

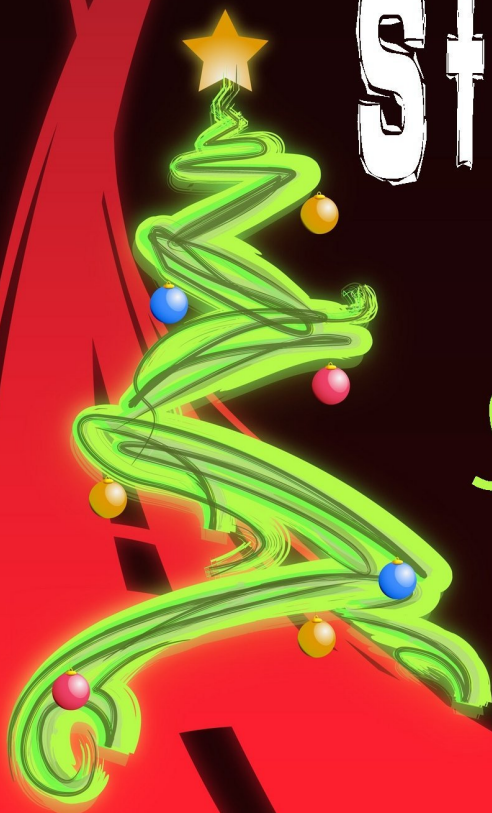
AN ASTRAL Q PHELPS FREE READ



2011:

THE YEAR THE GRINCH

STOLE SANTA



SAM CHEEVER

The Year the Grinch Stole Santa

A Free Astra Q Phelps Christmas Story

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In this short Christmas story, Astra is determined to take Christmas off so she's been ignoring the nearly constant calls from the North Pole to help them find Santa, who's disappeared just days before Christmas.

But when a flash mob of elves show up and whisk her away to the North Pole, fresh from the shower and all nakies, what's a Tweener to do?

Looks like Astra will be working again on Christmas after all.



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](#)

Book 6: Coming in 2012, [The Devil You Want](#)

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

Peace on Earth and Goodwill toward Men...Bleurgh!

In *my* world, nobody's peaceful.

Nobody.

In Heaven, the Big Guy's fighting to come to some kind of agreement with the Union of Guardian Angels and he's worried about a major strike that will leave everybody on Earth unprotected. On Earth, violence has spiked and people are going crazy over taxes and a truly stinky economy, as well as a food shortage. And at the North Pole, there have been rumors of Elf unrest and Santa has gone missing.

It's been all I could do to keep myself in the holiday spirit. With that goal in mind, I was currently ignoring multiple calls a day from the North Pole.

Ignoring? You ask in disbelief. *Ignoring Santa!?*

Yes.

I'm ignoring Santa.

Or rather, his elves. The little buggers have been calling me every five minutes and I've been doing my best to avoid those calls. *Why?* you ask. because I'm sick and frunkin' tired of having to work every Christmas.

Just for once I'd like to spend the week before Christmas shopping for gifts, attending holiday parties, and baking cookies like everybody else.

I saw that face.

You don't think I can bake cookies do you? Huh?

Okay. You're right. But I can frunkin' eat 'em can't I?

Sigh. If I get the chance.

My televisual bleeped again and I grabbed the pillow next to me and covered my face with it. Cursing like a green Martian policeman, I climbed out of bed and headed for the personal hygiene room, intending to drown my sorrows in blissfully hot soapy water.

A few minutes later, I was soaking wet and happily soapy when the lights in the room flickered and I sensed movement. I squinted one eye open, cognizant of the soap running down my face, and started to pull my power forward.

Something light and shimmery landed on my head and my power froze on my fingertips. My eyes opened wide and I immediately regretted it as soap ran into them in a stinging stream.

“Frunk!” I lifted a hand and scraped it over my face and then glared down at my diminutive attackers, my eyes trying their best to close under the sting.

A familiar face glared back at me.

“Ralphy!”

He was dressed in green tights and a green tunic and wearing a red pointed hat, a wide red belt, and red shoes with curling toes.

As usual, he looked ridiculous.

Behind him ranged several more vertically challenged rodents wearing stupid outfits to match Ralphy’s. They all had ridiculously rosy cheeks too, but their expressions were less jolly.

In fact they mostly looked royally pissed.

Ralphy looked down his pug nose at me. It didn’t take him long since it was only about an inch long. “Astra Q Phelps. I came to tell you that, this year, you’re so naughty you don’t even rate coal. This year all you’re gonna get from the North Pole is hostility.”

I sighed. “Look. I’m sorry about the big red guy. I really am. But isn’t there somebody else who can save him? Why does everybody always come to me first? I’m tired, Ralphy. So tired.” I gave the elf my best ‘hang dog’ look but he just laughed, his beady black eyes sparkling with mirth.

“Nice try, Phelps. You’re coming with us whether you want to or not. Santa’s been kidnapped and we need you to find him before Christmas is ruined for everybody.”

He took a step toward me and I looked down at myself for the first time. Aside from the magic snuffing web he'd thrown over me, I was nakies.

And the web was transparent.

I covered my important parts with my hands and arms and glared at the elf. He was standing so close to me that the felt ball on his stupid hat drooped in the humidity from my cleansing tube and tickled my belly through the thin web. "Step back, elf. I don't want to hurt you."

He laughed again. "Come on, boys. Let's get this naughty girl to the North Pole."

The elves surged forward, their fat, stumpy fingers reaching for me, and I just barely swallowed a scream.

It wouldn't be manly to shriek over the touch of a bunch of vertically challenged rodents.

The air shimmered and, before I could even squeal, I was being spaceshift-napped.

Again.

When sound and movement returned I was standing in the center of a massive room filled with toys and gifts in various stages of completion. The walls were covered in glittery snowflakes, interspersed with bright red ornaments that hung from gold beads, arrayed across all four walls. Bright, silver garland draped from the corners of the ceiling and met in the middle at a giant, spinning disco ball. The ball sent vibrant colors flashing around the room like a tattoo parlor sign. An enormous Christmas tree, flashing with tiny lights and nearly drooping under an avalanche of fake snow and ornaments, stood watch over hundreds of brightly wrapped packages.

A large sign hung on the nearest wall. It read, "Elves of the North Pole, Unite!"

The room smelled like an odd combination of sawdust and sugar cookies.

My senses went on overload as soon as we landed.

General tittering ensued and I remembered I was nakies. Doing the arm and hand cover thing again, I glared at Ralphy. "You could at least have let me get dressed."

“Then we wouldn’t have had something to dream about for the rest of our days,” offered a slightly tinny, male voice.

I turned to look at the face of an elf who was ambling toward us holding a clipboard. His wide face was gristly with a sparse brown beard and his nose was bright red, upturned like his shoes. He’d eschewed the drooping, conical hat and wore a *Hooters – North Pole* baseball cap instead.

Classy.

Ralph rolled his eyes. “Back off, Bob! Astra’s not some Hooter’s waitress, here to entertain you. She’s gonna help us find Santa.”

