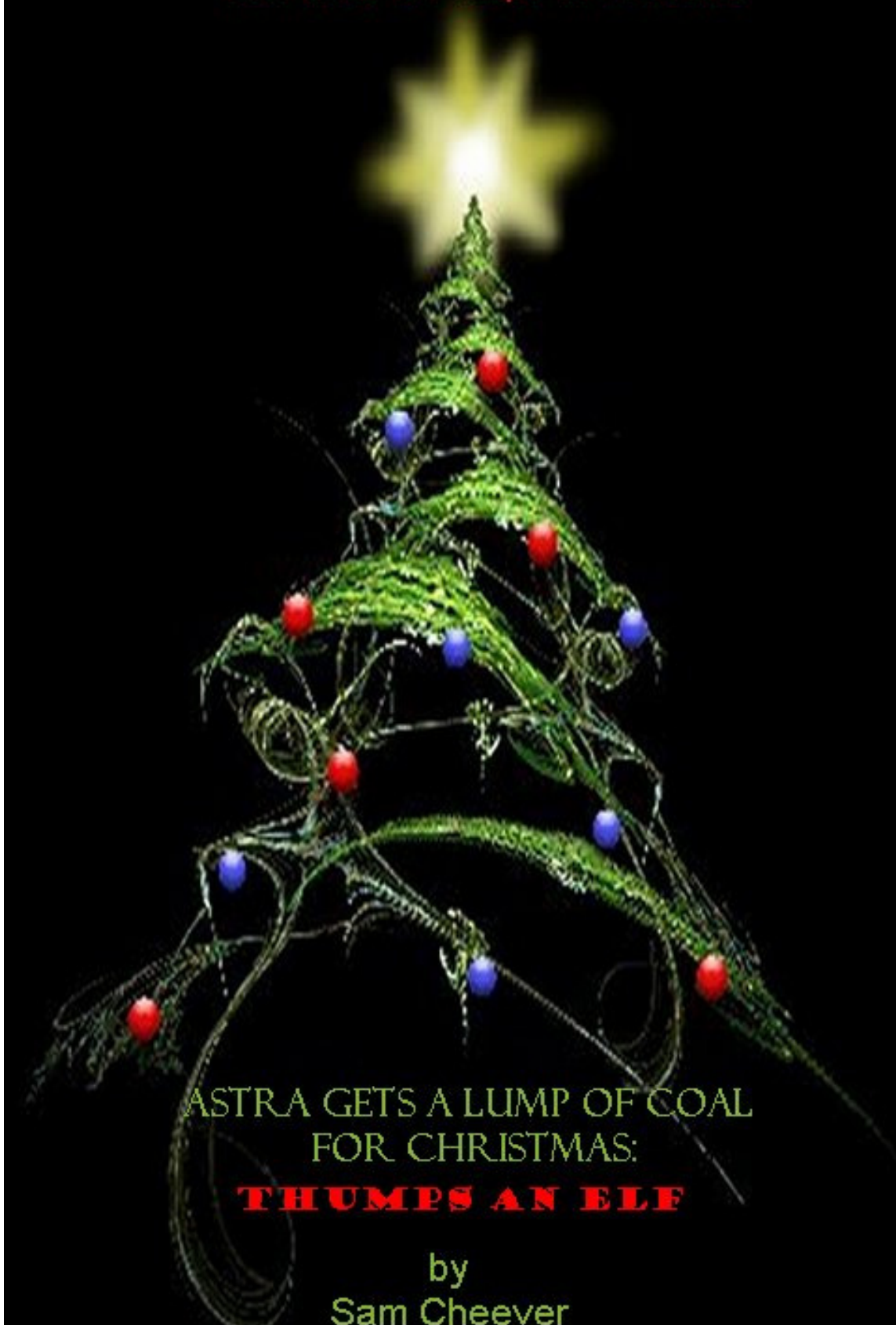


An Astra Q Phelps Free Read



ASTRA GETS A LUMP OF COAL
FOR CHRISTMAS:
THUMPS AN ELF

by
Sam Cheever

Astra Gets a Lump of Coal – Thumps an Elf

A Free Astra Q Phelps Christmas Story

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In this short Christmas story, Astra is forced to spend Christmas in Satan's backyard, helping the angels figure out how the green dragons are escaping Hell to terrorize the human realm on Earth. Astra is thrilled. I mean, there's nothing like Hell at Christmastime. The lovely, scorched earth theme delights the visual pallet while the dulcet sounds of terrified screaming serenade the lucky minions within Hell's fiery grasp.

Astra's body may be locked in Hell, but her thoughts are a few million miles north, where light and angelic music are the norm. And somewhere in the middle, where bright colors and happy thoughts rule the day.

So what does a kick ass demon hunter do when she finds herself holding a big, fat lump of coal on Christmas day? Why, she thumps an elf , of course!



Astra Q Phelps is the heroine of my Dancin' With the Devil series, published through Ellora's Cave. Based on a race of warriors called Tweeners, with both angel and devil in their DNA, the books follow the antics of Astra and her network of friends and family as they fight the good fight against the forces of evil. Plucky, self deprecating, and powerful, Astra is a unique and entertaining heroine. Her adventures with the uber-sexy Dialle will leave you gasping, smiling, and occasionally reaching for a fan to cool yourself off! Book and purchase info for the series is available on my Book Page (<http://www.samcheever.com/series.html>):

Book 1: 'Tween Heaven and Hell

Book 2: 'Tween a Devil and His Hard Place

Book 3 (Free Read): 'Tween Hopeful and Hopeless

Book 4: 'Tween Heart's Fire and Devil's Delight

Book 5: The Devil You Know

To find out more about me and my work, please pay me a visit at any one of the following online hot spots: <http://www.samcheever.com>; <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Sam-Cheever-Author/102117321982>; <http://twitter.com/samcheever> ; <http://www.myspace.com/samcheever>; or <http://tweenyouandme.blogspot.com/>.

