HAPPY H/D HOLIDAYS, RED_RAHL!

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Title: The Magic of the Holidays, or, How I Survived the Gringotts Holiday Helpdesk

Pairing(s): Harry/Draco, Blaise/Justin Finch-Fletchley

Summary: Draco's an Assistant Cursebreaker at Gringotts, Harry's an Auror. They receive the unwanted task of troubleshooting malfunctioning magical objects at the Gringotts holiday help desk. Together. The only question is whether they will kill each other before the magical objects succeed in killing them.

Rating: R for intent

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Warning(s): Murderous household objects, holiday snark, family

Epilogue compliant? So EWE it could nurse baby sheep.

Word Count: ~14,000

Author's Notes: Dear red_rahl, I do hope you enjoy this tale of holiday mischief and magic. I went with your requests for humor, snark, plots involving interesting/unique perspectives or aspects of the wizarding world, and the Malfoys as doting parents, especially Narcissa. I hope it achieves the status of an emotional journey with a good ending and as for working well as a team and both guys secretly pining for the other, well, you'll have to read on to see. Thanks to the marvellous mods and their incredible care and feeding of the fest! Happy H/D Holidays!

(The Magic of the Holidays, or, How I Survived the Gringotts Holiday Helpdesk)

Tags: [fic], rated: r, round: winter 2011

* * 1* *

Nestled in a charmed alcove off the main entrance hall, the Gringotts Wizarding Bank holiday help desk is a tawdry confection of draped green and gold velvet, ancient silvered glass baubles, lush boughs of greenery, and bored, sparkling fairies flitting around deadly looking crystal icicles. Frankly, it looks like someone's grandmother's Christmas tree threw up. The desk opens for three and a half weeks, between the first of December and Christmas Eve, for the discreet resolution of all of the bank clientele's holiday mayhem and mishaps.

I've always pitied the poor bastards trapped at the desk in December, my pity evident whilst laughing into my fist. This year it seems I'm the one to be pitied. The faint smiles, brief nods, and subtle gestures of my goblin and human coworkers show exactly how unhappy they are to see me perched on an uncomfortable and precarious high wooden stool behind the towering mound of holiday ghastiliness that is the desk, which is to say, not at all. I catch Flavia Finkirk smiling at me simperingly, wearing a hideous plaid muffler in unbecoming shades of raspberry and peacock green. I look away and count to from ten to one under my breath. It's only 8.15 and I already want to shout at someone.

Pointedly ignoring the chatter and smirks, I examine my new surroundings more closely. The alcove is small, with sloping stone walls, and only appears for the weeks the desk is in use.The air still smells faintly of dust and of old smoke. There's a fireplace at my back, its chimneypiece festooned with evergreen garlands, silver stars, and musty gold velvet ribbons. Mother wouldn't let anything so garish within half a kilometre of the Manor. She doesn't often come into the bank, and I pray I get fair warning if she does so she doesn't see me here. I may never live it down otherwise. I'll have to remember to be particularly creative with my lies about how work is going this month.

The fire behind the desk is real, blazing and crackling, perhaps the only perk of this posting. The rest of the Gringotts building is frigid even in summer - the old chimney system must predate the first Goblin Rebellion and there's a prohibition on warming charms (something to do with disturbing the security spells, which is utter bollocks in my opinion - I've cast a few charms over the years without being noticed and no one's reported a major vault breach after any of them). But now, after an hour sitting behind the desk, I'm completely warm, almost too warm beneath my heavy wool robes. It's an unfamiliar sensation for a December morning at the office.

Although it's billed as a service to our customers, as I understand it the primary function of the holiday desk is to protect the staff from the inevitable wave of malfunctioning charmed objects. Every year in December, people idiotically haul keepsakes out of their vaults for celebrations and inevitably something goes pear-shaped. Great-grandmother Griselda's prized silver reindeer figurines gore their eager heir and

run wild through the marble halls, injuring eight staff and shattering a decorative tile before being trapped in the Head Counter's office and stopped with a Relashio. The charmwork on Uncle Wilfred's cheerful brass holiday hunting horn decays and it begins blaring off pitch continuously at high volume whilst shooting musty fireballs that singe the eyebrows off of several bystanders and send two holiday workers to St Mungos before it can be subdued. And then there are those who, mistaking us for a fix-it-all service, bring malfunctioning objects through the door in mid-upset. It can get quite dangerous out on the bank floor.

The cases are not all easy to solve either; the episodes with the reindeer and the hunting horn were among the milder happenings of last year according to Bill Weasley, who was given holiday duty after breaking the seal of a prize sarcophagus only to have the entire contents turn to dust when exposed to the air. The sarcophagus was rumoured to contain gold jewelry, stones, and intact magical scrolls, and our boss, Chief Cursebreaker Varnok, was livid. He had to face the Head Goblin and explain that an accident had occurred, and we would not be receiving the finder's portion Gringotts had been promised by the Egyptian Department of Magical Antiquities. After this interview, Bill was banished to the holiday desk and ordered to prevent damage to property. All property. I even felt a twinge of compassion at his assignment, quickly smothered. I dislike Bill less than most of the imbeciles in our department.

And what have I done to be stuck behind the desk this year, you might well wonder? Sadly it has nothing to do with sarcophagi. Or ancient seals. Or even curses, of the business sort, although I hear lots of fantastic stories whispered among the people I am pointedly ignoring while I sit at my new, temporary desk. The sad truth is that I made the mistake of having a loud argument with the Head Goblin over being kept at the rank of Assistant Cursebreaker for another year. I might have also called him a shrivelled old gnome, but I can't remember all of the encounter. The stunning magic Varnok cast on me hit me hard enough to knock me out. I came back to consciousness on the hard tiled floor of the Cursebreaking office with the hushed whispers of my coworkers above me, not worried for my immediate safety but rather for the health of my position. The next day, I received the summons to the help desk.

Now here I sit, while the bustle of business picks up and the whispers slow to the occasional murmur. I'm glad it's slow on the the first day, although I've a sneaking suspicion my coworkers are going to try to test me, perhaps with pranks or with minor objects from upstairs in the secure, magic-free vault. I've overheard a few conversations to that effect and I've been reviewing my protective spells and revealing charms all week.

The Head Goblin's been at his post at the head of the hall for at least an hour. I can't see much beyond the entering customers, the guards, and the first few clerks from this vantage. I do see Flintlock hovering

near the entrance and I wonder why he's still about. When I see the sweep of red Auror robes, I realise what he's been waiting for. I fix my attention on the desk, twirling an icicle so as not to be caught gawking and cursing myself inwardly for my stupidity. Of course. There's always an Auror detail on the holiday desk, partly for additional security and partly to help with emergencies. The Cursebreaker does most of the spellwork. The Auror they had last year with Bill was ready to be pensioned off; he was admonished for snoring on the job several times according to house gossip. I'm sure I'll be stuck with someone just as scintillating, the way my week's going.