I glared down at the horny, short guy. “Bob, if you don’t turn those beady blacks in a different direction in about three seconds you’re gonna be eating that nasty hat.”

Bob’s eyebrows did a tacky little dance. “Bring it, baby. I think I can take you.”

I did a slow perusal of his three foot something form and lifted an eyebrow of my own. “The only way you’re gonna ‘take’ me is if I’m already dead.”

Bob shrugged. “If that’s the way it’s gotta be.”

A chorus of disgusted sounds lifted around us.

The scent of vanilla and sugar was suddenly infused with flowers and I felt a small, warm hand on my arm. I looked down into the rosy face of a pretty female elf. “Come on, honey. I’ll get you some clothes. I think Mx. Claus might have something to fit you.”

Having seen a recent picture of Mx. Claus I barely held back a snort. I’m sure, to the vertically challenged all us “bigs” looked the same. But I swore to myself that, if Mrs. Claus’ clothes fit me I was swearing off food for a month.

Never-the-less, preferring any clothing at that point to none, I hurried after the tiny female elf, whose name I later learned was Bell.

Anything to get away from Elf Bob’s leering face.



A half hour later I stood in Santa's office, trying to cling to the last shred of my dignity as I searched the room for an errant magic signature. Given the fact that I was swimming in one of Mama Claus' bright red shirts with a fake white fur collar, and stuffed into a pair of Bell's 'fat' pants, clinging to dignity was a tall order.

The pants were so tight at the hips they gave me muffin top, and they belled out at the bottoms. Since the bottoms only reached my knees, they looked truly ridiculous. Mx. Claus' shirt was longer than the pants if I didn't keep tugging it north, and the overlong sleeves were a series of puffs that ended in more fur.

I looked like I had caterpillars for arms.

But the worst thing was the giant panties I'd had to borrow from Mx. Claus. They used more material than a dirigible and were bunched into the over-tight 'belled at the knee' trousers, giving me odd bumps in strange places.

At least the material billowing over the waistband partially obscured my muffin top.

I had just located a vaguely familiar tinge of magic when my mental drawers shuffled and a sexy, deep voice intruded on my work.

Astra? Where are you?

Dialle, my scrumptious and eminently devilish love had been slightly aloof since the recent, and by some accounts unfortunate, marking incident. In a moment of supreme passion I'd inadvertently given him a daemon hickey. Until I'd done the impossible, females on the devil's court had been unable to mark their male mates.

Only the males could mark.

When I'd marked Dialle I'd forged new territory and shaken things up pretty good.

The males on the Royal Court were supremely pissed. Most of them wanted me dead.

The females were naturally curious. They'd taken to fixing me with speculative gazes that made me almost more nervous than the hatred from their men. I was afraid they'd ask me how I'd done it.

I had no clue.

Such was the weird science of my life.

But strained though our relationship was, Dialle needed to keep me happy because, as his queen, the health of the Devil Court rested on my happiness.

Frunkin' ice, eh?

Hey! Believe it or not I'm at the North Pole.

He snorted a laugh in my mind. *Petitioning Santa for something other than your usual lump of coal?*

I frowned, not amused by the coal thing. I mean, how many times did I have to save the world before it earned me a check in the elves' "Nice" column? *I wouldn't give Ralphie the pleasure of begging. No, I was dragged here by a flash mob of elves to find Santa.*

He's missing?

Kidnapped, according to the flash mob.

Your life is never boring is it, my love?

You think?

Well, at least it's better than last year.

I had to agree with him there. Last year I'd been stuck in Hell. Even covered in glitter and cookie dust, Santa's workshop was slightly less horrible than the fiery pits.

Well, don't let those elves get you down. I for one hope you retain a permanent spot in the 'naughty' column.

His voice was filled with special meaning and its husky promise sent warmth and other things spiraling through my lower belly. I grinned, enjoying the mischievous tone of his comment. *Hold that thought, bud. And along with it, hold the knowledge that I'm wearing giant panties.*

He gasped. *Be still my libido. Seriously? Describe them to me.*

My lip curled. I don't know, they're light pink...

He sucked air.

...there's enough fabric here to clothe the entire Royal Court, and they have lace around the legs.

Sexy. I'm picturing you swimming around in them and, I'll be honest, I find myself wishing you were here with me now so I could show you how very much I enjoy the visual.

I laughed. You're one sick puppy, Dialle.

Woof!

Though, if I was being honest, the sound of his voice had my own libido rearing its randy head and blinking rapidly. I'd be glad to finish my current nightmare assignment and get back to him. *I'll be back soon.*

Keep warm, my love.

I returned my attention to the aura I was sensing in Santa's office. It seemed to be strongest around the ever-present, live Christmas tree towering in the corner. As I reached my hand toward the soft, green needles, I felt a tingling sort of power emanating from them.

It was something I'd only felt once before.

The door behind me opened and Mx. Claus squished through, bearing a large tray filled with cookies and a glass of milk that was bigger than my head. "Hello, dear! I'm so glad you came to visit."

Her smile was wide and her small, brown eyes sparkled with mirth. I wondered at her jolly demeanor given that her spouse was missing. "Hello, Mx. Claus. I'm glad I could help." I watched her settle the tray onto Santa's desk. "Maybe you can help *me*. I was wondering if you could give me some details about Santa's disappearance?"

The rotund woman turned to me, her dark eyes still sparkling. Each soft cheek was rouged in red, though I suspected it was natural rather than cosmetic. She shook her head. Her curly, brown hair was touched with gray. "He's just gone off planet for a while, dear. I told Ralphy that, but he's a black sled type of elf, Ralphy is. He sees conspiracy in everything."

"Does Santa go off planet a lot?"

She shrugged her round shoulders, grinning. “Not every year but sometimes. When things aren’t going well in the workshop or he’s having elf troubles.” Her laughter shook her well rounded belly and set her massive boobs to jiggling. “He’s a big bear of a man, Mx. Phelps, and he overcomes an incredible amount of diversity every year to get his gifts distributed to the world, but occasionally he gets overwhelmed. And this year the Elves have been particularly troublesome. They’re demanding less work for more pay...that kind of thing. Santa keeps reminding them that they only work half the year as it is and that they live at the Workshop all year for nothing.” She shook her head. “But they’ve got a bug up their butts and won’t let it go.”

“Even if it ruins Christmas?”

“They think they have Santa over a barrel.”

I dropped my butt into the chair in front of Santa’s desk and reached for a thickly frosted sugar cookie. “Is there something different about this time? Why is Ralphy so sure Santa was kidnapped?”

Mx. Claus flipped sausage shaped fingers into the air dismissively. “Ralphy’s a worrier. Santa neglected to take his extra red suit with him this time, that’s all.”

I bit the head off my frosted reindeer and chewed, thinking. “Did he take anything else?” I figured if he was kidnapped he wouldn’t have taken clothing or supplies with him.

The first niggles of doubt trickled through her merry gaze. She grabbed a cookie and started to nibble. Thus the jolly figure. Apparently she was a stress eater.