I always love to chat with readers.

CHAPTER ONE

Merry frunkin' Christmas.

I sat at a table in front of the wall of windows in my boyfriend, Devil King Dialle's quarters and brooded, staring at the eminently festive colors of burnt brown, lifeless gray, and flaming red which made up the rolling panorama beyond the thick glass. Not a holiday light or color in sight. Unless you counted the red fire emerging from the gaping maws of the deadly green dragons flying from castle to castle in the smoky environs.

That was as close as Hell got to Christmas colors. And forget the elegant blue and silver of Hanukah. You'd have a better shot at eating a snow cone on the roof of Dialle's castle in Hades.

Once again I'd been called to the service of the Big Him on Christmas day. While everyone else was enjoying the season, wallowing in the festivities, I was sitting in Hell looking over geographic maps, trying to figure out how the green dragons were escaping into the world above.

I was in a funk.

No surprise there.

My Christmas was stacking up to be the biggest entry ever in my Shitty Day book.

It was a hopeless task. So far all I'd gotten from my search were charcoal stained fingertips from the maps and a bad case of red cheeks from the heat.

I didn't even have Dialle around to distract me from my own personal hell. He'd been called topside to deal with a Tweener who'd "Settled" on his dark side and was petitioning for a spot on the royal Court.

Dialle was going to have his hands full. Several of the royals were fighting the petition, saying the guy was just too ugly to be a royal. I'd seen him. They had a point. But really, it was so not PC. So unkind. So rude...I wondered how they could be that incredibly shallow. Then I did a mental head slap. Der...they were devils.

It was at that point that I realized I was stalling so I wouldn't have to do what I'd been sent there to do. With a sigh, I bent back over the table, my eyes blurring from staring at the maps.

But I couldn't concentrate, so I checked in with Dialle. Shuffling my mental drawers I called his name. *Dialle?*

Static silence filled my mind for a long moment. Then, just when I was about to give up, I sensed his presence. *What is it, Astra?*

What are you doing right now?

I'm kind of busy, Astra.

Oh, okay.

Did you need something?

You? I asked hopefully.

The air before me shimmered and he was there. He gazed at me through almond shaped eyes that looked about 10 miles deep. His devastatingly sensual gaze was cloaked in black velvet and ringed with pulsating rings of gold. His burnished black mane of hair fell around his square, golden jaw and touched his shoulders just where the barest, sexiest, little curl started at the ends. I licked my lips and clenched my knees together on a sudden wave of pure lust.

Then I realized it wasn't really him. It was his soul form. I frowned. It wasn't quite what I'd hoped for. But as he leaned against the desk with one slim hip and crossed his long legs at the

ankles, I couldn't help admiring the fine way his tight, leather pants hugged his thighs and other...erm...parts.

I'm trying to finish my business so I can get back to you, my love. His soul form sighed. *Things are...difficult here.*

I know. I'm just so bored. And lonely, but I'd slow dance with a stink demon before I admitted that.

Dialle's soul form disappeared and the air around me sparked. I jumped as a phantom touch found the sensitive skin of my neck. Dialle's scent washed over me, making the air clench in my lungs. I dropped my head back as the phantom lips created an electrically charged trail around to my throat, sending heat and need spiraling through my body.

I moaned, my hands clenching with the desire to touch him.

But it wasn't possible.

He wasn't really there.

A whisper teased my ear and his husky voice infused my thoughts. *I'll see you soon, my love.*

The air cooled and I felt his presence slide away, leaving me slumped in my chair, even more distracted and unfulfilled than I'd been before.

The wide, wooden door behind me swung silently open. Only the wisp of air from its opening alerted me that someone was entering the room.

I turned and found Dialle's right hand devil, Gerch, striding my way. His wide, red face looked extremely serious as usual. When Dialle left, he'd put Gerch in charge of my safety.

No easy task since it was me.

However, as Dialle's First Lieutenant, Gerch was doing his best to live up to his charge. It really made me want to screw with him.

What can I say...part devil here.

Gerch settled a silver tray on top of the table and pulled the lid off the small plate at its center. There was a single Christmas cookie in the center of the plate, thickly frosted in white, red, and green. It was Santa Claus.

I frowned. "I've decided I don't like Santa Claus."

"Why?" Gerch was a devil of many talents. He killed like a trained assassin, kept a thousand royal guard troops dressed, fed, and firmly in line, and poured tea like British royalty. I shrugged. "He gave me coal for Christmas."

Gerch stopped pouring and arched a dark eyebrow at me. "You know you kill things for a living right?"

I shrugged, feeling slightly insulted. "They're sanctioned kills."

Dropping a single sugar cube into my tea he stirred it and handed it to me. "Sanctioned by the Big Guy, not the red guy. They have different rules."

I sipped, breaking off Santa's foot. Popping it into my mouth, I grinned. "He tastes good anyway."

"So what's on the agenda today, my Queen?"

"Don't call me that." I broke off the other foot and nibbled it. "Nothing. I'm staying in. I have ten more maps to go over."

Gerch slanted me a look.

"What?"

"You wouldn't lie to me would you, my Q...erm, Mx. Phelps?"

"I might." A grin snuck across my face.

Gerch folded his thick, red hands together behind his back. “Then I’ll stay right here to keep an eye on you.”

I glared at him. “I was just teasing. I’m not lying to you. I’m going to sit right here.”

“So am I.”

Feeling my personal space being totally engulfed by huge, bossy devil, I tried another tack. “How about a compromise? You wait outside the door and I promise I won’t pop out.”