I hear the Head Auror's booming voice come closer and then he greets me by name.

"Mr Malfoy, compliments of the season." He sticks a large hand out.

I try not to grimace as I think about how much I detest this season. Instead, I come around the desk to shake his hand as politely as I can. "To you as well, Head Auror Shacklebolt. It's always a pleasure to see you here."

I straighten up to look Shacklebolt in the eye. Merlin's beard, the man is enormous. I'm not short at six feet (with a bit of stretching and possibly standing on my toes), but he must be several inches taller.

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy. I've brought the Auror who will be assisting you for the next three weeks." Shacklebolt casts me a small, odd smile, then steps aside.

It is only then that I realise how execrable this assignment will be. My jaw drops and it's all I can do not to gape. Standing behind the Head Auror is Harry fucking Potter, looking just as happy to be there as I am but lacking the decency to disguise the fact. His mouth is twisted in a scowl and his heavy black brows ride low over his flashing green eyes. His red robes are slightly rumpled and he definitely needs a haircut - the black curls on his neck graze the shoulders of his robe. Despite his posture of graceless irritation, or perhaps because of it, he looks fantastic: his shoulders are broader than I remember, and there's a coiled strength to how he holds himself that I find unspeakably hot. As in, I will never speak of it to anyone.

"Malfoy," Potter says after a few awkward moments of silence and a glare from Shacklebolt. He doesn't reach out a hand; his arms are crossed over his chest. If possible, he's in worse temper than I. For once, I

am not the centre of negative sentiment in the room, which puts me on the back foot.

“Potter.” I recover my cool and turn my back to walk to the side of the desk. My side. I glance over to the other stool. I have to sit next to a foul-tempered Harry Potter for the next three weeks. And I thought the tacky decorations and smarmy looks would be the worst of it. This is more fiendish than any detention I could have dreamt of at school. The only thing possibly worse than working with Potter is going to be telling Blaise about it when I get home. Blaise is the only one who knows about my hopeless pash on Potter at school, having extracted the information out of me on a night when I was unusually maudlin after too much whisky nicked out of Father’s study.

Flintlock coughs and I pay more attention to my surroundings. Shacklebolt is regarding me quizzically and I’ve no clue why.

“Sorry. I must have missed what you just said.” I try to recover my interested look, but I find it almost impossible to appear pleasantly engaged. I keep looking over to Potter, who’s picking at his nails uncouthly.

“I asked if you would remember me to your Aunt.” Shacklebolt inclines his head when he says this.

I nod in return. I hadn’t known they were well acquainted, but I suppose I should learn never to be surprised by anything connected to my Aunt Andromeda. “Yes, of course, sir. I’ll be seeing her for Advent lunch this weekend. I’ll be sure to give her your greetings.” If she’ll let me get a word in edgewise. She’s always lecturing me on something, the necessity of proper work or the importance of positive thinking or other such rot. I often wonder if she was adopted into the Black family, but she’s almost as manipulative as Mother in her own do-gooding way.

“Thank you, Mr Malfoy. Now, if you’ll both excuse me, Flintlock and I have a few things to discuss. Harry.” With a nod to Potter, Shacklebolt walks off with the smallish security goblin, who casts a baleful glance over his shoulder at the newly arrived Auror before disappearing from view a few steps into the main hall. There’s evidently little love lost between Potter and the Gringotts goblins.

Their departure leaves me alone with Potter, who’s now examining the stool on the other side of the desk with a churlish expression on his face. He rubs his hands a few times in front of the fire and then

clambers up to sit as far away from me as possible. If we were on proper speaking terms, I would assure him I feel the same way.

I think I must be watching him too intently, as he turns to me and asks “What?” in a terribly rude tone. Should I find his sneer so appealing? Bad manners usually appall me, but all the rules seem suspended in the erstwhile golden boy’s presence.

“Nothing,” I say, lifting my chin. Circe, what am I even thinking? I feel my cheeks burn. This is going to be a difficult few weeks. I’m almost eager for the first disaster. “The fire’s quite warm, isn’t it?”

He shrugs and looks away without answering. A fairy settles on my shoulder, sending shimmering dust across the dark wool of my robe. When I try to flick it away, the tiny bastard sinks sharp teeth into my fingertip. I yelp, Potter snorts, and the damned fairy lands in the metal bin beside the desk, its annoyed chattering muffled by the crumpled Prophet I toss in over it.

I hate the holidays. Really. I do.

* * 2 * *

When I get home, the lift is out of service again. Blaise wanted to live in a mixed Muggle-Wizarding building because of the amazing location close to Bloomsbury Square, but we’ve a Floo that can only be used for firecalls, and the nearest public one is two streets away, which is deadly when it rains.

As I trudge up the stairs to our flat, I’ve ample time for invective. The four flights were never longer. My entire body aches and I’m sure I’ve done permanent damage to my shoulder. I shouldn’t have wished for disaster: Potter and I were in constant motion all day with barely a break for lunch.

Among other indignities, I never want to see another cursed menorah again; I still have red marks on my neck from where the blasted thing tried to strangle me before Potter managed to freeze it. Of course then it warped from the spell in front of the horrified owner’s eyes, and we spent two hours restoring it to its original form. The only reason the wizard didn’t lodge a complaint was that he was too starstruck watching Potter to mind properly. Jammy bastard.

It’s Friday, so Blaise is in the kitchen ‘cooking’, which amounts to tossing pasta with carbonara from Waitrose and slathering garlic butter on bread. Oh, and he looks to have actually made the vinaigrette the rocket’s been dressed with.

“Hello, darling, I’m home.” I lean against the doorframe of the tiny kitchen, watching Blaise juggle the serving dishes and pans among the scant counter space. He moves like a cat, beautiful, detached, and faintly menacing all at once. And although he can be terribly lazy, he is preternaturally competent at whatever he chooses to do.

“And how was your day, sweetheart?” Blaise asks archly whilst balancing a crispy hot sheet of garlic bread in his oven-mitted hands. My mouth waters. He had to tie me to the chair to make me eat it the first time, but now I can’t get enough, even if Mother pretends to be able to smell the garlic on me after two days.

“Wretched beyond words.” I move to the small table at the near end of the third room, carefully adjusting the place settings and opening the wine. Blaise and I’ve survived six years together here, which is much longer than even we thought we’d achieve. We have our little rituals and tasks for meals, each of us comfortable in our roles.

Blaise walks in with our dinner trailing behind him on a tray. We’re allowed levitation and basic spells in the flat as long as we’re careful and there are no showers of sparks or explosions. But no House Elves, which is another constant source of irritation, especially on the days when we have to say our own cleaning spells. Mother knows this and carps on it every time she tries to get me to move back to the Manor, which seems to be every time we speak these days.