I figured there was probably a LOT of stress dealing with a flash mob dressed in pointed hats and curly shoes every day.

“No. He didn’t. But he’s perfectly capable of finding supplies on the road.”

Which reminded me. “How does he travel when he goes off planet...generally?”

“He takes one of the sleds of course. One of the smaller ones. That way he only needs to take two reindeer. He’s sensitive to tiring them out just before Christmas.”

“So two reindeer are missing, I presume?”

She shoved another cookie into her mouth and said, “Bnotsch eggaxkwy.”

I frowned. “Huh?”

Mx. Claus swallowed and swiped a thick fingertip across her crumb covered lips. “Not exactly, no.”

I just stared at her and she stared back. After a moment her bottom lip started to quiver and her eyes began to leak.

I started to panic.

Oh good Him! Not tears! I didn't do tears and emotionally wrecked very well. In fact I totally sucked at the “there, there” thing. I was completely not compassionate. Which probably explained why I'd bludgeoned her with questions until she'd started blubbering in the first place.

I stood up and went over to pat a well padded shoulder. “I'll find him, Mx. Claus. Don't cry.”

She sniffled and sobbed anew, causing me to cast my gaze hopefully toward the door. If I broke into a full out run maybe I could make it through the door and out of Santa's workshop before the stubby legged flash mob could catch me.

I was formulating a detailed plan of escape when the door opened and Bob the randy elf stuck his head in the door. “Rudolph's back.”

I had no idea what he was talking about but I knew an exit line when I heard it. I gave Mx. Claus another ineffectual pat on a pudgy limb and hightailed it to the door, moving as fast as my skin tight, bell-kneed pants stuffed with giant panties could take me.

CHAPTER TWO

According to Bob, Rudolph had been sent out to search for Santa shortly after he was discovered missing. Though I'd never mastered the fine art of conversing with a reindeer, I quickly gathered from the crestfallen look on Ralphy's face that Rudolph's search hadn't turned anything up.

Finally Ralphy turned away and ambled toward me with a face longer than his legs.

Bob led Rudolph away, toward a clean stall filled with fresh water and hay.

"What did he say?" I asked Ralphy.

He shook his head, setting his stupid cap to bouncin'. "He searched the whole area. The snowy plains, the woods, the mountains..."

"And?"

"Nothing. All he found was a set of elf prints running from the main gate into the woods."

"Elf prints?"

He lifted his foot, showing me a curly-toed slipper. "These leave very distinctive prints in the snow."

"I bet. So we have nothing."

"Not exactly nothing. I'd like to know who would be heading into the woods in the middle of our busiest season." Ralphy's face was dark with temper.

"Is it unusual for an elf to leave the workshop?"

"On foot? Highly. Two days before Christmas? Unheard of." He shook his head, obviously disgusted.

"Then that must be connected to Santa's disappearance somehow."

That deduction didn't make Ralphy look any happier. "I really don't want to believe this is an inside job, Astra."

I just shrugged. It was what it was.

"There's one more thing."

Judging by the look on the elf's face, I was pretty sure I didn't want to hear what that one thing was. But I sucked it down and asked, "what?"

"Temperatures at the Pole are rising."

"And that's bad?"

"Very bad. If the snow starts to melt the magic dies and Christmas will be gone forever."

"Oh. That is bad."

Ralphy frowned. "Yes."

I expelled breath. "Can you show me the trail of prints? I'm going to follow it and see where it ends up. If we're lucky the culprit will be standing at the end with a guilty look on his face."

Ralphy put his head down and headed for the door. I shuffled after him in Mx. Claus' borrowed slippers.



The prints were long and narrow, with a little swish mark at the front of each one where the curly bits hit the snow at the end of each step. They extended in a straight line into the woods, and they were single file.

If an elf had left the workshop and struck out for the woods, he hadn't been walking with Santa. Or carrying him.

The footprints weren't deep enough to indicate that much weight.

Shivering in a bitter, North Pole wind, I trudged through the soft snow alongside the trail of prints. By the time I was halfway there, my ankles and feet were frozen and my teeth were clacking together. It occurred to me that I should have borrowed better clothes for my outing.

But the idea of donning a giant, red coat from Mx. Claus had been just too much for my dignity to bear.

I decided, in that moment, that dignity was highly overrated.

The snow was shallower at the edge of the woods and disappeared altogether when I entered the trees. More than that, the air felt a good twenty degrees warmer. I looked down at Ralphy. “Why is it so warm here?”

Ralphy’s lips curled. “The Grinch considers himself the anti-Christmas. He started heating the woods about a year ago, claiming that *his* woods wouldn’t be celebrating winter or the most magical time of the year.”

Knowing what I did of the nasty green guy I wasn’t surprised. “So this woods belongs to the Grinch?”

“Yes.”

“And yet it never occurred to you that those prints might belong to him?”

Ralphy looked like I’d smacked him ‘tween the eyes. “The Grinch would never step foot in the workshop. He’d rather get gaily wrapped gifts for Christmas.” Ralphy shuddered at the very thought.

“It seems an obvious connection to me. In fact, I actually felt his magic signature in Santa’s office.”

Ralphy’s beady elf eyes grew wide. “That’s a damn lie!”

I was pretty sure elves weren’t supposed to swear. I was about to tell Ralphy this when I noticed a crumpled piece of paper lying on the ground.

A clue!

Reaching down, I picked it up and pulled it flat. It was a flyer advertising a rendition of The Christmas Carol that was playing in downtown Angel City. I’d gone to the show several times in the past and it was very well done. “What would this be doing here?”

Ralphy shrugged. “Santa sends one to the Grinch every year. He always tells us he’s going to talk the Grinch into going with him some time.” Ralphy’s little face took on a dreamy quality. “Santa never gives up. He’s the most determined man I’ve ever met.”

Judging from the fact that the flyer was scrunched into a ball on the ground, I was guessing that Santa would have to dig much deeper into that determination before he talked the Grinch into attending a play that celebrated the wonder of Christmas. “Maybe next year.” I murmured.

Ralphy just nodded. “Can we go back to the workshop now?”

“You can if you want to. I need to talk to the Grinch.”

Ralphy’s little shoulders drooped but he fell in beside me as I headed more deeply into the woods. The path we were on was narrow and the woods grew darker and creepier as we progressed.

Soon the reassuring sound of the wind creating icy drifts in pristine snow gave way to strange chirpings and unfamiliar screaming coming from the dark woods. Every once in a while I’d catch a glimpse of glowing orbs peering at us from the shadows.

The eyes would disappear in the blink of an eye and I’d be left with nothing but a growing sense of unease.

“It’s not too much further.” Ralphy told me. I’d noticed his steps had slowed and his worried gaze swept the area more cautiously the further we got away from the snowy plains around Santa’s workshop.

I opened my mouth to ask him why, but never got the chance.

The air in front of us suddenly exploded into fire, and the sound of wings pounding the air thundered down on us. I grabbed Ralphy and leapt into the trees at the side of the path, hoping the green dragon pounding the air above us would lose interest if it couldn’t see us.

