

The Day Before Her Birthday

amenon

-----BEGIN PGP SIGNED MESSAGE-----
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The Day Before Her Birthday

Dedication

To avwolf; For joy over sorrow.

And to everyone who's come all this way. Thank you for letting me share this with you.

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Version: GnuPG v1.4.12 (GNU/Linux)

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The Day Before Her Birthday

Maddie stood in the snow, wearing *everything*. The day was as beautiful as it was cold, with the sky a deep, deep blue, and sunlight spotting the snow where it found its way through the trees, making patches too bright to look at for long. She turned around, awkward in the heavy snow, to catch the position of the sun and gauge the time. Probably a bit past noon. A few hours of daylight left.

She looked at her tracks, disappearing into the sparse forest. From the road to here was maybe a fourth of the way. If she kept walking, she wouldn't get there before dark. Not with this much snow.

She adjusted her scarf, then took her mittens off for a moment, wedging them between her arm and side, squeezing tightly in hopes of keeping them warm while she snuck her hands under her hat to scratch at her ears. The hat was the most ridiculous piece of headwear she'd ever seen, all over the place and in all of the colors. Every time she put it on, she felt like she was wearing a tea cozy. *And* it made her ears itch. But... it was the warmest thing in the world.

Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to be there already. To see them.

But... she was going to. Her legs still felt good, and she wanted to have walked it, on this day and in this weather. She cleared the frost from her eyelashes, put her mittens back on, and shoved her hands in her pockets. Walking kept her warm enough—too warm if she didn't pace herself—but standing still, the chill was getting to her. She turned around again and looked for the right tree. It wasn't the marked one; that just told you where to start looking. She found the one and walked up to it, lifting her boots clear of the snow as she took her steps. It wasn't quite halfway up her shins here. Not too bad.

When she got to the tree, she placed one hand against the rough trunk, leaned her weight against it, and waited for a moment. Then she tapped herself on the leg a few times, before extending her arm out and making a big thumbs-up gesture. A chime answered her from the empty air. She waved in the direction the sound had come from, and pulled her scarf down

for a moment to show her smile. Then she got her bearings again, and resumed walking.

The tracks she was leaving were no concern. Anyone following them would find themselves elsewhere.

She made mostly steady progress, slowing down when the going was heavy, taking care not to get too cold or to start sweating. She was going through her rations as she went—she'd brought some jerky, hard cheese, and half a loaf of bread—but not stopping for more than the few moments it took to get some food in her mouth and her gear back in order. The good thing about wearing about four layers of clothing was that you ended up with a *lot* of pockets. When her canteen got empty, she stuffed it full of snow and figured out where to carry it so it would melt.

The depth of the snow varied greatly. Sometimes, she had to skirt around open expanses where it was over her knee; at that point, walking stopped being much of an option. Sometimes there was a frozen crust strong enough to hold her weight. Sometimes, it held her weight for a while, until suddenly dropping her through up to her knee. Or, in one memorable instance, groin. Some cursing may have been involved. But there was not a whole lot she could do. The clothing made it impossible to move with any kind of real grace.

The forest was silent, except for her breathing and pushing through the snow, and the occasional bird call. What *did* they find to eat in this? A few times she came across animal tracks, but saw neither hair nor hide of what had made them. It was just her, and the endless snow and trees.

The shadows lengthened before her as she walked, the sky growing an ever deeper shade of blue as the sun, never all that high to begin with, slowly inched its way across and down.

Maddie was about two thirds of the way there, crossing a small clearing, up to her knees in snow that didn't *quite* hold her weight. The sun was nearly on the horizon, and she was starting to think that *maybe* this wasn't the

smartest thing she'd ever done, when, with a soft ping, something appeared a few steps before her and dropped onto the snow. An oblong package, tightly wrapped in cloth. She immediately caught the aroma of food, and her mouth began to water. It wasn't like she was hungry, but something *warm...*!