He shook his massive red head. I noticed he’d layered little gold and silver hoops over his horns. Very festive. “Not happenin’. I don’t trust you and the King said he’d have my hairy balls for breakfast if anything happened to you.”

Grimacing at the visual, I turned away, forcing my gaze downward. I didn’t even see the maps spread out before me. My mind was busily concocting a plan to divert and/or escape Gerch.

It made me happy. For the first time since getting dumped in Hell.

I had no idea what I would do once I’d escaped.

One thing at a time.

Several minutes later inspiration struck. I looked at Gerch out of the corner of my eye and saw that he was staring out the window, looking about as depressed as I’d been feeling. His sad expression almost made me change my mind about tricking him.

Blink, blink.

Nah. He was goin’ down.

While he wasn’t looking at me, I reached over and touched the spot on my hand where a fellow Tweener, Slayer, had marked me recently. Though Slayer and I had a confusing and blush-worthy past together, we’d become kind of ... sort of... almost friends. He’d given me a daemon hickey, without my permission of course, which I could use to call him if I ever needed help.

Fortunately for me the hickey had disappeared after a time, leaving only a tingling sensation on my hand where he’d marked me.

Thank the Big Him.

I hadn’t looked forward to ‘splainin’ that one to Dialle.

I rubbed the tingly spot and shuffled my mental drawers. *Slayer. I need you.*

I bent determinedly over the maps, pretending with all I was worth that I was examining them closely. But I was actually keeping one eye trained on Gerch.

The air started to shimmer across the room and Gerch jumped, one large, red hand moving to his sword.

The well built form of a male Tweener shimmered into view a few yards away. He was tallish, around six feet, and his hair was midnight black, cut very short, military style, to enhance a densely muscled neck. His mouth was wide, with a full, bite-able lower lip, and his square jaw held a light stubble. His canines were slightly enlarged, like a royal’s, and his eyes were gold, with black flecks. He wore only tight fitting black pants tucked into tall, scuffed, brown, leather boots. The smooth skin of his naked chest was a deep golden color. He was covered in a fine sheen of sweat and held a training sword in one, large hand.

When he smiled at me, a matching pair of dimples decorated his cheeks. “Hello, Astra.”

I looked at Gerch. “Hey, Slayer. This is Gerch. He’s a friend. Don’t hurt him.” As Gerch launched himself toward Slayer with a roar, I blew Slayer a kiss and popped out of the room. Locked in time and space I had a moment to wonder if Slayer would get a good workout with

Gerch. I had a strong suspicion he would. For all our basic differences, and the fact that he was usually allayed against me in any given situation, I respected Gerch as a soldier. He was a savvy fighter and loyal to a fault. Given my feelings for Dialle, I had no choice but to appreciate Gerch's determination to keep him safe.

As guilt started to worm its way into my psyche I pushed it ruthlessly back and set my mind to the task at hand. Landing in the dragon's nest of Dialle's castle, I immediately wrinkled my nose against the smell. There was nothing in any of the thirteen dimensions to rival the stench of dozens of giant reptiles gathered together under tropical type heat.

Bleurgh!

I spotted Glynus across the huge room with a few of the younger greens. They had lined several items up along the wall and were taking turns firing on them. As I approached, Glynus let loose a stream of metal melting fire on something green with bright spots of color.

A Christmas tree.

The tree went up in a flash of smoke, leaving only a tiny pile of ash on the stone floor. The room erupted in exultant roars and Glynus tipped her snout and flapped her wings in thanks.

Tadpole.

The huge black turned and lifted an eyebrow at me. *You ditched Gerch?*

Had to. He was way too smug. Want to go on a little outing?

Her wide, black face split in a toothy grin. *Frunkin' ice!*

I let the swear word go. I figured if she was old enough to hang with the greens in Hell she was old enough to swear. Giving an internal sigh, I realized my tadpole was growing up. It made me sad. *Let's go then, before Gerch finds me.*

I leapt onto her back and settled in, watching the room for signs of Gerch's or Slayer's arrival. Glynus took three big hops and was airborne. The air around me snapped and shimmered as she settled her power over me like a protective blanket.

Without Glynus' powerful protection I would have been ash like those Christmas trees within seconds.

As we cleared the field of magic over the building-wide exit and emerged into the environs of Hell, I heard someone calling my name and turned, finding both Gerch and Slayer standing at the exit.

I smiled and waved. Gerch let loose a string of foul words. *Fly fast, Tadpole. I think we're gonna have company soon.*

My pleasure, Mother Tweener.

The air shimmered behind me and something long, hard and yummy settled at my back. Looking down, I found my hands resting on a pair of muscular thighs. My long, auburn hair was swept to the side and a soft, moist touch at my neck made me shiver with delight.

"You're a naughty girl, Astra." Slayer's lips trailed down the back of my neck, sending spirals of heat and anticipation through my entire body.

I stopped breathing as his scent made my nipples harden and places further south clench and weep hopefully. "Get out of here, Slayer. If I wanted you along I'd have invited you."

He chuckled, sending a wisp of testosterone-rich breath against my neck. "You called me and here I am. With only a small detour into less than satisfactory sword play in between."

I grimaced. "Sorry about that. It was the only thing I could think of to distract him."

Those soft, yummy lips created another mind-boggling trail down my neck, starting just under my hairline, where the nerve endings were so weak and susceptible to intimate touch.

"What about your boyfriend?"

I shivered, closing my eyes against the sensual assault. “He ‘s busy.”

Slayer’s hands slid up my thighs, heading toward the promised land.

I grabbed the errant digits, stilling them but unable to pull their treacherous heat from my legs. Like spirals of smoke in a drafty room, that heat spread inexorably toward my happy place, making it suddenly hard to breathe in my little Glynus cocoon.