The food is quite good, and I’m famished. I don’t start talking again until after mains, when Blaise pours me the last of the Chianti and we ponder another bottle. “You’ll never guess who’s working on the desk with me,” I say, taking a blissful sip of the heavy wine. As much as I hate my work, it does make the weekend twice as sweet.

“Harry Potter,” Blaise says, working the lead foil loose with his knife. “Your undying secret love.”

I startle forward, almost spilling wine into my lap. Then my eyes narrow. “Who told you?” I’m not at all pleased that word has spread. And I dislike Blaise’s mocking tone. I’m long over Potter, really. Completely.

“You did, remember?” He’s insufferably smug and I want to throw my napkin at him. “Sixth year. Moaning about how unfair it was that he should look so good while being such an arse.”

“No, not that, you tit.” I’d forgotten that bit, and it’s still true, although I couldn’t care less now. “About Potter being on the help desk. With me. I mean, next to me, actually, I suppose.”

“I have my sources.” Blaise smiles lopsidedly, and I remember why there was a time I couldn’t resist him. It’s been a few years, and he and Justin are very happy together, but there are moments I’ll never forget from our salad days when we wouldn’t leave the flat for an entire weekend except to fetch takeaway to give us the strength to continue.

No one was very seriously attached then, and there are many, many things I don’t miss from those days, but I do occasionally miss that. Times have certainly changed. I’m the odd man out now in our set, what with Pansy and Tony getting married, Millicent and Greg sharing a cottage in Bath of all places, and even Blaise and Justin considering moving in together. They think I don’t notice but they’re neither of them as discreet as they imagine.

As I take the last sip of wine, I mentally catalogue the day, frowning into my glass. Of course. The menorah. “You’ve talked to Pansy.” The starstruck wizard was Jonathan Silver, Tony’s cousin. I contemplate telling Tony his grandmother’s menorah nearly killed me, but then, I’m sure he already knows. “The Slytherin grapevine is rather annoying at times.”

Blaise smirks, proffering the bottle. “More wine?”

I hold out my glass. With any luck I’ll get pissed enough to forget this godforsaken day. I lean back in my chair and sigh.

* * 3 * *

The less said about Advent luncheon, the better.

Father's in high form, ranting about Ministry conspiracies and the imminent end of the Wizarding World as we know it across the table to Mother, who's drinking a little too much, her blue eyes very bright. Although she nods in all of the right moments, she's not really fully there. She's retreated into whatever inner mental sanctum enables her to live with him.

As the House Elves are serving pudding, there's a break in the tirade and both of my parents are momentarily absorbed after Tippy nearly drops a plate, my father scolding, my mother trying to temper his scorn. I look to Aunt Andromeda. "I saw Head Auror Shacklebolt at the bank on Friday."

It must be my imagination, or the sherry, but I think I see two spots of colour bloom on her high cheekbones. "How interesting. Was it a routine visit?"

"Yes," I say. Father's voice rises again and we stop and look over to his end of the table for the moment, then back to each other when we realise he's still haranguing the cowering elf. "He asked me to send you his regards."

Now I'm sure the colour is there. Is my Aunt blushing? She dabs the corner of her mouth with a napkin. "How very kind. Harry mentioned you were working together this month."

It's my turn to be surprised. "Oh, did he?"

Aunt Andromeda nods. "Yes. He came to play with Teddy yesterday and he told me all about your work together."

I cough to buy a bit of time. I'm going to kill him on Monday.

“Draco, darling, have some more of your bavarois. It will soothe your throat.” Mother’s looking at me, but I can tell she’s not really paying attention. Father’s winding up for another of his interminable digressions on Wizengamot plots in the Far East. I fiddle with my fork and start to plan my exit from the situation.

Father’s eyes light on me as if he can read my thoughts. I grit my teeth. “If you listened, you might learn something useful. Merlin knows you could stand to.” He sniffs haughtily. “Spend too much time around goblins, my father always said, and you’ll start to think like one.” “Lucius, dear,” Mother says gently and I know she’s noticed my knuckles whitening around the handle of my fork. It takes all I have not to slam the tines into the smooth polished mahogany of the table.

Aunt Andromeda coughs softly into her napkin. Father frowns at her. “Bit of a cold,” she says brightly, and his eyes narrow before he goes off on a rant about the idiocy of the Healer he saw last week for his headaches. I sink back into my chair, reaching for my sherry.

Even Blaise stays out of my way when I get home.

* *4* *

Work is blissfully busy. Between us, Potter and I handle a number of broken charms, a minor fire, and a rather exciting Japanese lantern possessed by an Aoandon. A few days pass before I have a chance to find out what forced him onto help desk duty. We finally have a slow moment in the alcove on our fifth afternoon working together, and Potter’s nursing a sore hand, bitten by the lantern spirit after he tried to grab it. I warned him that they’re only dangerous when attacked, but he’s not much for listening. I gather tactical planning is not his forte, but then, it never was.

When the tea trolley comes by, I ask for two cups just before Potter can reach out. I also ask for a few lemon biscuits - they’re a reason to look forward to Thursdays. Potter watches as I pay the goblin, then accepts the teacup with his left hand. I put the plate between us. We’re both sipping for a few moments, and I sense that my generosity with the tea arrangements has bought me the right to a question.

“So what did you do to end up here?” I ask, casually glancing in his direction after polishing off my second biscuit. The steam rises from the white cup and the angle he’s holding it at looks awkward. He sips gingerly, and I’m sure he’s going to ignore me.

“I nearly burnt a house down,” he says after several long moments of silence. He sets the cup down and takes a biscuit.

My morbid curiosity gets the better of me. “On purpose?” I ask, likely sounding a bit too eager.

He glowers at me and, in all honesty, it’s still a bit off-putting even though I’ve grown accustomed to his surly behaviour. “No.”

“Oh.” I return to sipping my tea. At least we only have an hour of awkardness to go until end of day if nothing else comes up.

“I was chasing a wanted criminal in a residential neighborhood, and he took a family hostage.” He raises the cup to drink.

Despite myself, I’m fascinated. Being a Cursebreaker is not always as interesting as it sounds, and I’m not allowed out into the field often. “What happened then?”

Potter purses his lips, and I think I see a flush on his cheek, although it might just be the warmth of fire behind us. The effect is oddly attractive for such an ill-tempered git. Not that I’m watching or anything. “Kingsley told me to stand down.”

I nod, afraid speaking will ruin his willingness to divulge information. My schadenfreude is growing by the minute; I want to know all of the details how perfect Potter reached disciplinary status.