She retrieved the—warm to the touch! And vaguely sloshing—package and carefully carried it to the nearest ray of sunlight, then turned around to face the sun and sat back on the snow, letting her weight down as slowly as she could. It held. She took her mittens off and set them on her lap, then set the package—something actually warm!—on top of them. The package was tied at the top, and there was a spoon struck through the knot. She undid the knot, freeing the spoon and revealing the top of a lidded bowl. Around the spoon was a scrap of paper. It was a crude sketch of her with her arms up, and a question mark next to it. She laughed, freed one arm to hold it out sideways, and shook her head.

She opened the lid. A heavy stew, meat and potatoes. She unwrapped her scarf and looped it freely around her neck, and for a moment, just held her face in the fumes rising from the bowl. It smelled very, very good. She began to eat, and the taste agreed. Keith's cooking, she thought. They were all thinking of her.

Somehow, that was even warmer than the food.

She ate at a good pace, though the dish seemed to hold its heat better than it had any right to. When she'd finished, she rinsed the bowl with some loose surface snow. The lid was already cold, but the bowl still radiated heat. She packed it with snow, and it started to melt. She shook her head, smiling. Magic.

Between the trees, the sun was touching the horizon. Twilight would linger, and the—she looked for the moon, but couldn't find it—even the stars would be enough to see by. But having stopped, she'd already started feeling stiff, and the fleeting warmth was escaping. A third of the way to go. Maybe she really should just...

There was another ping, and a heartbeat later she smelled coffee. She found the source; a covered mug had materialized a bit behind her.

She'd have to get up.

Maddie smiled to herself. Of course.

She made room for the bowl and the lid in her largest overcoat pockets—they just about fit, and the bowl was still warm—then retrieved the mug, taking great care with it as she carried it forward to the edge of the clearing. Her legs protested at having to do work again, but she managed not to groan. She found a tree to lean against and settled in to watch the sunset, then uncovered the mug.

She took a sip.

Another.

She tugged on her hat. Her ears were itching again.

The sun had disappeared by the time she finished her coffee, and all the world had a blue cast to it. In the sky, black was starting to show through. Twilight would linger. One third of the way left.

She found a pocket for the mug and trudged on.

A half an hour later she had to admit that yes, nature was calling, and yes, she had to answer. With a deep sigh, she started figuring out the logistics.

It was true night, the snow glowing a muted white under the stars, by the time she finally caught a glimpse of her destination. She hurried forward, past the last of the trees and into the clearing where the house stood, spilling yellow light onto the snow. She'd made it! Maddie threw her arms out and toppled backwards into the snow, landing with a satisfying fwoomp.

The sky was full of stars, more than she'd ever seen. They were steady points in the sky, barely twinkling, as if they too had been frozen. Maddie could feel her heartbeat settling, and her breathing calmed as the heat of her final rush began to evaporate. She could feel the open sky sucking the warmth right out of her.

The whole world was completely silent. Lifeless.

She shivered. Okay, that should be enough. Getting back on her feet was more of a struggle than she'd expected. Her legs felt like lead, and the rest of her wasn't much better off. She shook the worst of the snow off her clothes, then slowly made her way towards the house. Towards light.

Warmth. Life. She stopped before she stepped on the porch, taking off her mittens one last time to dig through the layers of her clothing, to retrieve the rather more respectable hat of her winter uniform. She switched headwear, then dusted off as much snow as she could before stepping up.

She was about to knock when the door opened, revealing Natani with a finger to her lips. Maddie couldn't have found her words either way. The sight of the wolf, the wash of warmth from the open door, the *scents*, the crackle of a fire... Natani looked at her, then took her by the shoulder, gently ushering her in and closing the door behind them. The wolf—fully nude, or as nude as she could be in her full winter coat, anyway—smiled at her and pulled her along down the corridor, to peek in on the sitting room. *There* was the crackling fire, and there were the guys, sleeping on the hearthrug; Zen in the middle, with pants on for modesty, and Keith and Nick snuggled up against him on either side, wearing robes. Arms and legs a happy tangle. No wrappings to be seen. Maddie grinned like an idiot at the sight, then looked up at Natani, who was smiling at her. The wolf led her back to the entryway, and Maddie finally had the presence of mind to start getting undressed. Natani helped her, supporting her when she stumbled trying to get out of her boots, taking her clothes as she shed them. When Maddie was finally down to her indoor wear—pants and a sweater—Natani spread her arms. There was no thought involved; Maddie stepped into her chest, burying her face in the wolf's coat. Natani's arms closed around her, pulling her tight, and the wolf tucked her under her chin. Maddie slowly got her own arms around Natani's back, letting them rest against the base of her slowly wagging tail. One of Natani's hands wandered up to carefully scratch at Maddie's ears, and she nearly whimpered with relief.