“It’s a shame he doesn’t trust you.” His tongue swept along my hairline and my panties dampened in response.

“Good LORD! STOP!”

Slayer halted in mid-lick. His hands stopped trying to slide northward. “Is there something wrong, Astra?”

I started to laugh. I couldn’t help it. I was a minnow swimming with a school of sharks. And I was slathered in butter.

Be strong, Mother Tweener. He’s a temptation you don’t need right now.

Like any good conscience...even one that was as big as your average house and weighed as much too, Glynus’ stating the obvious was just the cooling draught I needed. I turned to Slayer. “Look, Slayer, I don’t think it’s any secret that I find you very...erm...tempting. But I’m stuck in Hell on Christmas. I’ve been handed a giant lump of coal this year. and I’ve come to understand that I can either make fire with it...in a land of too much fire...or work the coal into a diamond. You translate into fire. I don’t want to make fire. I want to make a diamond. Do you understand?”

Slayer looked at me with his soul-deep eyes and pursed his eminently biteable lips and then finally smiled. He kissed me on the tip of my nose and nodded. “I do. You just need more time before you’ll be ready to succumb to my considerable charms. I can respect that. Later, Astra. Stay safe.”

And he blipped away. Leaving me feeling very unsatisfied and a little bit cranky.

Glynus, I said, doing the right thing really sucks.

Yes, Mother Tweener.

No...I mean REALLY sucks!

Her response was a chuckle in my mind.



We flew over the charred landscape of Hades, the monochromatic panorama making an indelible mark on my psyche. Despite Glynus’ carefully held protective bubble, the heat pulsed around me like a living thing, banging against my head and dragging moisture from my body.

I narrowed my eyes on the scene below, beyond all reason, looking for signs of the season in Hell. Within minutes my head hurt so badly I could feel every strand of my hair. I knew it was futile to try to find something as bright and positive as the season of giving and love in the environs of Hell, but something inside me wouldn’t give up on the idea that Christmas was there...just outside my grasp.

It could be found anywhere, I told myself. It was a state of mind, of heart, not an actual physical entity that Satan could keep out.

My mind told me all those things, but my heart knew I was full of shit. Nothing good and noble could survive for long in the charred, hopeless environs of Hades.

A huge, green carcass lay on the ground far below us. A green dragon. Dead. Its thick limbs twisted and contorted as if it had died in horrible pain.

No Christmas there. No Christmas anywhere in that horrible, disgusting place.

Where do you want to go, Mother Tweener?

Despondency swamped me. I was covered in a sheen of sweat and my organs felt as if they were being broiled alive. My head throbbed.

My heart felt as if it were shriveling in my chest.

I sighed, closing my eyes on the horror below. I was wasting my time. I wanted to tell Glynus to take me back to Dialle's castle, where I could curl up in the fetal position and wait out the New Year.

In fact, I opened my mouth to tell her to take me back. But something danced faintly past me on the super-heated air.

It was a sound one never expected to hear in Hell.

A happy sound. A bright sound.

Bells.

Did you hear that, Tadpole?

Hear what, Mother Tweener?

I listened carefully and heard nothing. Deciding the heat must be getting to my brain, I shook my head. *I guess it's nothing. Take me back to the castle, Glynus.*

Something in my voice must have worried her, because she turned her massive head and fixed me with a beautiful, violet eye. *Are you sure, dragon fighter? We could fly over the mountains for a while. It's cooler there.*

I looked with longing toward the distant ridge. I'd never been there, but rumor had it the mountains were the barrier between Hell and the other realms. I suddenly realized that would be a logical spot for the greens to be escaping.

Though none of the maps I'd been perusing showed an exit. I suddenly understood a breach could still be there.

I felt better. And then I heard the faint sound of bells again and knew.

Yes! The mountains, Glynus and hurry!

CHAPTER TWO

The bells got louder as we got closer to the mountain range. Glynus repeatedly denied hearing them, so I had to finally conclude that, either I was losing my mind, or someone was trying to communicate with me.

Flying low over the barren ridges, I noted the rows of cave-like indentations in the steep, sheer cliffs of rock. The cliffs overlooked a wide river of lava, which scorched its way through the rocky soil and gave off thick clouds of sulfurous smoke.

Looking at the caves on the mountainside, I wondered that it had taken the greens this long to succumb to the noxious air. At that moment, I felt a twinge of pity for the large nasty reptiles. Something that had never happened to me before.

We flew for what felt like hours without seeing a single, living thing in the hellish landscape below.

Despite the lack of progress, I was growing increasingly agitated. The gentle sound of the bells should have had a calming effect on me. But they seemed to be doing just the opposite.

It didn't help when my sister decided to check in.

My mental drawers shifted and Darma's nails on the blackboard tones screeched across my last nerve. *Astra!*

I grimaced. *Darma. What's up?*

I'm trying to find a Christmas gift for father. I can't think of anything he needs. If he wants anything he just thinks it up and it's there. It's impossible. I thought you were going to help me this year.

I frowned. *Trust me, Darma, I'd love to be there helping you but I'm stuck in Hell.*

You're such a drama queen, Astra. Just pop over to the mall and help me with this gift or I swear I'm gonna haunt your every waking moment.

Perhaps you've heard of Hell? Large place, really hot, clings to its inhabitants like a Diva clings to her mirror?

Very funny! Can't you just pop out of there for an hour or so? Those people are damned for all eternity...they have bigger problems and won't even miss your annoying presence.

Bigger problems, Darma? You mean like making sure they're covered head to toe with two thousand plus sun block?

Yeah. Like that.

I sighed, swiping my sleeve over the sheen of sweat on my face. *I tried to pop out. It didn't work. My popping privileges have apparently been revoked.*

Well thanks for nothing, Astra.

