

Chapter 8

You are sitting at a table in a dining hall in Bird's tail with Mira, Lezli and Benji. The hall is quiet, the few people who are there are talking in hushed voices. Lezli, however, is very loud in comparison. "...and they could have moved further away, so really it's on them if they got hurt," she responds to your "did you tell them to evacuate before trying" question. "Next year, we will make the coal mining more efficient," she says determined.

"Next year as in right after Christmas or next year as in a year later?" Mira asks, her hands cupping a mug of hot chocolate. Your hands are doing the same.

"Next Christmas of course. We need to make sure the gifting deity has enough coal to deliver to the bad people," Lezli responds as if the answer was obvious.

"Ah the gifting deity, right. I should've known, silly me." You can tell that Mira is struggling with keeping a straight face. "Remind me, what was its name again?"

"The Great Santa. Surely you have not forgotten this close to his own holiday?" Lezli looks at Mira as if she just forgot that the sky is blue. You haven't heard of this Santa before. Maybe it's a culture thing up here? You've heard of gifting coal to people who have been bad, though. Is this where it started? You make a note to ask Mira about it later, not wanting Lezli to give you the same look as she's giving Mira. Benji isn't saying much in this conversation, he seems occupied in his own head.

"And what do you think you'll be getting from Santa this year?" Mira asks, amused by this conversation.

"I've been good this year, helping the community, solving problems. Everyone is happy with me, they just don't want to admit it." Benji looks like he wants to object, but he makes the wiser decision. Instead, he takes a sip of his hot chocolate and takes a bite of his calzone which he made himself. Apparently, they have a whole bunch of calzones stored somewhere.

"I hope you don't mean that all the coal you've been mining is meant for gifting people. You don't think that many have been bad, do you?" You ask.

"With how grey things have been and how terrible the mood is, I'm sure that's a sign that too many people are getting coal for Christmas this year." Lezli responds confidently.

"Yes, that must be it! That would explain why I have no desire to celebrate Christmas anymore..." Mira feeds Lezli's statement, and you elbow her.

"Speaking of Christmas! We are hosting a celebration, a little Christmas party, down in the Capital if you would like to come!" You say cheerfully, changing the subject.

"I have so much work to do here, but I will see what I can do. Or if you want, I can help organise some activities for the event?" Lezli looks excited about the idea of getting more work for whatever reason.

"Sure, if you want!" you respond, and Lezli beams. Benji is again rubbing the bridge of his nose with two fingers. You're suddenly wondering if it was a good idea to agree.

A cup of hot chocolate and a calzone later, you and Mira are on your way out again. Before you get very far, you hear some noises coming from the watermill. It's a mix of laughter and...distress? You're not sure, but if it is distress you need to check it out.

"Oh come on, are we going to help every single person in trouble?" Mira asks, but she follows.

"Yes," you respond simply. How else will you get the reputation of Princess Pernille the Folk Hero?

When you get to the watermill you are greeted by some kids standing in a half circle around the mill, laughing and pointing towards it. Mira snorts next to you as she sees what they're laughing at. On the spinning mill is a kid tied to it, just now coming out of the water as the mill continues to spin slowly. "What are you doing?!" you exclaim, already moving towards the mechanism to stop the spinning. The kids curse and mutter angry things at you as you stop the mill and untie the kid. You ask him if he's okay, but he doesn't reply. He's shaking uncontrollably, probably a mix of cold and fear.

"I guess we now know why Lezli thinks we need so much coal this Christmas," Mira stands with crossed arms, taking in the scene. Her expression looks like a mix of amusement and anger, which surprises you.

"Yes, coal! You are all getting coal for Christmas this year!" You fix the kids with a stern look, and they look at each other uncertainly. "What were you thinking?!"

For a long time, the kids don't answer. Then one, the tallest of them, says, "He deserved it! He's been going around and saying lies about our parents!"

"That does not mean you get to torture him like this," you chastise them. "I will make sure your parents know what happened, and I will also make sure Santa knows."

Some of them look worried, others seem unfazed. "I'm sorry, Billy. We shouldn't have done this," one of them says with a look of genuine regret.

"I'm just sorry we got caught," the tallest one says. Around you, you see shadows start to slowly creep in from the sides. You look at Mira who's looking at the tall kid with a raised eyebrow.

"Mira," you say, interrupting whatever concentration she's having. Her gaze darts up at you and the shadows retreat. You move back to her side and whisper, "They are kids."

"They are bullies," she responds. "But you're right..."

You send the kid back to the town, telling them that if they don't tell their parents themselves, you will. Mira added that Santa is always watching and he will know if they don't do it. You don't know if that will work, but you can hope. The bullied kid had already run off by the time you were done lecturing them.

You want to go with them back to the town, to make sure everything is alright, but you do still have a mission to accomplish, and you shouldn't sidetrack too much.

"Alright, let's head to Morph then."