It was the opposite of winter.

Maddie leaned away to look up at the wolf, and whispered. "I want to hear your voice."

Natani smiled at her, running a thumb along the ridge of one of her ears. "Oh? Anything in particular?"

Somehow, the words got away from her. "... tell me you love me?"

The wolf's expression grew even softer. "I do." She leaned down to nuzzle her, then pressed the side of her muzzle against Maddie's and

whispered in her ear. "I love you, little kitten."

Maddie nodded, rubbing against the wolf, almost overcome with emotion, then slowly pulled back to let their muzzles meet in a kiss. Natani had the same idea, and when their mouths met the wolf's intensity made Maddie's ears stand up. Natani was saying that she *would* show her love. Maddie looked silent assent at the wolf, and Natani pushed her back, gentle but firm, guiding her to the adjacent store room, only stopping to close the door behind them before pinning her against the wall. The wolf kissed her again, fixing her in place, leaving her breathless, then nuzzled her neck, caressing with her tongue, grazing with her teeth in a way that made Maddie shiver. She could feel Natani's hands working her belt, and the wolf soon had it loose, and was diving down, to her stomach; nosing up under her shirt... then down, pulling her pants down with her muzzle, long tongue flicking, searching... finding. Maddie bit her lip, trying as hard as she could not to make a sound as Natani worked her over. Her first orgasm came almost immediately, the heavy weariness of her body only accentuating her pleasure, but the wolf was only getting started. Maddie somehow managed not to cry out while, with one peak after another, Natani slowly reduced her to a quivering mess, legs trembling, only staying up because the wolf was supporting her and keeping her pinned against the wall, Maddie curling over Natani's head, clutching at her back, panting hoarsely. Finally, the wolf let up, and after one last climax, let her down. When she could think again, Maddie found herself in Natani's lap, straddling her, held close in a gentle embrace. She realized she was purring.

Natani licked her on the cheek. "You are loved, little kitten."

Maddie drew a shuddering breath, overwhelmed. "Dammit, Natani, are you *trying* to make me cry?"

The wolf grinned at her. "Yes."

Maddie wiped her tears. "I love you. I love all of you."

Natani smiled. "Even Zen?"

Maddie laughed quietly. "Especially Zen. Just... don't tell him that."

"He wouldn't stop grinning for a week. A *month*. But... he knows, kitten. He's always known."

Maddie sighed. "Yeah." She stuck her tongue out. "Doesn't mean I have

to tell him, though.” Natani touched their noses together, and Maddie kissed the wolf. Love and silliness. But she couldn’t find any heat, and chuckled, rueful. “My body feels like a wet noodle.”

Natani grinned at her. “I can tell. Just rest. And... you can do whatever you want to me tomorrow.”

The thrill of those words! “You mean...?”

Natani blushed, then looked away for a moment. Nervous. But also excited. “Yeah.”

Maddie took Natani’s head in her hands, stroking both cheeks with a thumb. “You can trust me.”

Natani closed her eyes, a small smile playing on her lips. “Yeah.”

Maddie kissed her gently. No silliness, this time. She smiled. “Is that my gift, then?”

Natani opened her eyes, smiling. “Just a part of it.” She stuck out her tongue. “I won’t spoil the surprise.”

Hmph! Maddie kissed the wolf again. There was *more*? Maybe she *could* find a bit of heat... “Are you sure there isn’t anything you want from me?”

“Just rest. You wouldn’t want to be exhausted tomorrow.” A wicked grin. “Besides, I know someone who isn’t a wet noodle.”

Maddie laughed. “*Keith* doing something *I* should have, for once?”

“Thought you’d like that. So, what do you want? Food? Bed? Bath?”

“I’m not hungry, and... I don’t smell, do I?”

“Not in any kind of a bad way.”

“Then... I think I’d just like to be by the fire. Bath and food later? It’s not *that* late yet, right?”