The dragon decided to fire the trees instead, in an obvious attempt to flush us out. All around us trees smoked and sizzled, but appeared disinclined to ignite.

Unfortunately, Ralphy wasn’t so lucky. The ball on the top of his stupid hat ignited in a flash, and flames crawled quickly over the soft material.

I reached over and yanked the hat off his head. “Hasn’t Santa ever heard of fire retardant fabric?” I shook my head, pulling my power forward. “Stay here.” I stepped back out onto the path and looked around, searching for the green scaled, red eyed fiend.

The not too distant thrum of heavy wings on the air told me the big reptile was circling around for another shot at us. Unlike last time, I’d be ready when it returned.

The green dropped out of a thick bank of snow clouds, its block-long wingspan undulating lazily against the sky as it prepared to dive for me again.

Fire erupted from its snout, the bright red of the flame looking kind of Christmasy against the massive creature’s green body.

The dragon pulled its wings back and stretched its neck in classic dive position.

I pulled power into my fingertips and waited for the green to get closer, planning my attack for maximum damage.

Power popped and sizzled around my hands, behind me, Ralphy whimpered in a less than manly way. I opened my mouth to tell him to man up but a dark shadow suddenly appeared in the sky above me and to the right.

I jerked my gaze in that direction and my mouth dropped open. Then another shadow appeared. And two more, coming from the other direction.

As the massive dragons dropped down from the sky, toward the green, I opened my mental drawers. *Hey, Glynus! Fancy meeting you here.*

Mother Tweener. Did you forget I was here visiting Snoopy’s family?

I snorted, while sending censure through my mind. *Glynus, he’s going to be king of the whites some day, you really shouldn’t call him that.*

What? He likes it. The elegant black threw back her head and screamed, the sound bringing the rogue green out of its dive, its head jerking upward in alarm. When the green saw the single, elegant black dragon heading straight for it with fire in her pretty eyes and her contingent of faithful white subjects, the rogue gave a single, alarmed bellow and veered off, leaving me to deal with the future queen of the white dragons and her fiancé, the gorgeous and humble Spencer.

“Is that Glynus?”

I turned to find Ralphy standing right next to me. “Yes. And her boy toy, Spence.”

Ralphy’s small face was pointed to the sky, his expression awed. He’d put his charred hat back on and it sagged pathetically. “She’s gotten big.”

I smiled sadly. “She has, hasn’t she? And beautiful.”

We watched as Spencer shot fire into the sky and roared at his guards to hang back, then he and Glynus headed straight for us.

Ralphy took a step back. “Has she learned to land better?”

I laughed. “I’m pretty sure she has.”

The elf frowned. “*Pretty sure?*”

“You might want to just step into the trees in case.” I was teasing him of course. Glynus was no longer the clumsy, gawky teen he’d met the previous year. She’d grown a lot in the last months, as dragons tended to do.

But then I realized she was going to try to land in an area that wasn’t even as wide as her legs. *Um, Glynus?*

Yes, Mother Tweener?

I don’t think you and Spence are going to fit.

But they just kept coming.

I think you’ll be surprised.

Glynus...

They neared the tops of the massive trees.

Glynus!

I looked at Ralphy. “Okay, I was kidding before, but I’m not now. They’re about to crash and burn. You’d better step into the trees.”

Ralphy shook his head. “It’ll be okay, Astra.”

The two dragons were ten feet higher than our heads and half a block away when their massive legs dropped and they spread their wings to slow their momentum.

“Glynus, no!” I started toward her at a full out run. Not sure what I was going to do to save her, but going on pure instinct. I’d been her protector for two years and it was a hard habit to break.

To my shock, Glynus laughed in my mind. *It’s okay. Really, Mother Tweener. See?*

To my amazement the two dragons landed safely and gently, only the wind from their wings creating a stir as the trees in the wood somehow gave way to their enormous bulk. In fact, as I watched in amazement, all of the trees disappeared around us, leaving behind a vast wilderness of frigid, white beauty as far as the eye could see.

“It’s an enchanted forest, Astra. It was never really here.” Ralphy supplied helpfully.

I glared at him. “Thanks for telling me. *After* I almost had a heart attack.”

We were back in the vast wasteland surrounding Santa’s workshop. And in the distance, now that the obscuring trees were gone, a single mountain range loomed.

The Grinch’s mountain.

High in the central peak, a dark archway rose in jagged splendor. And standing at its center was a small green and red speck, whose hostility somehow wafted across the space between us.

The Grinch.

CHAPTER THREE

The air above the vast wasteland that is the North Pole was even more frigid than the air on the ground. Glynus' heat kept me from turning into ice, but just barely. At the moment it seemed ridiculous to be worrying about the North Pole warming.

Flying solicitously close beneath us, Spencer spread an impressive set of glistening, white wings and all but disappeared from view against the snowy ground below. Only the vibrating red and green rodent riding on his back, with the charred stupid hat, broke the endless span of sparkling white.

Ralphy clutched one of Spence's spikes in both gnarly little hands, his knuckles bright white. His eyes were tightly closed and his formerly rosy face was almost as white as the dragon beneath his quivering thighs, though there was definitely no sparkle there. He was terrified.

I grinned. That's what he got for shifting me into the workshop nakies.

Spencer sure is handsome, Glynus.

Her response was a fire tinged snort.

And he seems very sweet.

She turned her head, fixing me with a beautiful turquoise eye. *You sound like my mother.*

I sort of am...a surrogate mother anyway.

She shrugged.

Spencer pounded the air hard with his huge wings and rose up beside us. He turned a bright, green eye on Glynus. I could tell they spoke to each other on a mental path and wondered what they were saying.

Spencer suddenly lifted his head on a roar, and several massive white dragons shot toward us across the sky, sliding in behind us in the shape of an arrow.

What is it, tadpole?

Greens. Lots of them.

I frowned. *I thought the whites and the greens had reached some sort of a truce?*

The queens have. But there are factions of greens who do not wish to follow their queen's dictates.

The Hell dragons.

Yes.

The previous year, Glynus and I had been in Hell at Christmas. Our unfortunate assignment had been to discover how hundreds of green dragons were escaping Hell. They'd been running for their lives, essentially. Hell's sulfurous fumes were growing steadily thicker and it was poisoning them. Especially their young.

We learned that Ralphy the irritating elf had released a few of them to the North Pole before we could stop him.

There were a lot of problems with this, but the biggest one was that the Hell greens are hot blooded dragons, having spent most of their lives in the steamy environs of Hell. And being in a snowy wasteland made them cranky.

Are they working with the Grinch?

It would appear so, yes. He's most likely promised them an end to Santa and the workshop. They seek to engage the Escendo Prophecy.

Ahhh. So that's what he's up to.

Yes. Snoopy and I have been keeping an eye on the cranky little green creature for months. However, last evening our queens demanded our presence at a bridal meal.

I could clearly hear the disgust in her tone. *And the Grinch chose last night to snatch Santa and set the Escendo Prophecy into motion?*

It would appear so, yes.