My calculated reticence doesn’t make a bit of difference, however. Potter finishes his tea without another word, then stands up and fishes a few Sickles out of his pocket to repay me. He flashes me a quick smile. “Thanks.”

As he arranges the stacked cups and plate and carries them into the hall, I find myself blinking into the space where he just was. I find him distinctly unsettling.

When he returns, he doesn't go back immediately to his place but stops in the center, slightly to my left, and fiddles with a glass ball painted with an old view of Diagon Alley. One of the fairies flies toward him, and he pulls his hand away. "What are you here for, Malfoy?"

His eyes glance up to catch mine and I have the sensation of being pinned. "I-" I stammer for a moment, then compose myself. "I shouted at the Head Goblin." I refuse to look away.

His mouth quirks. "If that were a crime in the Aurors, I'd be on holiday duty every day."

"I knew I should have been an Auror," I say lightly, leaning back on my stool and stretching my legs.

We both pause for a moment, the space between us strangely still. I hear a log in the fire collapses with a loud crackle. Potter bursts out laughing. It takes him several minutes to stop. I know he's laughing at me and I should be offended but I'm not at all. It's the first time since he arrived that he's been anything but tense.

* * 5 * *

On Friday we have a practical lesson in the well-known household wisdom that you shouldn't mix potions with unknown liquids. Shortly after lunch, an elderly witch and her granddaughter come in. Between them, they've imprisoned what looks like a sloshing scalloped cauldron full of lemon slices and are levitating it towards us. Harry gets up hastily from where he's been flipping through Botte's Magickal Miscellany, a venerable collection of remedies to counter magical ailments, minor curses, and troubles with objects and livestock.

Potter advances in front of the desk, then stops short, slightly in front of the seething, silvery, rattling mass.

"Hannah." He nods to the girl and my stomach drops. Of course. It's Miss Abbott, and she's grown up to

be quite striking. Potter stares. I grab the copy of Botte's and stick my nose into it. I can't imagine she'd wish to see me again. I remember something about her mother being killed sixth year during the Troubles.

"Young man, perhaps you could help us," the elderly woman says to me, interrupting Abbott and Potter's conversation.

I walk forward, ignoring the patent look of disapproval on Abbott's face as she recognises me. "Of course," I say in my most soothing tones. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Damned thing's been drinking the punch," Mrs Abbott says. "And attacking guests."

Potter stifles a snicker. Abbott trades smiles with him, and I suddenly wonder about the nature of their association. They do seem to know each other awfully well. I look back and forth between them suspiciously, and then a bony finger prods me in the ribs.

Piercing eyes glare at me from under a prim green hat trimmed with a pair of jewelled holly leaves. "Fix it."

The tone brooks no opposition. I examine the offending piece of silver floating in the air. It's simple, not terribly distinguished but not bad either. The fluting on the sides is pleasing and the cupids on the scallops hold a garland of silver ivy.

"Perhaps you'd like to set it down," Harry suggest. Before I can tell him this is a bad idea, the two witches move their wands in unison and the bowl lands on the help desk with a thud, scattering the irate fairies who move to the corners of the table, chattering and hissing. The bowl sways unsteadily on its large foot.

"Self-ladling?" I ask.

Abbot frowns. "Supposed to be. But it started refusing to serve guests this afternoon. And it kept trying

to grab their glasses and dump them back in."

Harry raises his eyebrows. "How?"

"It used the ivy as a sort of tether," Mrs Abbot says. I bite my tongue. That must have made quite the stir at the ladies' luncheon. "Viburna Withers struggled with it and it broke her lorgnette."

I breathe through my nose to suppress a laugh. My eyes water with the effort.

The younger Abbot nods. "Now we can't even get the punch out of it, although the level keeps going down."

As if to illustrate her point, a finger of remaining liquid disappears. The bowl sways and, if I didn't think it impossible, I would have sworn that the damned thing hiccoughed.

"Couldn't you turn it upside down?" I find myself oddly charmed by the recalcitrant piece of servingware. I also daren't turn my back on it. One of the silver cupids flips two fingers at me and another rattles the ivy it's holding.

"It's also charmed not to spill," Abbott explains. "So it rights itself no matter what you do."

"Perhaps we can sober it up," Potter suggests. He removes a small purple flask from his cloak.

Unfortunately Potter frequently acts before his spectators have quite realised what inane thing he purposes to do. While I'm about to say, "No one would be stupid enough to pour a potion into a charmed magical bowl full of spirits," Potter does just that.

The effect is nothing short of stupendous. The bowl rattles and lurches to the side, spewing punch in every direction. I'm suddenly covered in lemon and sugar and the vapours make my eyes water.

Grandmother Abbott mixes very strong punch, and I wonder for a moment if the silver monstrosity was acting in the public welfare by withholding its contents.

The giant silver bowl is gripped by a massive shudder. It falls sideways, and then falls again, bouncing off of the unbreakable glass ornaments and landing with a massive crunch on the marble floor. Potter's mouth opens in surprise as the wretched thing turns purple in mottled splotches and crumbles into a pile of dust at our feet. All that remains is the ladle, which has been thrown clear and is now lying in the corner.

The room is frozen in silence. Even the fairies seem barely to be breathing. Mrs Abbott opens and closes her mouth a few times, like a fish. The fire crackles. I can hear the bustle of business and hubbub of voices in the main hall.

After a few moments, I decide to take advantage of the brief pause to wipe a handkerchief across my sticky and dripping face. I daren't look down at my robes. I already have the urge to strangle Potter, and I know that I'll give in if I actually see what he's done to my clothing. I try to calm myself with the thought that Mother's elves can salvage almost anything, even though I don't believe it.

"Merlin's beard." Hannah stares at the pile of purple dust with a stunned expression on her face. She shakes her head and then gathers herself. With a resolute expression, she walks to the corner and gathers up the surviving ladle. She hands it to her wordless grandmother, then takes her by the elbow and steers her to the alcove's exit. She nods to Harry on the way out.

"I'm... I'm so sorry about your punchbowl," Potter calls after them as they exit into the main hall. He running a hand through his hair.

"Potter, don't be a tit. You destroyed it." I put my hand on his shoulder to pull him back into the room. I can feel the crystallising sugar gluing the cloth of my outer robe together. "Besides, any fool would know that was a monteith."

Potter rounds on me, face flashing in anger. He suddenly looks ready to shove me. His eyes are blazing and his colour is very high. Something perverse in me cannot wait for him to try. There is a small dry

cough from behind us.

Flintlock is standing in the arched doorway clutching two shapeless masses in his hands. They look to be made from the same curtains as the table covering.

“In future, you would do well to avoid such wanton destruction of property,” Flintlock says in a rasping voice.

I bow my head. I can’t be thought insubordinate, although, really, I am. Terribly. To the marrow.

“Sorry, sir,” Potter mumbles, and I echo the sentiment with a downcast expression..