“Right. Supper’s in a few hours.”

“Will you take a bath with me after that?”

Natani grinned. “Not relaxed enough yet? Feeling like floating for a bit? With a wolf between your legs?”

Maddie grinned back. “Well, it’s easier than standing, that’s for sure. I don’t trust my legs right now.”

Natani kissed her. “I wonder why. Bath and a massage?”

“That... sounds nice. Do you think you can keep it professional?”

“Of course not.”

Maddie laughed. “It’s not even my birthday yet, and you’re just pampering me.”

Natani smiled. “Isn’t that why you walked? Because you wanted to be pampered?”

“... yeah.”

“Want to sleep with me tonight? Or maybe Zen?”

“... both?”

Natani grinned. “Zen it is.”

Dammit.

The wolf licked her on the cheek. “Let’s say it’s both if Alaric is staying the night. Can you stand?”

It took a few false starts, but Maddie got her legs under her, and her pants up and belted. Natani kept an arm around her as they returned to the corridor. Maddie took the support gladly. She almost did feel like her knees might buckle at any moment.

They met Keith coming out of the kitchen.

Maddie smiled, but kept her voice low. “Hey, boss. Thanks for the food. That was you, right?”

Keith smiled, and glanced at Natani. “Well, I cooked it, anyway. Welcome. Tough trip? It can get pretty lonely out there.”

Was everyone going to get to her today? Maddie stepped forward and hugged Keith, and after a moment could feel his arms slowly settle around her. No doubt he was looking at Natani over her shoulder... but he did return the embrace like he meant it, and after a moment, Maddie could feel Natani step up behind her and put her arms around them both.

You are loved.

Keith sounded at his gentlest. “I’ll take that as a yes. Want some more food?”

“I’m okay.” She let go, and Keith stepped back, but Natani kept her arms around her, supporting her from behind. Maddie leaned into the wolf. “But thank you. And a happy belated birthday. Sorry I missed it.” She grinned. “I was busy doing your job.”

Keith grinned back. “Funny you should mention that. I was just thinking that I should step up for a change. Give you a bit of a break.”

“... I *just* got everything back in order after the last time. What fresh hell are you brewing this time, sir?”

“We can talk about that later, but how does a few weeks here sound?”

“With the wolves? Really good, right about now. If you’ll take some messages from me?”

Keith flashed a grin at Natani past her. “Well, someone’s got to keep them company. And of course I will. Kat?”

“And some others. When are you leaving?”

“In a few days. Natani will take me, but he’ll be back pretty soon... right?”

“Right. I might spend a day or two in Wreathwood, if people don’t make too much of a fuss. But I can play messenger, both ways.”

What *was* Keith up to this time... ah well, time enough to worry about that later. “Very well, sir. *Try* not to start any wars.”

Keith grinned. “I’ll take that under advisement, Lieutenant.” He reached out and put a hand on Maddie’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “Relax. It won’t be too bad this time, I promise.”

Natani sounded amused. “Are you reassuring your subordinate, or fondling me?”

Keith smiled up at her. “Can’t it be both?”

The amusement took on an edge. “Can you stand, Maddie? I have some business with your boss.”

Maddie got out of the way with a grin. “Something about a tab?”

Natani took Keith’s hand. “Something like that, yeah.”

Keith raised his eyebrows. “I’m not sure what this is, but I think I’m okay with it.”

Maddie laughed softly as Natani led Keith away, their tails wrapping together as they went. *Have fun, both of you.*

She hobbled to the sitting room, where the fire was still going—and going strong; Keith had probably added wood. There was a pun there, but she was exhausted and had no one to amuse but herself. Zen was still sleeping on the hearthrug, with Nick on his shoulder. The wolf was asleep for sure, but Nick... she studied her old boss very carefully. Yes, he really *was* asleep.

Nickolai Alaric, sleeping peacefully on a rug.

That was the true magic of this place. Of these people.

She got down next to Zen, leaned in close to the wolf's ear and whispered very, very quietly. "I love you." Then, satisfied that nobody had heard, she kissed him on the cheek and took the place Keith had vacated, curling up next to Zen and burying her face in his mane.

She was asleep in seconds.