The Escendo Prophecy tells of a time when Santa and Christmas no longer exist. The outcome of that eventuality is in question.

Some read the prophecy to foretell the end of the North Pole, thinking that, without the magic and hope entailed by Christmas and its perpetrator, Santa, the whole geographic area would dissolve in upon itself and just disappear.

Others believe, as the name Escendo implies, that the climate of the area will reverse and become tropical.

It was easy to see why the greens would want the latter outcome. But I suspected the Grinch was interested purely in squelching everybody's good time.

That would explain why temperatures have been changing, I told Glynus.

We have noticed too. Though it is still painfully cold, at this time of year the cold is usually deadly. Each day that Santa is missing and Christmas is in danger grows the prophecy's tendrils exponentially.

It is one of the most quickly growing prophecies we have.

Then I guess we need to stop it. I grinned at Glynus as she turned her head and showed me her teeth. Reaching down, I rubbed my dragon's broad, glistening black shoulder in her special place and she wriggled happily, giggling in my mind.

No matter how big, how old, or how elegant Glynus got, I knew she would always be my tadpole. It had been too long since Glynus and I had fought a worthy battle together. I had to admit I was looking forward to it.

Shall we go kick some Grinch ass, Mother Tweener?

Spencer's massive, white head came up and he fixed us with a bright green gaze, bobbing his head in the affirmative.

I smiled at him. *Spencer?*

Yes, Mother Tweener. His voice was very deep, with just the tiniest bit of squeakiness at the end that told me he was still growing.

I laughed. I hadn't known Glynus was sharing our mental path with her future mate. That was the moment I realized my baby girl had grown up...and that she was happy with her mate. Soon she'd be an old married dragon.

But she'd still giggle when I rubbed her shoulder.

Welcome to the family, Spence. We're strange and a little on the cranky side...

Glynus snorted. *Wait until you meet auntie Myra.* She told him.

But we stick together and take care of each other.

His grin showed massive teeth so white they made me blink. *Thank you, Mother Tweener. I am honored to mate with Glynus. She is the most beautiful and brilliant creature I've ever met.*

Glynus just snorted. But I could feel her pleasure in my mind.

I'd been watching the dark shadow in the distance grow larger as it came closer. I hated to ruin the greeting card moment with harsh realities, but it appeared the greens would arrive within the next several moments.

And from what I could see there were lots of them.

I looked at Ralphy. "How many greens did you let escape before Glynus and I showed up last year?"

He looked sheepish. "Only a few dozen families."

I glared at him. "You lied to me! You get a lump of coal this year, elf."

A year ago, in Hell, Ralphy had told me that the process was very slow going and he'd only managed to move a few through the hole he'd created into the North Pole.

He squelched the quick guilt flooding his gaze and glared right back at me. "How was I supposed to know you hadn't come to stop me? I was trying to save as many as I could. I didn't want you using your connections to drag them all back."

"COAL, Elf!"

His thin, rodent lip curled and, for a moment he seemed to forget he was riding a dragon. He reached a clenched fist in my direction and I felt power gathering in my hands. One power induced flick...only one...and he'd be sailing out over the winter wasteland below. I'd make sure he landed in a big pile of snow.

He'd live.

But he'd have wet undies and multiple bruises.

Um...Mother Tweener?

Ralphy and I continued to glare at each other. It would be fun to watch him trek it back across the snow with urine icicles in his panties.

Dragon fighter?

I sighed, allowing the pleasant visual to fade. *Yes, tadpole?*

It appears the green dragons aren't all we need to worry about.

I turned my gaze in the direction she was looking. The Grinch's mountain cave.

The Grinch still stood there, his pointed green face folded into a nasty scowl and his ridiculously curled foot bouncing angrily against the snowy outcropping. But he was no longer alone on that ridge.

At least a dozen massive, furry, white shapes with claws as long as my fingers stood on either side of him, their beady blue eyes sparking with aggression as they watched us approach.

"Abominable snow monsters?" I really hated when my voice did that screechy thing. Unlike Spencer, I didn't have adolescence to blame for the pitch.

I guess the Grinch plans to put up a fight. Spencer added helpfully.

"Are those abominables?" Ralphy screeched.

"Frunk me to Hades," I murmured. Abominables were the nastiest creatures at the Pole. In fact, they might be the nastiest creatures anywhere. They were like the cockroach of frigid temps, nearly impossible to kill. One would be a real problem. Dozens of them were a horrifying prospect.

I sighed, shuffling my mental drawers. *Dialle?*

Yes, my love.

I think I'm gonna need some help.



Ralphy used a strange looking red and green satellite phone to call the workshop for recruits, though the idea of a bunch of elves fighting the abominable snow monsters made me chuckle. I figured they could at least run around and distract the monsters while I blasted them.

Glynus and Spencer did a flyby of the ridge and I counted snow monsters. There were a dozen.

Frunkin' ice.

So exactly how do you kill these guys? I asked Glynus.

According to Spencer, the elves once told him the abominables are like vampires. If you don't cut off their heads they regenerate. And they do it so fast you won't even see it happen.

I grimaced. The idea of lopping off the heads of a dozen snow monsters the day before Christmas just didn't appeal.

“What are we gonna do?” Ralphy asked in a squeaky, alarm ridden voice.

“Glynus says we have to cut off their heads.”

Ralphy's face suddenly matched his green outfit. “Gross.”

I nodded. *That's gonna be really messy,* said I, the new queen of understatement. *I'm not sure I'm up for that.*

Glynus' long elegant form tilted and her wings undulated on the air, turning us for another pass of the ridge. We were basically just keeping an eye on things until help arrived. *There is one other way,* She sounded unsure.

I was ready for anything. *Tell me.*

We could bust out their teeth.

I snorted. *Like the ancient human cartoon, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?*

Glynus nodded.

You're joking right? You believed that shit?

I did. Because it's true. Human mythology and superstition are based on truth. They just don't believe those truths, much to their chagrin. Glynus' massive head rolled from side to side

in a head shake. *The one thing abominables can't grow back is their teeth. And without their teeth they become frightened and docile.*

I grinned. *Just like in the movie?*

Yes.

Frunkin' ice! Are you telling me abominables are cranky because they have toothaches?

Glynus snorted thick gray smoke. *That's just stupid, Mother Tweener.*

The air behind me shimmered and solidified, until a long, firmly muscled form draped against my back and legs. "Hello, my love."

Warm lips trailed down the side of my neck and I shivered. "Dialle."

"In the flesh."

And what incredible flesh it was. "I think we have a plan."

The kisses trailed back upward, stopping to suck an earlobe into the heated moisture of his mouth. His hands skimmed beneath the hem of the massive, caterpillar sleeved shirt and found the bunched fabric of my giant panties, tugging on them. "Do we have time to step into one of those caves and explore the advantages of giant panties first?"

My head dropped back to a firm shoulder and I sighed, wishing we did. "There's an army of greens coming this way and we have to defang a dozen abominables and rescue Santa to save Christmas."