“In this case, it is fortunate that we have a few bowls on hand that Mrs Abbot may choose from. The cost will of course be deducted from your wages.”

I begin to protest. I happen to know that the bowls were salvaged from an old vault and cost the company nothing. Besides, it’s Christmas.

“I’ll pay for it, sir,” Potter says. He squares his shoulders. “Malfoy, I mean, Mr Malfoy tried to stop me.”

Flintlock sizes Potter up. “Very well, Mr Potter. We’ll owl the bill to the Aurors. In the meantime, these should help.”

Potter stares at the pointy, mottled green and gold velvet hat Flintlock hands him. I have the strange urge to back away as Flintlock advances on me, holding a gold and silver piece of horror disguised as millinery.

“What are these, sir?” Potter’s face displays a mix of curiosity and revulsion.

“These are the traditional holiday help desk hats. They help the wearers undo unfortunate decisions made during emergencies.” Flintlock coughs and traps me against the desk. I’ve no where to go, and the fairies are picking at my robes. I accept the sodding hat with what I hope looks like a vague form of gratitude.

“Very practical,” I say, so chipper I must sound mad. Flintlock glares at me. I take a deep breath and put the smelly, awful thing on my head. I’m going to have to clean my hair afterwards as well. This afternoon is becoming a disaster of epic proportions.

Potter smirks at me from behind Flintlock, his lips curving in a self-satisfied grin. Which quickly disappears when Flintlock turns to him. I experience a brief, pleasurable flare of satisfaction as Potter dons the misshapen velvet. He looks like he has a mass of algae on his head. I couldn’t be happier.

“When you cock-up, the hats will allow you to undo the last five minutes. You must both be wearing them when the accident occurs and you must both say ‘hasenpfeffer’ at the same time.”

We both start to say it, and Flintlock holds up his hand. “Not now, gentlemen. But when you need it, it will help you immensely. Do not do any more work without the hats.”

He turns on his heel and leaves.

“You look like a tit,” Potter looks me up and down smugly. “Or a pointy elf.”

“May I suggest that that vile shade of green does nothing for your complexion?” I eye him in return, my eyebrow raised and lip curled. He still looks too good for someone wearing what is essentially a deboned lampshade, but I do not intend to let him know this.

“Why did they pull them out now?” Potter asks, raising a cautious hand to his head and patting the manky velvet. “Why not humiliate us from the start?”

I actually know the answer to that. “They couldn’t find them. It’s a point of honour for the previous year’s helpdesk workers to hide the hats where they are not able to be Summoned. Bill swore that they would never be found again.”

“They must have locating spells on them.” Potter fingers the ridge of braid trimming his hat.

“And they must have been particularly desperate after that last event. Really, Potter. A potion into an unknown mixture? In a silver receptacle that is charmed? Did you sleep through seventh year? ”

He stops and tilts his head at me. “I wasn’t there at all. You know that. I spent most of the year in a fucking forest.”

I bite my lip and look down. I’d meant it as a joke. I’d almost forgotten that we have very little to joke about in our shared past, Potter and I. “Well, I suppose that explains it. Although you’ve destroyed my robes.”

Potter regards me earnestly, then raises his wand. He looks completely idiotic in that hat and I suppress the urge to laugh. Besides, he can’t try to do anything to me here. At least, I hope that’s the case. Instead of hexing me, he mutters something and a frigid breeze blows through my clothing. “Here that should help.”

He’s said a cleaning charm, a powerful one by the feel of it. I shiver convulsively as the cold seeps through to my skin. “W-w-warn me next time,” I stammer as goosepimples rise on my arms and legs. My fingers are numb and I can’t seem to move for shaking.

“Oh my god, Malfoy, your lips are blue.” Potter reaches for me, propelling me bodily to the fire. “Here, hold your hands out.”

He stands behind me, lifting my arms up toward the crackling fire. Warmth begins to seep into my fingers, then my hands. Once I stop shivering, I sag. He holds me upright, my shoulders resting against

the warm expanse of his chest. I'm suddenly shivery for an entirely different reason, although the warmth is too wonderful for me to care.

We stand like that for a moment. My face grows hot from the fire and from the knowledge that I'm being held by Potter and I don't mind. It's all of my teenage fantasies come to life, except I'm wearing a bloody holiday elf hat and my robes were just covered in sugar and spirits.

Thankfully Potter sneezes and the moment is broken. "Sorry, Malfoy." He lets me go gently and steps back to rub his nose. "These hats are full of dust."

I turn to face him and I'm sure my face is flushed. He looks to be a bit warm from the fire as well. "Thanks. For the charm, I mean. Even though it froze my nadgers off."

When he smiles at me, I wish I hadn't said anything about my nether parts, as they are already far too interested in him. "Happy to oblige. Sorry, though. I didn't mean to..."

"That's enough." I hold up a hand to halt his stumbling apology. "We'll do better to imagine this afternoon never happened. Do you think these hats can be set to Obliviate us?"

"They certainly are ugly enough to stun someone into silence." We both laugh.

As much as it pains me to admit it, I like laughing with Potter almost better than laughing at him. I don't know what's wrong with me.

* * 6 * *

"And then she picked the ladle up off of the floor. You should have seen his face." I wave my hands in front of me, making my best sad-crup face for effect.

Blaise and Justin lean on each other, laughing to the point of tears. The large table at the Green Dragon is

covered with the remains of an excellent pre-Christmas lunch: pheasant pie washed down with generous amounts of mulled wine, roasted nuts and root vegetable salad. The faint smell of clove hangs in the air. It's become a tradition to stop here during Christmas shopping, and this is already Justin's second time with us.

"He was shattered." I pick up my glass and drain it. "As was the monteith, of course."

Blaise smirks. "He should have sorted Slytherin. He'd have known from that fifth-year party not to put potions into mixed spirits."

Justin tilts his head quizzically. His brown forelock flops in a fetching manner. I do see what Blaise sees in him, as much as I've tried to hate him. "What happened, exactly?"

"Oh, Pucey thought it would be clever to put a laxative potion into the house punch bowl at a party before Christmas hols." Blaise casts a warm look at his boyfriend and the knot in my stomach tightens. I look away. It's not that I begrudge them their happiness, at least not any longer, but moments like these remind me all too well that I'm looking in from the outside.

"It was quite dramatic," I say, reaching rudely and on purpose in front of Blaise to pour more wine from the warmed carafe. They break eye contact and I pretend not to notice Blaise's small frown of reproach. "His eyebrows weren't really back until Easter."

"Oh I remember that." Justin taps the table lightly with his palm. "He said he'd been in some sort of accident at home."

"I'm sure he was, when Mrs Pucey found out." I lean back in my chair and adjust my napkin, signalling with my posture that I'm more than ready for the next course.