She disappeared from my poor mind in a wash of anger. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. Only my incredibly bitchy and selfish sister could be mad at *me* because I was trapped in Hell at Christmas.

Mother Tweener.

I couldn't believe it. How could she be so unbelievably selfish?

Mother Tweener.

The nerve...the amazing, mind bending, unparalleled, gall...

Mother Tweener!

My eyes flew open. *What!*

Look down there. Is that an...elf?



The elf was sitting on a three legged stool in the mouth of a cave, surrounded by snow. A small fire crackled happily before him and he appeared to be perusing the longest scroll I'd ever seen. It was piled in loose waves on his lap and wound around his stool and over the snow, disappearing finally into the cave at the elf's back. As could be expected, he was dressed in green tights and a green tunic and wearing a red pointed hat, wide red belt, and red shoes with curling toes.

His upturned nose and cheeks were red too.

As Glynus and I approached, the little creature stood and turned his rosy face upward, watching us with placid interest. Glynus skidded to a sloppy stop in the deep snow squealing with delight as the heavy, wet stuff spun upward in a cold cloud, dousing us both.

I grinned, thoroughly enjoying my first cool moment since I'd been dumped in Hell.

Glynus lowered her head and I slid off her back, toward the ground. As I turned, something smacked me in the face, hard. The icy snowball was quickly followed up by several more, most of which pinged harmlessly off Glynus, missing me entirely.

The sound of giggling coming from the jolly little creature throwing snow balls at me was at least as out of place there as the snowballs had been. I didn't know what kind of magic the elf was using, but it was powerful stuff if it could create and keep snow in Hell.

I decided to enjoy the moment, since it would most likely be short-lived. I crouched down and quickly formed a snowball, flinging it toward the little elf just before he let loose another icy missile.

The snowball bounced harmlessly off the rock at the edge of the cave's entrance behind him. The elf had space-shifted a few feet to the side before it hit.

Smack! Another icy ball exploded on my chest.

I laughed and used my power to form and throw more balls, actually managing to hit the tricky little elf more than once. Finally, in a moment of sheer frustration from having missed the little twerp several times in a row, I used my powers to shift behind him.

As he blinked and started to turn, I smashed a huge snowball into his rosy little face. We both dissolved into laughter and called a truce.

I dropped into the snow and lifted my cold feet toward the fire. The elf sat back down on his stool, picking up his scroll. "So...what's an elf doing in Hell?"

He spared me a quick glance. "Are you kidding me? This is our biggest coal distribution area."

I snorted. "Who'd you piss off to get Hades duty?"

"I've never been very good with politics," he murmured.

"Yeah, me neither. What have you got there?"

He grinned at me. "The nice and naughty list."

I frowned. This was a sensitive subject with me. "Am I on it?"

The elf pretended to peruse the list, his beady black eyes flashing with terminal hilarity. "Astra Q Phelps? Let's see...oh yes, there you are...in the coal section." He burst into good natured laughter, his little shoulders rolling and bouncing with mirth.

I frowned, not amused. "How'd you know my name, elf?"

He shrugged. "I was told you'd be coming."

"Who told you I was coming?"

He just shrugged again and pretended to peruse the scroll.

I tried to read over his shoulder but he turned his back on me so I couldn't see. "Why won't you let me see the list?"

"Santa / recipient confidentiality."

"But I'm a recipient. "

He ignored me and continued to read the scroll.

I lay down in the snow and, just for grins, made a snow Tweener. When I stood up to look at it, my Tweener had horns and a tail. I glared skyward. "Very funny." Thunder rolled across the sky, sounding suspiciously like laughter.

Glynus lay down on her belly and flapped her wings, sending snow billowing over the elf and me. She grunted in pleasure as the snow cooled her enormous belly. *I love snow, Mother Tweener.*

Yeah, me too, Tadpole.

Glancing back toward the elf, I tried a different tactic. "Have you seen a lot of green dragons around here?"

The elf looked up, his dark, sparkling eyes narrowing on me with distrust. "Why do you ask?"

"That's why I'm here. I've been tasked with stopping their escape into the human realm."

His gaze, which had been harmless and bright a moment earlier, like a puppy's, was suddenly dark and unfathomable, almost hostile.

I wasn't aware elves *did* hostile.

"You do realize they're being poisoned here, right?"

I opened my mouth to respond but he didn't give me the chance.

"Their only hope is to get out of here. You would stop them and cause their deaths? You would really do that? No wonder you're on the coal list."

Sloughing off the un-elf-like dig, I ploughed onward, seeing a possible end to my stint in maximum security Hell. "You seem very informed and interested, elf. You wouldn't by any chance be involved in helping them escape, would you?"

He pulled himself up to his full height of about four feet and not much and stuck his little pug nose into the air, puffing up his rosy cheeks. "If I was involved I wouldn't tell *you*, coal girl."

I felt a snarl building in my chest. Power tingled in my fingertips. I clenched my hands to stop myself from flinging a fireball at the vertically challenged rodent. "Look, elf. I don't really care if you're involved. I'm not gonna turn you in to the red guy or anything. I just want to stop the spill of greens into the human realm so I can get home and start enjoying the Holidays."

The look on his face almost took my breath away. Through his beady little eyes I suddenly saw myself. I finally realized what I was saying, what I had been trying to do.

I was willing to sign death warrants for every green dragon in Hell so I could get back to my Champaign and cookies. I was a schmoie, a shmuck, a class A jerk. I dropped my butt onto the elf's three legged stool and buried my face in my hands. "You're right. I'm an ass. I do deserve a lump of coal."

Are you all right, Mother Tweener. Do you want me to thump the elf for you?