Dialle groaned against my throat, his hot tongue came out to lave across the daemon hickey he'd given me to ensure our mating. My whole body trembled with need. I tightened my thighs against the sensual assault and grabbed his hand, dragging it reluctantly away. "But hold that thought. I have a Christmas present for you later."

"Does it involve massive yards of white cotton fabric?"

I turned to stare into his gorgeous black eyes and grinned. "Maybe."

His long hair was tied back in a leather tie, but strands of it had broken free to frame a square, golden jaw. It touched my cheek as he nodded. "I cannot wait, my queen."

A series of pops nearby brought my gaze around and I lifted my head from Dialle's shoulder. The air around us was quickly filling with white dragons, all focusing jewel colored green to blue eyes on their prince.

Spencer began giving instructions in a series of growls, roars, and barks that represented a language I didn't begin to understand.

My mental drawers shifted and Glynus translated for me. *He tells them they will fly hard to cut off the green invaders. He will lead them, and if the greens won't listen to reason he has instructed his soldiers to kill every last one.*

I nodded. The greens were much larger than the slim bodied, elegant whites, but they couldn't match the whites for cunning and deadliness. I'd seen the two races fight before and it was almost unfair how easily the whites outmaneuvered the dense and clunky greens.

Hopefully the greens will see the error of their ways and surrender.

They must. Snoopy and his parents are outraged by the greens' usurpation of our lands as it is. They have no manners at all and recognize no authority but their own.

They did come from Hell.

Yes. And they act like it. But Snoopy and I have a plan for bringing them under Queen Forvar's wing, so to speak.

Pride swelled in my breast. I'd always known Glynus would make a good queen, but seeing her take the reins at the North Pole just affirmed that I'd been right.

The air suddenly sang with the clear, cheerful tone of jingle bells. Several large sleighs, filled to the brim with stupid, pointy hats and the elves that wore them, were approaching at a good clip from the direction of Santa's workshop.

I turned my head and kissed Dialle on the lips. "Ready to kick some abominables in the teeth?"

Dialle grinned. "It is generally the other end you are aiming for, my love, but I support you in this as in all things."

I snorted. "You are so full of shit, Dialle."

He simply nodded as if I'd told him he had golden skin and preferred black leather.

Suddenly we were locked in the sphere without movement or sound. When we landed, Dialle was standing next to me and we were looking at a furry wall of white a few feet away. They had their backs to us and hadn't noticed our arrival yet.

A few, stubby white tails twitched in anticipation of the coming battle.

Dialle had a sword in one hand and his power burbling around him in a purple aura.

I pulled my power forward too, and focused it into a narrow beam so I could aim for the monsters' mouths better.

We waited for the right moment, when the elves would be there to occupy the masses as we carefully picked them off one molar at a time.

I doubted Dialle and I would survive if they all attacked us at once.

In the distance the sound of roaring and outraged screams, as the battle was engaged, told me the greens hadn't done the right thing and surrendered.

I sighed.

Then I jumped as a war whoop, provided in a tinny voice, split the air, and Bob the elf dropped from the sky onto an abominable's head.

Another green and red rodent followed suit, and then it seemed to be raining elves. Each of them held a large pair of pliers in a fat, stumpy hand.

Apparently they'd had the same idea we had. But it would take them all day to remove the rows of sharp, white teeth with pliers. I had a better idea.

"Hey ugly!" The abominable nearest me swiveled its massive head slowly, its wide, blue eyes narrowing as it spotted Dialle and me.

"Good luck, my love!" Dialle screamed as he launched himself at another, charging monster.

I went down under what felt like a ton of fur and blubber, and quickly found myself squashed to the ground under an abominable.

Massive and fat they might be, but they were frunkin' fast!

CHAPTER FOUR

The creature smelled like rotten fish and other, less pleasant things. I shoved at its broad, matted chest as hard as I could and turned my head from side to side to avoid the huge, snapping teeth.

Pain sluiced through me as the thing's claws scraped down my shoulder. I kicked hard, sending power into my flailing limbs, in an attempt to shove the thousand pound monster off my body.

Need help, my love?

I jammed my hand under the creature's jaw and sent full power into it, shattering the bone beneath my fingers and sending bits of tooth flying.

I closed my eyes and turned my head, but I was too close and felt my skin being pierced by flying molars none-the-less. *I've got this under control, Dialle.*

His chuckle in my mind made me growl. The massive, white teddy bear lying across my legs was already healing his jaw, but his beady, black eyes were filled with surprise as his massive paw felt around in his mouth looking the missing enamel.

I dragged my legs out from under the snow monster and ducked as another tire-sized paw swiped toward my head.

I'd coiled power in my fingers to de-tooth the slightly smaller female stomping toward me across the blood spattered snow, when a wall of white spun past me with an elf on each shoulder. The elves worked their pliers like pros, extracting teeth at a mind boggling rate and flinging them over their shoulders into the snow mounds surrounding the ridge.

I ducked a bloody canine tooth that was as long as my middle finger and groaned as the female took advantage of my distraction to pick me up and hold me ten feet in the air over her head. She roared, sending putrid breath in a gust into my face, her massive paws squeezing the air out of my lungs.

I blinked, struggling to breathe, and tried to gather power as stars burst before my eyes. My devil came out in a big way and I growled back at the female, causing her to blink empty blue eyes at me.

My hand shot out and I blasted her straight in the mouth. The jaw full of teeth exploded into dust around my fingers. I followed the blast with a power induced kick to her chest and she let go.

I flew backward, smacking into another snow monster. Looking down, I saw that the thing had Bob the elf cornered against a massive tree and the tiny misogynist was holding it off with his pliers and not much else.

I sent a power arrow into the back of the thing's head and blood and teeth shot toward Bob in a white and red spray. The elf swiped a gnarly hand down his pug face and leered up at me. "Thanks, sexy."

"You're welcome, shorty." I cast my gaze around the ledge, seeing that the elves and Dialle had things under control. A blur of color caught my peripheral vision and I turned to see the back end of the Grinch disappearing into the mouth of his cave.

I climbed the stumbling snow monster I'd just dispatched and sprang off its shoulder, doing a flip in the air and landing on my feet in front of the cave. You got this, *Dialle? I need to go after the Grinch.*

Go ahead, my love. I think we're nearly done here.



The cave was unlit, the only illumination of its rough hewn walls and floor coming from some kind of dust that sparked in reds and greens as I moved quickly and silently through the passageway. I recognized the dust from Santa's Workshop. He must have scattered it like breadcrumbs for us to follow.

I entered a small cavern with passages like spider legs trailing off in several different directions from the main cavity. Listening with my power and my ears for anything that would tell me which passage to take, I heard nothing.

A stale, cool breeze swirled through the cavern, spreading the sparkling dust in a whirlwind pattern at the center and extinguishing my trail to Santa.

I sent out my sensing power to look for auras and found two small ones bouncing up the passageway behind me. Elves. Even their auras were green and red.

Frunk me.