The waiter appears to clear away the plates, his polished smile firmly in place. He brushes the crumbs away and waves his wand. Small dessert glasses of ginger and lemon trifle appear.

I pick up my spoon and contemplate the confection in front of me, then take a delicate mouthful of the cream studded with stem ginger from the top. Delicious as always. “The best part, of course, of the event yesterday was the visit we had from Mr Bones the elder an hour later.”

The eager spoons of my dining companions pause. Justin blinks. “Oh no. Did he attempt to duel Potter to avenge the family honour?”

While Blaise quirks an eyebrow, I gently wipe my mouth with my napkin. “Quite the opposite. He pressed a Galleon each on Potter and me and told us he’d always hated that old thing.”

After we finish our trifle, I take a snifter of brandy, an excellent close to a most enjoyable meal. And if Blaise and Justin trade a few too many looks heavy with want and implication for my liking, I’m enjoying the companionship too much to be sour-tempered.

I don’t tell them about the punch and the cleaning spell, of course. I’m not an idiot. Blaise would make a meal of the little episode in front of the fireplace if he knew of it. I’m also not entirely sure how I feel about it, or why I find it so discomfiting that I can still remember the sensation of Potter’s arms. It must have been the charm, of course, and the stress of a terrible week.

When Justin goes to get our cloaks, Blaise leans forward and touches my hand lightly. “Hm?” I look up from smoothing my robe. For a moment, I’m afraid he’s caught something on my face.

“I have something to tell you and I don’t know how you’ll react.” He leaves his hand on mine, his thumb swiping unconscious little circles to soothe me.

“Perhaps you’re thinking of moving in with Mr Finch-Fletchley?” I say lightly, leaving my hand under his.

He curses softly. “Who told you?”

I lean away, pulling my hand out from under his and smoothing my robe again. We both glance to make sure of Justin's whereabouts, but he's stopped for a conversation with an acquaintance sitting at the bar.

"Does anyone else know?" I counter. Even though I've been expecting this, the confirmation of my suspicions is hard to accept.

"Draco." Blaise watches me carefully, which means he thinks I'm on the verge of a tantrum. Possibly I am. "I'm really in love with him."

"As if anyone had any doubt I that." I can't help the petulant sound to my voice. "Of course, I couldn't be happier for you."

Blaise nods briefly. "Thank you. And for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

I catch the conflicted look on his face. "Sorry why? It's not your fault you fell in love with the poor bastard."

"Sorry because I wish I didn't have to choose, but there aren't two ways to live with your lover and your best friend. I mean, easily." He fiddles with the candle on the table.

I nod. "I understand." I don't really, but it's no use explaining that now. It won't change the outcome. I've seen how they look at each other.

"Will you move back to the Manor?" he asks.

"When hell freezes over," I say with unfeigned vehemence, folding my arms over my chest.

“I’m sure your mother would be happy to arrange that.” We trade a wry smile, which eases the tense mood at the table somewhat, and then Justin is back with three cloaks draped over his arm.

“So, where are we off to next?” Justin kisses Blaise lightly on the top of the head. Blaise pretends to swat him away and be annoyed, but he isn’t at all. “Is there any emporium we haven’t yet denuded in our search for Christmas cheer?”

Blaise pulls the itemised list out of his pocket. Only the top third is crossed off. I’ve no illusion we’ll be home before dinner.

* * 7 * *

After a weekend of shopping and social duties, work is almost a relief. Potter is sullen, as always, but it doesn’t bother me as it did at the beginning. I’ve grown accustomed to his silences, in fact, I almost find them companionable. The morning starts slowly and almost nothing has happened when the mid-morning tea trolley comes by.

We’re still blowing on our cups of tea when Flintlock hurries into the alcove clutching a small iron key. Potter and I straighten up from where we’ve been leaning on the desk. We exchange glances.

“Time to get your cloaks,” the security goblin says briskly. “You’re wanted on a house call.”

He hands me the key, and we Summon our cloaks from the corner.

“This is a portkey, of course.” Flintlock stands watching us as we get ready. “It will activate in three minutes. You should return by Floo when the call is complete.” He looks us up and down. “I’m glad you have your hats. Don’t forget: hasenpfeffer. And bring the key back with you.”

We nod, and Potter reaches his hand to touch mine. I’ve almost forgotten about the tiny key. His fingers are warm against my palm. I look down to our joined hands and then the portkey takes and I feel the hooking sensation behind my navel. I suddenly realise I’ve no idea where we’re going.

We land outside of a large whitewashed cottage with squat square front windows and a black wooden plaque proclaiming it to be number 7. A Christmas tree with candles gleams through the glass and the grey air of midwinter is fresher here.

Potter turns and scans the road behind us and the sloping hill. “Cornwall.”

I’m very impressed with his local knowledge until I spy him putting something back into his pocket. “And what’s that exactly?”

He opens his hand and displays a charmed amulet in his hand that shows our current location as Lostwithiel.

“You cheat,” I chide.

He shrugs. “It worked for a moment.”

As we start to bicker, the door opens suddenly and two middle-aged witches stand looking at us. The one is dark-haried and shorter with a firm set to her jaw and the other is blonde and willowy and reminds me of Cousin Luna. The taller of the two asks us in hopeful tone, “Are you here from Gringotts?”

“Yes.” As I begin to introduce myself, I realise they have already turned to walk into the house. I wonder what awaits us inside.

Potter catches me by the shoulder and I stop short. He’s stronger than I thought - he has me easily restrained with one hand. “Let me go in first.”

I don’t know whether to be pleased or offended that he’s being protective. I settle on resigned and snarky. “Very well. Potty.” I say the last bit in an undertone but the daggers he shoots me before he

follows the witches inside tell me he heard. I smirk, suppress the urge to shift my velvet hat, and take up the end of this bizarre procession.

We enter a well-appointed and comfortable sitting room. The house is peaceful and still, except for a small commotion near a coral red brocade sofa. The two woman crouch in front of a large, pink and green dome shaped object. Upon closer examination, it looks like a ball of leaves on top of a green and gold shimmering pot. I notice that it's snoring lightly.

Potter kneels down next to them. I remain standing and ready my wand. The shorter of the two witches turn to look at Potter. "Genevieve wanted a poinsettia, and we bought one that was charmed to be safe."

"They promised it would be all right," the blonde witch wrings her hands and looks truly pitiful. The dark-haired witch puts her arm around her and she leans on her for support. "It just didn't seem like Christmas without a poinsettia. Dorian is only eight weeks old. I was far more worried about him with the tree, but Melania told me not to be silly."

"You couldn't have know, Vivi." The dark-haired witch keeps her arm around her. "Can you help us?"

"We can certainly try." Potter nods, craning his head to one side and then the other. "Where is your son?"