I sighed. *No, tadpole. I don't want you to thump the elf. I may want to do it myself.*

After a moment I looked up at the elf. He had his stubby little arms crossed over his ridiculous green chest and was tapping a foot covered in a jester-like shoe. His rosy cheeks were even brighter than before, infused with angry color. “What’s your name?”

He blinked, some of the hostility leaving his eyes for a moment. “Wh...why?”

“If we’re gonna work together I’m gonna need to know your name.”

He blinked again, thought about this for a moment and then said. “Ralphy.”

I rolled my lips. Cleared my throat. Bit my tongue. Pinched myself. Then I said. “Okay, Ralphy, how many dragons do you have listed on that scroll?”

Ralphy the elf stared at me, surprise written large on his little face.

“That’s right, I knew it wasn’t a naughty or nice list. I’m not a big believer in coincidence. This mountain range is the obvious place for the greens to escape and here you are, an elf in Hell. Did you really expect me to fall for that?”

Ralphy shrugged. “There are fifty more families and another fifty or more singles. I’ve been managing about two an hour. It’s a long, slow process.”

“So what’s the problem? Why so slow?”

“There are powerful protections built into this range, it takes a lot of magic. Especially to send them to Earth. The Big Guy frowns on sending potentially dangerous creatures amongst the human populations...”

“And that doesn’t concern you? Sending them to Earth?”

He looked slightly guilty. “I’ve been sending them to the North Pole. Nobody lives there. Santa’s given over a mountainous area to them.”

I snorted. “And you thought they’d stay there? In case you haven’t noticed it’s cold at the North Pole. Only white dragons like the cold long term. Greens are used to living in Hell. They like heat. They probably started traveling south as soon as they landed. And they’ve been creating havoc all over Earth.”

The elf frowned. “That is a problem.” Then he shrugged and went on as if I hadn’t spoken. “I need time to rebuild my stores after each extraction. And I have to keep a low profile. This isn’t exactly sanctioned.”

“The red guy doesn’t know you’re doing this?”

“Depends which red guy you’re referring to. Santa knows I’m here, but the other red guy, the one with horns and a tail, doesn’t. He’d be mighty irritated if he knew we were taking away his dragons. It will seriously cramp his style.”

I grinned, clapping Ralphy on the shoulder. “Sux to be him. He should be okay with discomfort, I mean he *does* live in Hell.”

Ralphy laughed.

“Okay, elf, here’s the plan.”



The line of greens stretched as far as the eye could see, winding through the twisting, rocky passages of the ridge. I was in charge of holding the barrier open, and Ralphy manned the list, checking off families as they popped through the barrier.

Glynus was line patrol, keeping the cantankerous greens from fighting amongst themselves as they waited for their turn to cross.

She had her hands full. Already she'd had to thump a few of her young friends from Dialle's castle when a brawl started midway down the line.

Slayer was astride his red dragon, keeping watch and communicating with the reds on Olympus.

Gerch was at the barrier, shoving dragons through when they balked.

My mental drawers shuffled and Slayer was in. *Astra, you need to step up the flow a bit, Queen Persuis is getting antsy. She has a thing to get to this afternoon.*

I sighed. Everybody had a thing to get to but me. *I'm trying but I need more help.*

Then get more help. If we lose the support of the Red Queen you won't have any place to send the greens other than Earth.

It was true. Queen Zerphor, queen of the black dragons and Glynus' mother, was away on a mission to the North Pole, where she was trying to find a mate for Glynus among the white dragons. It was not an easy mission, since Glynus had already been very vocal about her resistance to the idea, which was why, I figured, she'd undertaken her mission while Glynus was in Hell with me.

I'll see what I can do.

I disconnected, brooding for a moment after I slammed the mental path closed on Slayer. I watched Gerch at the front of the line, poking and prodding and threatening the greens to keep them moving forward.

I thought about trying to get more of Dialle's guard up there, but dismissed the idea as quickly as I came up with it. Gerch was only there because I'd threatened to tell Dialle how easily I'd escaped him earlier in the day.

I furrowed my brow. A wicked grin found its way onto my face. Of course. Why hadn't I thought of it earlier. If I was gonna be tortured on Christmas, I figured my guardian should be tortured too. I grabbed the cross around my neck and thought his name.

The air in front of me shimmered and thickened, briefly showing Flick's nondescript form with a scowl on its face, before it blipped and he disappeared again.

My mouth fell open in shock. I swore. He'd resisted me! How dare he!

Okay, it was war.

I placed my hand on my forehead and called him again, this time copying my aunt and my father on the request. The air before me shivered, pulsing with power in three, distinct places. The largest and brightest spot coalesced into my father. He smiled at me. "Hello, daughter."

The smaller but nearly as bright spot next in line pulsed into my aunt Myra's glaring form. She had her arms crossed over her gold and silver chest and looked as if she'd like to thump me.

The third form, shorter even than my aunt's and dullish compared to the Seraphim's and the Archangel's, blipped clumsily into view.

He looked pissed.

I grinned at my erstwhile guardian. "Hey, Flick. How's it going?"

"What do you want, Astra? I was busy."

The sound of a deliberately cleared throat made Flick jump guiltily. He gave my father a sickly smile. "Sorry, sir."

Flick crossed his spindly arms over his narrow chest and waited, his nondescript brown eyes filled with silent hostility.

I shared my grin with the angelic assemblage. "Thank you for showing up to help." My father lifted a single, golden eyebrow. My aunt glared at me. Flick's lips dropped open. He'd been perusing the long line of deadly reptiles.

“Help? What are you up to, Astra?”

“I’m up to helping the greens escape the environs of Hell so their children don’t get poisoned.”

“Weren’t you sent here to *stop* them from escaping?”