A moment later Bob and Ralphy, covered in tooth dust and blood, ambled into the cavern.

I frowned at them. "What are you two doing here?"

Bob looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "We're here to save your pretty ass, sweetie."

I snorted. "Yeah?"

Ralphy glared at me. "You're not exactly known for your finesse, Astra. I wouldn't want you to blast the Grinch and accidently fry Santa."

"Besides, you're a chick. Chicks are helpless and weak." Bob shook his pint sized head in disgust at how dense I was, probably bruising his Neanderthal brain in the process.

I crossed my arms and leaned back against the cavern wall. "Okay then, it sounds like you two don't need me at all. Go ahead and rescue Santa and I can get back to enjoying the holiday."

The two pointy headed rodents stared at each other for a long moment, blinking. Finally Bob said, "You'd pout if we didn't let you come along and help. I know how you chicks pout."

"Not at all. I'm good with this. If I had to save Santa I might break a nail or something. Plus, I wouldn't want to rip Mx. Claus' caterpillar shirt. You two go do the man's work and the little lady will just wait here for your triumphant return."

More blinking.

"Do you want to talk out your plan first?" I asked them, examining my nails.

Ralphy cast a clueless gaze in my direction. "Plan?"

"Yeah. Maybe you'd feel more secure if you talked through what you're gonna do when you find Santa. Are you gonna whoop the Grinch's ass?"

Bob puffed out his tiny chest and nodded, pulling his fuzzy, red pants higher onto his little round belly. “Yeah. We’re gonna pound that cranky green guy into the dirt.”

“Then what?”

“Huh?” Ralphy was starting to turn a little green himself.

“What if Santa’s knocked out? How will you get him back to the Workshop?”

Ralphy looked at Bob and Neanderthal elf shrugged. “I guess we could drag him.”

“Have you seen his waistline lately?” Ralphy asked. “I don’t want to get another hernia.”

They fell silent and stared at their stupid, pointy shoes.

I let them stew for a few beats and then asked, “Can I get on with it now?”

“Yeah.” They both nodded enthusiastically. “You know what you’re doing. You don’t need us.”

I rolled my eyes and stepped into the nearest passageway, murmuring to myself. “God save me from little man syndrome.”

As I moved further from the central area of the cave, I started to notice a humming noise and a green glow that throbbed along the walls up near the ceiling. I had a déjà vu moment of the passageway leading toward the blood covered underground cavern of Devil King Nerul’s Royal Court and felt my pulse picking up.

In my head I knew the Grinch wouldn’t be doing blood sacrifices in his cave. But my nerves still thrummed as the sound deepened and the green glow brightened.

My foot landed on something squishy and there was a squeak. I jumped in alarm.

A small hand landed on my right butt cheek and I stopped short.

Someone plowed into me with an “umph” sound and I turned on Bob. “You scared the shit out of me!”

Bob looked sheepish, his black eyes sparking with embarrassment and one lock of shiny blond hair curling the center of his forehead. “Sorry. Ralphy tripped and ran into me and I lost my hat. I was looking for it and fell over a crack.”

Glaring at him, I reached down and picked up the soiled felt hat I'd stepped on. "I thought it was a rat."

I REALLY hate rats.

Bob slapped the dented hat back onto his head. The little white ball hung at an odd angle off the pinched tip.

"You look ridiculous."

His teeth shone in the green light. "Thanks!"

"And if you touch my butt again I'll strangle you and bury you under an elf sized pile of rocks."

Ralphy snorted and Bob's smile drooped crookedly. Like his stupid hat.

I turned away and continued toward the throbbing, green light. On the plus side, now that we'd moved beyond the windy central cavern, I could see the sparkly trail Santa had left us again.

And up ahead was the end of the passage. A clanking noise had joined the hum by the time we made it to the roughly chiseled hole at the end of the passageway.

At the exit, I moved close to the wall, making as small a target of myself as I could, just in case the Grinch had any more nasties like the abominables up his sleeve.

Behind me Bob and Ralphy slapped at each other, giggling.

Bob's hat was now drooping down his cheek, the sad little ball resting on his shoulder.

"Stop it you two!" I yelled in a harsh whisper.

They stopped and stood there, hands in pockets in the center of the passageway. I sent out a silent wish for a giant snowball to roll through the passage and carry them out with it.

Peering around the edge I saw an empty, snow-covered ledge with blue sky beyond. I carefully stepped around the wall.

Nothing.

Walking toward the edge of the rocky ledge, my eyes widened in shock. Bob and Ralphy ambled up behind me and stopped with twin gasps of outrage.

Far below us, in a green and vibrant valley where the sun shone brightly and not a bit of snow existed, a giant mechanical nightmare clanked and shook and hummed, throwing off a bright, green light and quaking as if it would explode at any moment.

At one end, dressed only in his fuzzy, red pants, big black boots, and a grease stained wife beater t-shirt, Santa fed stuff into the machine and punched buttons. At the other end, the Grinch grabbed toys and set them on a long conveyor belt, where they ran in serpentine fashion through the verdant greenery of the valley and were scooped into pre-wrapped boxes by a couple of elves, who dropped them into a series of waiting sleds when they were wrapped.

“Scabs!” Ralphie and Bob shrieked.

Santa looked up and grinned, waving.

I stood there with my mouth hanging open for a moment, before grabbing the stubby hands of my annoying companions and shifting us down to the valley floor.

“Good! We need help.” Santa informed us as we landed. “Ralphie, go get me some more coal for the engines.” He pointed to a giant black pile of the black stuff in the distance.

“But, Santa, is that the coal we give out to bad little children?”

“...and Astra?” Bob giggled.

I glared at him.

“Not anymore. After dealing with a few hundred naughty elves this Christmas, I’ve decided I’d have to hand out all the coal in my workshop, so I decided to discontinue coal distribution this year.”

Despite my irritation at having been sent on a Mother Goose chase, I laughed.

Santa winked at me, his rosy cheeks shiny with perspiration from his hard work.

“Bob, I need you to organize the reindeer. Rudolph has his hands full with the new ones.”

Bob made an outraged sound and we all turned toward the far end of the valley, where dozens of reindeer stomped and played while Rudolph tried to get them to pay attention to his instruction.

His nose was glowing with irritation.

Bob stomped off, murmuring something about traitors and four hooved scabs.

I grinned at Santa. “You ran away from home.”

He stuffed a bolt of red fabric into the machine and pushed a button. “I did. I knew we’d never meet the Christmas deadline if I didn’t get around all the bickering somehow. So I told Mx. Claus I was going to my special place and she covered for me.”

I would have to remember how good an actress Mx. Claus could be when she was motivated. Those tears sure had seemed real.

Looking at me, he lifted an eyebrow at the caterpillar shirt. “I thought that was her standing up there for a minute.”

My own eyebrows lifted in horror until he laughed. “Not to worry. As soon as I saw the scrawny legs I knew it wasn’t her.”

Frowning, I wasn’t sure I felt any better. “Do you need some help?”