I cough and then interject in my smoothest voice. "I believe Dorian's the kneazle. Although they are very much like children, aren't they?"

The two witches nod. "We don't want anything to happen to him," Genevieve says.

"I see." Potter says, though I can tell he is more than a bit befuddled. "And where is the kneazle?"

They both stare at him. The blonde witch looks about to cry. "Why, inside the poinsettia, of course,"

Melania says sharply.

I cough again and Potter glances at me. I notice that he is biting his lips with some effort, likely to restrain a similar laugh to the one I just covered.

“Oh, dear,” I say, leaning closer. Potter and I both look at the plant. It’s formed a covering with all of its leaves and flowers. Inside, we can hear the regular breathing and slight whistling of a small animal. “How long has he been in there?”

“About two hours,” Melania says. “He was running around the house and then he got tired. Genevieve was working in her studio and came back for a cup of tea. That’s when she saw the plant.”

As I nod sympathetically, Potter pokes the plant with an outstretched finger. The plant hisses and everyone freezes, holding their breaths. If this gets bad, we may have to use the hats. I clutch the tattered velvet brim almost unconsciously. But then the rhythmic breathing of the small kneazle continues and the plant settles down again.

“I’ll need to talk to my partner about this.” I give Harry a very significant glance, attempting to communicate you-utter-arse-don’t-you-dare-bollocks-this-one-up-too with my eyes alone. I’ve had extensive lessons in nonverbal communication from Mother.

“Why don’t I put the kettle on?” Genevieve says. She walks into the kitchen and Melania goes with her.

My voice is low and, I hope, menacing. “Potter. You idiot. The plant could kill the kneazle cub if we’re not careful.”

Potter shakes his head, far too calm for the level of reproach I’m aiming at him. “No way. Neville works with poinsettias all the time. They’re basically harmless, just very territorial.”

I blink for a moment, suddenly sensing our rescue. “Can we get Longbottom here? Right now?”

“Sure,” Potter says. “He’s usually in the greenhouses at this hour, but I can ask his Gran on the Floo.”

Potter politely asks the witches if he may use their Floo. I hear the stentorian tones of Augusta Longbottom from the room with the chimney, and then the more modulated, inquisitive tones of Neville Longbottom.

They walk out of the neighboring room, Longbottom still brushing the soot from his dark blue sweater. He has potting soil under his nails. I’ve never been happier to see him in my life. He smiles at the two witches, and then stops to stare at me. He gestures to his head and I nod briefly, trying to maintain my dignity. I can’t blame him for staring - the hat is truly hideous. Genevieve offers him a cup of tea.

“No, thank you.” Longbottom says, already crouched in front of the plant-kneazle ball. “I’m going to try to work with the Euphorbia pulcherrima first.”

“Perhaps we should leave him some room to work,” I suggest. We all walk into the kitchen.

Potter and I each accept a china cup of tea and standing awkwardly, sipping and trying to smile at our hosts while Longbottom strokes and cajoles the plant in the next room. From my vantage leaning against the doorway, I see the leaves quiver and then relax.

Longbottom says something in an undertone, and the plant opens up in an impressive swish of green and pink.

With a cry, Genevieve rushes forward. Longbottom strokes the plant while she scoops up the small grey ball of fluff sleeping amongst its stems.

“Beautiful flowers,” Potter says.

“Yes, the bracts are particularly fine in this hybrid,” Longbottom agrees.

Melania and I look at each other. We’re both still in the kitchen. “Our friend works with plants,” I suggest. “Perhaps you’d like him to take the poinsettia.”

She nods firmly. “We would be most obliged.”

We say our goodbyes and then head for the Floo. Longbottom steps in first, holding the poinsettia.

“Excellent work, Longbottom,” I say. He disappears in a whoosh of green flame, a surprised look on his face.

When Potter and I meet up in the Leaky Cauldron, I suggest we have lunch before we return to the bank. I doubt Potter’ll accept, but Tom makes an excellent shepard’s pie and I’m not above an ale or two at noon. To my astonishment, Potter agrees and we find an empty table in the corner together.

When we make it back to our alcove two hours later, perhaps just the tiniest bit unsteadily, I’m almost happy. And at Christmas too. I hardly know what’s wrong.

* * 8 * *

My happiness is short-lived, as it always is. The next morning dawns grey and stormy. We’re out of milk and I can’t find my scarf. It’s pissing down on the way to work. I arrive fifteen minutes late, wet despite my Impervius, and in a terrible mood.

I grunt at Potter and hang my cloak near the fire. I’ve cast numerous types of charms on the pointed velvet hat, stopping just short of wringing it in a basin of steaming water with cologne. It still reeks of wet crup no matter what I do.

Of course, Flintlock has already been by. “You’re late, Mr Malfoy,” he says when he returns. “I expect you to be more punctual. Your performance here goes into your review, you know, and word has it it’s not been the best year for you.”

I swallow what I’d like to say and nod meekly. It is a hard lesson, but I’ve recently learnt not to make a bad situation worse. If I can help myself.

Potter’s not in a chatty mood either, thank Merlin, so we sit and watch customers pass our door. There are several cases, a few minor objects to assist with, and at one point Flintlock has us come to the vault exits just in case things go wrong with a very old and rather infamous French Christmas tapestry with a unicorn and a holly tree. All in all, though, we make it to lunch without incident.

In the afternoon, Potter and I are quite tired of household furnishings attacking us at random. We’re bickering about responsibility in our last case in which a reindeer-horn-handled carving knife jumped for Potter’s throat.

Potter rubs his hand angrily over the scratch. “You could have helped a bit sooner, you know.”

“I had my hands full with the carving fork. Nearly took my eye out. Don’t do that, Potter. You’ll only make it worse. You just need a bit of salve.” I reach into my satchel and hand him a murtlap and dittany mixture that I brew myself.

When he looks at it for too long, I sigh. I open the pot and scoop a bit onto a finger. “Come here, you oaf.”

He leans in, and I massage the oddly grassy, herbal smelling concoction into his skin. Potter breathes into my ear while I get another fingerful, and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. I concentrate on the long red gash which goes across his Adam’s apple and curves down under the collar of his shirt. The muscles of his throat move under my touch as he swallows. I spread his collar carefully and rub down to the ridge of his collarbone. He sighs and I can feel his breath against my face. I bite my lip and forge on, trying not to think too much about the intoxicating warmth of his skin beneath my fingertips. I eye my handiwork critically. The scrape looks a bit less angry after I’ve finished. “There, that’s better.”

Potter has an odd look on his face. Possibly he's still furious with me, but I couldn't care less. I'm just concentrating on not showing on my face that I'd be happy to rub salve anywhere he asked me to right now. "Thanks, Malfoy," he says in a rough voice. "That... That helps."