I ignored my damnable guardian angel. He was just stupid.

My aunt gasped. “Astra, are you aware of the damage these creatures will inflict on Earth when they’re released?”

I frowned. “Of course! You don’t think I’m just winging it here, do you?”

The other eyebrow lifted on my father’s handsome, angelic face.

Aunt Myra opened her mouth, no doubt to scour me with a caustic reminder of all my past failures. Sure, I’d been known to wing it. Okay, mostly I just winged it. But this time, dammit I had a plan! “Okay, okay, I get it that I’m a screw up. But I’ve given this some thought.” I pointed toward Ralphy. “See that elf over there?”

Three sets of angelic peeps turned toward the rosy cheeked short guy. Ralphy stood, open mouthed, staring at the impressive trio. He lifted a tiny hand and gave a little finger wave, the scroll drifting to the ground from nerveless fingers.

“That’s Ralphy. Santa sent him here to save the dragons. But we need to step it up. Queen Persuis has an engagement she needs to get to.”

Myra’s scowl cleared. “Persuis? You’re sending them to the reds on Olympus?”

“Yes.” I tried to keep the smug look from my face but I don’t think I was entirely successful.

Father smiled and golden light burst from his person. I covered my eyes and Ralphy fell to his knobby knees in the snow. “Well done, Astra!”

I grinned, always a sucker for parental approval. “Thanks.”

“Well, let’s get this done, then.” Myra said.

“Astra!” We all turned to look at Slayer. “I’m afraid we have company.”

I turned just as a roar sounded in the sky beyond the ridge. “Shit,” I murmured.

The entire horizon was filled with greens bearing Satan’s minions. The red guy had discovered my little plot. And it was about to get really ugly, really fast.

Dialle! I need you...and about two hundred of your guards!

I slammed down my mind shields before he could respond, there wasn’t time to explain and I needed to do the best with what I had until he showed up with reinforcements...or in case he didn’t.

I looked at my father and my aunt. “What can you do to speed up this extraction process?”

“We can blast a temporary hole in the barrier, big enough for the dragons to flood through. The hole will close up as soon as we drop power, Satan has complicated magics holding the barrier in place.”

My aunt glared at me, “You’ll need to make sure nothing but dragons gets through, Astra. Zeus won’t be pleased if we let a lot of devils and demons into his protected zone.”

A hair lifting roar sounded behind us, followed quickly by the growl of flame and the heavy reverberation of massive bodies smacking together. I turned to see Slayer aboard his red dragon, taking on the leader of Satan’s greens.

Satan’s guards plowed into the greens at the back of the extraction line, creating almost instant chaos in the line. The conflict caused the line to contract until the smaller creatures were in eminent danger of being squashed.

I turned to the angels. “Get that barrier open!”

My father lifted his hands and turned, focusing his massive power toward the barrier within the mountains. I covered my eyes as Myra and Flick joined their energy to his. The light from their combined magics was blinding and filled with heat that melted Ralphy's elf-made snow to water in an instant. It pulsed above the mountain range for miles, seeming to touch the orange-red clouds above.

So much for stealth.

I called to Glynus, who was airborne and fighting a large green with a minion perched on its back. She sent a final wall of flame searing toward the badly injured green, who was almost twice her size, and it went down, plummeting toward the river of melted rock below.

She swooped toward me, shooting fire arrows into Satan's minions as she came. As we'd done a hundred times, Glynus picked me up on the fly. She swung by low, slowing as much as she could, and I grabbed the edge of a wing and propelled myself onto her wide back.

As we swung by Ralphy I yelled, "Get ready with that list, elf. We need to pick up the speed about fifty notches." He nodded, quickly ticking off names as the greens lifted wing and propelled themselves through the massive hole the angels had created in the barrier in the sky.

Beyond the shimmering hole, I could see the craggy peaks of Queen Pursuis' queendom, and an army of reds waiting to usher in the greens. Glynus' roar brought my head snapping around and we met the attacking green with fire, flashing claws, and, for my part, a thick, pulsing arrow of power that was more gray than white. The longer I spent in Hell, the more my devil came out, tainting my power toward the dark side.

The green lifted a wing to protect its face and swung upward, flashing eight inch long claws toward Glynus' snout. She dropped ten feet, sending my stomach into my esophagus, and rolled, ripping several long gashes into the green's belly and dropping away before it could retaliate. I sent a power arrow into the green's brain as it faltered and watched it plummet toward the ground below.

Several sonic booms alerted me to the arrival of Dialle and his forces.

As Glynus headed toward our next victim I searched the sky, looking for Dialle. I found my sexy royal not too far away, riding a massive white dragon and already engaged in battle with one of Satan's finest. He turned as Glynus and I approached to take on a second green that was trying to double-team Dialle and his white.

Hey! I said to him.

He turned a gorgeous smile on me. *Hello, my love.*

Thanks for coming to help.

His chuckle turned my insides to mush and sent my nether regions to throbbin'. *It's not like you gave me much choice, Astra.* His grin widened. *Besides, there's always fun and excitement around you.*

There is, isn't there? I returned his smile.

Look out!

I ducked at Slayer's warning and barely missed becoming a Tweener toasty as a red eyed green rose up on the other side of Glynus and took a shot at me. *I'll see you later?*

Just try to avoid me. Dialle responded.

Glynus and I swung hard right to take on the newcomer, my body thrumming with pleasure and anticipation of time with my gorgeous royal. The promise of his touch carried me through the next two hours, until the last of the greens dumped its rider and surged through the hole in the barrier to join its friends.

A huge cheer went up all along the range as the assembled warriors, angels, and extractors realized the battle was won.

Astra Q Phelps one, Satan zero.

I closed my eyes and sighed as Dialle shifted onto Glynus behind me.

