

“Babe, I love you,” Deacon grunted. “But this thing is really heavy.”

“You’re good. Let me just tighten the screws in.” Lang twisted the knobs of the ornate metal tree stand, edging the massive stops into the bark of their spruce. “Then we can make sure it’s straight too.”

The stand was huge, a complicated thing of screws and flat spacers he’d stared at for a good five minutes before Deacon came by and sorted it out in thirty seconds. He worried it wouldn’t be strong enough to hold up the enormous spruce but to be fair, he worried about a lot of things. This was their first Christmas as a family, a single working unit of temperaments and personalities...and something Lang never imagined he’d have in his lifetime.

He was also trying to not get distracted by Deacon’s bare feet and ankles not more than a few feet away, poking out from under the spruce’s netted branches. It was stupid to be turned on by toes but there he was, staring at his husband’s feet of all things when he should have been working to steady the tree.

“Any time you’re ready to finish that up, sweetheart. The tree and I will be right here waiting.” Deacon’s light teasing held a golden warmth. There was never any edge to his words, nothing to cut into Lang to make him bleed.

“Sorry, got distracted,” Lang confessed, turning one of the opposite screws he’d been working on to keep the tension even.

“That’s okay. I’m really good. I kind of like this whole watching you work on something while you’re hunched over.” Deacon’s voice went husky, slick with promises and heat. “I like how your ass looks in those sweats.”

A sear crept through Lang’s cheeks, flushing him red and he flicked at Deacon’s toes with his fingers. “Stop that.”

“What? Zig’s over at Angel’s making cookies and...” Deacon paused when the sound of two young bickering voices bleed through from outside. “Never mind. The monsters have descended.”

The front door slammed open and a tangle of noise and trouble stamped in.

Zig’s smile held little of the brittle hardness it had when Lang first met her in his bookstore. Instead, she beamed, confident and secure enough to launch herself at Deacon at a full run. There wasn’t any question he’d catch her. He was the kind of man who anyone could fling themselves at in the hopes of being saved and Deacon would without hesitating, embrace them in midflight.

Unfortunately, grabbing Zig meant letting go of the tree.

The tree lurched forward and Lang made a desperate grab for it, snagging his fingers in its netted covering. With three of the four screws in, the spruce bobbed and danced in its stand, threatening to topple over. Yelping in alarm, Lang called out and a pair of hands grappled the tree from him.

"I've got it," Angel reassured him, his forearms barely straining with the effort of keeping the tree upright. "Guess you weren't done?"

"Not quite." Lang peered around the tree at Deacon and a mortified Zig. "Are we done killing me?"

"Sorry," Zig muttered as Deacon put her down. "Just got excited. Roman and I get to be angels in the school play together. Angel said he'll make us wings."

"Appropriate I suppose. To get your wings from an older angel," Lang drawled.

"Here, let me get that, Ange." Deacon moved in to hold the tree but Angel shook his head.

"Nah, I've got it but there's stuff in the car if you want to bring it in. Some muffins and cookies the kids made. Can't tell you they're edible. Put icing on like they were spackling adobe onto a house." Angel was tall, a dirty blonde with sharp grey eyes Lang swore saw everything around him and probably one of the most together people he'd ever known. He was also a link to Lang's grandmother and a veteran of the Christmas tree battles, giving Deacon a wicked grin. "It's kind of nice to be the one holding the tree up. Normally it was me fighting with the damned stands."

"Go on. It's like old times. Except I'm the one down here," Lang waved his husband off. "Make sure they don't eat themselves sick. You can stay for dinner if you want, Ange. You and Roman."

"I don't know if I should," Angel murmured softly. "Especially since your brother's trying to shut me and my bakery down."