Santa pointed to a pile of wood, paint, and metal connecting parts. “You can man the rocking horse station. Just follow the instructions on the panel. You just need to put the materials into the machine in a certain order and it creates the toys.”

“Sweet!”

He laughed and his big belly rolled under the wife beater. “Yeah. I magicked it myself. Fine piece of work if I do say so myself. But I couldn’t have done it without Grinchy’s help.”

We both glanced down the long line of the rumbling, rolling machine and caught the beady, red gaze of the cranky green guy. He lowered his brow and glared at me.

“It hasn’t improved his disposition any.”

“Grinchy has a pineapple exterior but he has a pudding center.”

A roar sounded high above our heads and I looked up. A lone green dragon flew by, its wings pounding the air lazily. A thin ribbon of gray smoke trailed from its massive nostrils.

“You know, Santa, your little stunt has caused a lot of pain. The dragons fought and a lot of your abominables lost their teeth.”

Amazingly he started to laugh. “Astra, you don’t really think I’d be that cold hearted do you?”

“The greens you saw were nothing more than an illusion. When your beautiful Glynus reached the herd they would have dissipated like snow on a griddle.”

“And the abominables?”

“They were instructed not to really hurt anybody. And they volunteered for the fight. You probably don’t know this, but abominables love pain. They regularly fight and hurt each other just to feel the sting. That’s why they were created for constant regeneration, otherwise they would have gone extinct centuries ago.”

“But they can’t re-grow their teeth.”

Santa stopped in the middle of dumping a bucket of bolts into the machine and looked at me, his red nose twitching with good humor. Then his head went back and his belly bobbed on a full-fledged guffaw. He held his belly and laughed for a full minute while I stared at him, wondering if he’d lost his mind.

“Santa?”

He shook his head and wiped his streaming eyes. “I’m sorry, Astra. I told the elves that story decades ago. It was a fun story, about an abominable that had a toothache and an elf who wanted to be a dentist. Apparently they still believe it.” He went off again, barely able to breathe he was laughing so hard.

I shook my head. “I’m glad I don’t live on the North Pole,” I murmured to myself. “It’s a nuthouse here.”

My mental drawers shifted and Glynus and Dialle checked in. Glynus verified what Santa had told me and I told them both I had Santa and everything was ice. Though I was feeling a bit cranky about having been used again and my Christmas destroyed.

I started stuffing things into the machine and Santa resumed work too. Four hours later the night sky was darkening and all of the sleds were nearly full. My arms were so tired I could barely lift them to shove the last chunk of wood inside.

Santa walked over and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “You’ve done great work today, Astra. I’d like to give you something extra special for Christmas this year. What would you like?”

A thought had been brewing in my feeble little brain all evening while I’d worked. I smiled up at him. “That’s a lot of sleighs over there.”

The beginnings of a grin trembled on Santa’s lips. “It is, yes.”

I shoved paint into the machine, my fingers tingling with numbness. “Who’s gonna fly them all?”

Santa’s lips widened into a hearty grin and his belly started to bobble, his rosy cheeks puffing as he rolled into his trademark belly laugh.

I laughed with him, knowing that I’d get exactly what I wanted for Christmas.

If only this once.

CHAPTER FIVE

The reins were made of the softest leather, like butter between my fingers, and were extremely sensitive. Even the slightest tightening of my fingers sent the six reindeer strapped to the sled into a rolling turn that made my stomach jump in a fun way. I'd already done several loop de loops and a few slow rolls. And only the first loop de loop had been an accident.

I was grinning so hard I thought my teeth might freeze.

For the moment, I followed Santa and the elves, who each flew a sled filled with colorful packages ahead of me, but I had orders to split off as soon as we reached Canada, which, according to my magical map on the dashboard, would be in about five minutes.

My fingers twitched with excitement. My stomach clenched.

The air above the fur covered seat beside me shimmered and warmed and a yummy royal devil appeared. "Hello, my love."

I grinned at Dialle, working hard not to bounce on the seat. "Dialle! I'm flying a sleigh and delivering toys!"

His chuckle sent warmth skittering through me, and made several spots on my body heat. "It appears that you are." He glanced toward the sleighs ahead as we veered away, heading for Ontario. "Is this object difficult to drive?"

I shook my head. "It's all magically programmed. I'm really just here in case something goes wrong."

"Then what do you do?"

I thought about this and laughed. "I don't have a clue! Call Santa I guess." I laughed some more, truly enjoying myself.

Dialle glanced over the rim of the sled at the crisp, white countryside below. Everywhere we looked, the bright sparkle of multicolored lights dotted the countryside and lit up the wilderness.

As we neared a cluster of homes in the snowy expanse of countryside below, several packages lifted from the back of the sled in a shower of sparkles and fluttered downward, heading straight for the chimneys of the cozy homes.

The sled continued on, packages fluttering unerringly toward smoking chimneys as the town's inhabitants slept.

The reindeer snorted, bells on their tack jingling merrily in the silent night sky, and the cold, clean bite of deepest night barely touched us. I took a breath and closed my eyes, enjoying the incredible peace.

I suddenly understood the term, *Peace on Earth and Goodwill toward men*.

Leather crinkled and Dialle's long, heated body was suddenly draped alongside mine. I opened my eyes and looked into a velvet black gaze. Long, thick black lashes highlighted sexy black eyes that swirled with sensual reds and oranges.

The colors of passion.

He lifted a leather gloved finger to skim along my jawline. "It's very pleasant up here, Astra."

I smiled, closing my eyes again to savor his touch. "Yes. It is, isn't it?"

The gloved fingertip warmed against my skin and softened, turning to butter as it skimmed along my throat. "This fur is very soft, and warm."

I shivered as the leather covered fingertip found the neckline of my caterpillar shirt and skimmed inside, along a suddenly energized breast. "Very soft. Very warm."

His lips found the side of my throat, branding me with moist heat. I turned my head and captured them, inhaling the sweet musk of his breath and making it mine.

Dialle wrapped his arms around me and pulled me onto his lap. My fingers dropped the reins and tangled into the heavy silk of his midnight hair as my mouth ravaged his.

Flames flared between us. Magic sparked. And my body burned as his lips and hands settled into long, slow exploration that took us through Canada and well into the top third of the United States.

Later, as we sipped the sweet, dark chocolate Dialle had conjured over Philly, I leaned into his warm chest and sighed. Packages still continued to rain down in multi-colored magic sparkles from the back of the sled.

The reindeer snorted and grunted merrily ahead, conversing in their own special language, and the night folded velvet wings around us.

The giant panties waved like an ugly flag from one of the sled's metal runners, where Dialle had attached them with a magic wish.

He skimmed a finger over my upper lip and slipped it into his mouth, savoring the smear of whipped cream he'd harvested. "It's been a wonderful Christmas, my love."

"It has. My best ever." I sighed and turned to give him a soft smile. "Merry Christmas, Dialle."

"Merry Christmas, Astra. I can't wait to see what you'll get up to next year."

I laughed, snuggling closer as the sled headed out over Manhattan. "That makes two of us."

THE END