Merry Christmas, my love.

Right back atcha, bud. I leaned into him, thinking maybe I wouldn't have an entry for the Shitty Day book after all.



I collapsed onto the divan in Dialle's office. The battle had been long and hard and I was exhausted. And stinky. I was covered in soot, blood, and dragon gore. I needed to clean up but was far too weary to move. Dialle had popped out to deal with some residual problems on the Court. The new Tweener apparently didn't like his lowly status in the hierarchy. Dialle had gone to give him his options.

Option 1, learn to like his status.

Option 2, die.

I was pretty sure I knew which option the Tweener would take. I was a little surprised Dialle hadn't zapped him already and took a moment to appreciate his restraint.

The air shimmered and I sucked in a breath as a very round figure dressed in red and white, with a bulbous, red nose, popped into the room, accompanied by the sound of bells.

I recognized those bells.

"Hey, Santa."

The jolly elf grinned, showing me large, straight white teeth under a dense, white mustache. "Astra Q Phelps." He lifted a pudgy hand to show me a short section of scroll. "I wanted to let you know that I've made some changes to my "nice and naughty" list. I peered at the scrap of scroll. My name was crossed off the "coal" list and placed back under the "gift" list where it belonged.

I laughed. "Thanks, Santa." I glanced at my watch. It was well after Midnight. "But I'm afraid it's a little late."

Santa's smile widened. "Ah, but you forget who you're dealing with." Santa wiggled his fat fingers and the room beyond us became a party, filled with all the things I loved most about the season, bright lights, lots of pine scented garland swags, and a sparkling tree with bunches of brightly colored packages underneath. All of my friends and family sat or stood around a fiercely crackling fire, drinking Champagne and nibbling on goodies.

The didn't appear to know that Santa and I were there.

I sat back on the divan, sighing at the sight. It was beautiful and made a warm spot in my heart.

"I thought you might like to join the party for a while." Santa's small, black eyes sparkled merrily, as if he had a wonderful secret he could barely contain.

I watched the scene for a while, just enjoying it. And then finally, shook my head. "No. Thanks anyway, Santa. I don't need the party this year. I'm feeling pretty good already."

Santa cocked his head and the sparkle in his eyes increased. "It was a really fine thing you did tonight, Astra Q Phelps. Those greens will be a wonderful addition on Olympus, and they will live long, happy, and prosperous lives."

“Yeah.” The warm spot in my heart expanded. “It was, wasn’t it.” I glanced at Santa. “Thank you.”

He looked surprised. “For what?”

“For forcing me to come outside myself and do the right thing. I apparently needed a reminder of what the season means. I owe ya big time for that.”

Santa stared at me for a long moment and then nodded. “Then, you’re welcome. But the impetus was entirely self-imposed.”

Remembering the mysterious sound of bells as Glynus and I had been flying aimlessly around Hell, I doubted it.

“Well, I’ll leave you to your evening then.” Santa winked at me and then popped away, taking my potential party with him.

I expected to be saddened by the loss, but thinking of Dialle’s imminent return, I couldn’t dredge up any sadness. I headed toward Dialle’s personal hygiene room and stripped, calling for hot and soapy water from the cleansing tube.

Stepping under the foamy heat, I sighed, enjoying the soothing feel of the soapy water massaging my aches and pains. I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall of the tube, my thoughts moving from the events of the night so far...to the events still to come.

Right on cue, the air changed and the tube got warmer, and harder, as Dialle stepped into me, wrapping me in a needy embrace.

My eyes popped open and found his, which swirled with the warm colors of passion. “Hello, my love.”

Water streamed over his midnight black hair and down his golden chest. His sexy, biteable lower lip held a single drop of water in its center. I leaned close and flicked my tongue over the bead, pulling it into my mouth.

It tasted of Dialle, hot and spicy and filled with possibilities. “Hey, yourself.”

He stepped closer, pressing certain parts of his yummy self against me and causing noticeable changes in my special and happy places. I lifted a leg and wrapped it around his calves, enjoying the way his happy place fit into my hungry body.

Dialle lowered that incredible mouth toward mine. His sweet breath bathed my face in moist heat. “I have a Christmas present for you, Astra.”

My laugh was husky with need. My hands found the backs of his hard thighs and slid upward, over a truly remarkable set of buns and higher, to settle on his hips. I tugged gently, pulling him closer and gasping as sensation exploded over me. “I think I know what it is.”

Dialle’s head lowered and he settled a whisper-soft kiss on my parted lips. His tongue slid inside to dance against mine. Heat built quickly between us, until the drops from the cleansing tube sizzled against our skin.

With a thought Dialle blipped us out of the tube and into his massive, silk-covered bed. He landed on top of me, pressing me delightfully into the sheets.

I moaned at the delicious pressure of his body on mine. He nipped at my lips, my nose, my chin, and then settled his lips over the daemon hickey on my neck. Passion flared even brighter between us. Flames flickered around the bed, creating a multi-hued counterpoint to the soft sounds of sensual exploration.

As Dialle kissed his way down my body, stopping along the way to worship all my favorite places, my thoughts strayed, only briefly, to Satan. I envisioned his angry impotence in the Hell of his own making and smiled.

Realizing that Dialle's presence in that bed had just increased the score by one point. I had love, passion, and happiness. Satan had nothing. I almost felt sorry for him.

Blink, blink...

Nah, he'd deserved to go down and I was keeping score.

It was now Astra Q Phelps 2, Satan 0.

It was the best Christmas present Dialle could have given me.

Dialle's lips found the quivering skin of my belly and settled a warm, enticing kiss there.

I shuddered with delight as he continued his journey downward, toward the promised land.

Well...*almost* the best present.

The best was obviously yet to come.

THE END