There's a dry cough behind us and Flintlock is standing in the doorway holding a familiar key.

This time, it's Potter who protests. "It's almost five already. We're ready to go home."

"Quarter to, Auror Potter," Flintlock says. "And we still have a call to answer before closing up for the day."

Although I want nothing more than to run away, from Potter and from this damned help desk, possibly throwing my hat into the fire before I go, I walk to Flintlock and take the key from his hand.

Potter comes up behind me. "You forgot your cloak." He lays the dark wool on my shoulders and then reaches for my hand without looking at me. The pull of the Portkey takes us before I can say thank you.

I stumble when we land, tripping Potter, and we go sprawling across a black and white diamond-patterned marble floor. I have the wind knocked out of me, and Potter's half on top of me, but that's not why I can't breathe.

I know the pattern of this particular floor. Far too well.

"There you are gentlemen. I wasn't sure..." My mother's voice stops in mid trill. "Draco, is that you?"

Potter shifts to the side and I stand up, dusting off my trousers. I brush my hair out of my eyes to meet her shocked gaze. "Yes, Mother. You Flooed?"

She's almost at a loss for words. A small smile is teasing her perfect composure. Then she looks behind me and sees Potter. "Oh, so your aunt wasn't telling tales. Auror Potter, how kind of you to come."

To his credit, Potter stands up and says politely, "Not at all, Mrs Malfoy, how can we be of assistance?"

It's the most courteous thing I've ever heard heard him utter. I turn to look at him as Mother tells Tippy to take our cloaks. "What?" he mouths.

Mother shifts her attention back to us. "If I'd known it was this easy to get you to come, Draco, I would have called the help desk weeks ago. You've not been answering your Floo."

"It doesn't work very well," I lie. "You know how shoddy that building is, but Blaise loves it."

"I don't see why you won't join us back here." There's a familiar, long-suffering look in her blue eyes. "You know your father and I have plenty of room."

"What's the problem, Mother?" I'm verging on losing my temper, and I sincerely hope my father is napping because dealing with him as well would send me over the edge right now. "Or have we been summoned for a social call?"

She straightens her spine just an inch, and a shiver of fear courses down my back. My mother can be quite terrifying if crossed, and I know I'd better watch myself. "Of course not, Draco. Although now that you mention it, I do hope you will both stay for supper."

I open my mouth to protest. "Thank you, Mrs Malfoy," Potter says. "I wouldn't want to trouble you."

She smiles at him, a genuine smile. I always forget they see each other from time to time at Aunt Andromeda's; I never go along for the Saturday afternoons with Teddy. "It's no trouble at all, Auror

Potter. I'll tell Tippy to set for four."

Something inside of me dies.

"Now, if you'll come this way, the problem is in the drawing room." Her mouth thins. "Or part of it, at least."

She motions for Potter to join her and they walk together. I trail behind them like a petulant child.

The house is beautifully decorated, although not as lively as I remember. It feels empty now, older in a strange way. We've all been marked by the difficult years, and I'm impressed that Potter can walk through the halls so easily after all he faced. I have a hard enough time some times and I grew up here.

Still, it smells of Mother's clove-studded pomanders and roses and evergreens and balsam fir. There's a warm fire going and my father is sitting in a large wing chair next to the fire when we come in. Potter stiffens immediately. Standing behind him, I can see the tension enter his neck and shoulders.

"Mr Malfoy," Potter inclines his head a fraction.

My father looks up from his book. "My goodness. Auror Potter." He stands up slowly from his chair; his knees are clearly giving him trouble. I find it hard to accept the fact that my father, the demigod of my youth, is aging. To me, he is timeless, but as I see him now, he looks like a harmless older wizard.

He's just about to show Potter the problem when he sees me lurking in the entrance to the drawing room. "My God. Draco. What the hell have you got on your head?" He motions me to him.

I come forward and he picks at the velvet monstrosity. "Bad enough that you work in this bank, but now they're dressing you like a gnome?"

With a roll of my eyes, I snatch the pointy hat out of his hands. “It’s part of the holiday help desk. It’s supposed to assist our work.”

He raises his eyebrows. “They’ve put you on a holiday help desk.”

I frown. “Yes, Father. That’s why I’m here with Mr Potter. We’ve both drawn the short straws this year. Now how might we help with your holiday problem?”

To my surprise, he listens. “It’s this damned nutcracker,” he says. “It’s been scaring the elves and now it’s taken possession of the tree.”

Potter nods in a sympathetic fashion. “When did you start noticing problems?”

I have other, more pressing questions. “Since when do we have a nutcracker?”

My father turns his leonine head to me slowly. The slight flare of his nostrils indicates he’s not pleased to be interrupted, but his enthusiasm for the object gets the better or him. “It was a gift from Mr Bauschenberger after the property negotiations last year. It had been in his family for generations. It’s quite interesting, actually, an old German wizard with a green cloak and a gold staff.”

“Perhaps he gave it to you for a reason?” I fold my arms over my chest. My father folds his arms over his chest. Potter glances between us.

My mother breezes into the room, her red tipped holiday gown billowing behind her. She’s followed by Tippy grappling with an enormous silver tray bearing delicate handled cups full of steaming red liquid. “May I offer anyone mulled wine?” Mother asks brightly.

Potter fairly leaps at the chance to break the silence. “Yes, please, Mrs Malfoy.”

She hands him a cup and I watch smugly as he takes a large sip. I could have warned him that Mother uses overproof rum in addition to the wine to make the holidays more festive, but it's far more fun to watch as his eyes water and he tries not to cough.

I've no taste for holiday drinks since the punchbowl incident, but the expression on Mother's face makes it clear I'll have worse problems than nutcrackers and my father in a moment. I accept a cup as well.

She's outdone herself this year. Even with a delicate sip, my nostrils are on fire from the vapours and my throat burns. And it's delicious - the spices perfectly balanced and the wine, tea and rum blending beautifully into a fiery whole. After a few sips, I am suddenly much warmer and my father is only mildly annoying, which is a good thing considering that we've work to do.

"Where is the nutcracker now?" I set my glass back on the tray. Potter's face is berry red in the cheeks. It actually looks good on the fool, bringing out the dark of his curls and the green of his eyes.

"I'll show you." My father sweeps an arm, indicating for us to follow. He stalks off into the ballroom hall where they've set up the largest tree. This is the one with the oldest ornaments, carved wooden angels and delicate silver stars, golden holly leaves and shimmering blown glass globes. There are real candles on the boughs and crystal icicles scattered throughout. A cut crystal star tops the tree, which is easily nine feet tall.

My father gestures with his staff. Potter and I crane our necks. I do think I see something moving in the upper branches of the tree. Suddenly a ruby glass globe flies out from the tree and explodes on the wall behind us.

My father flinches, then frowns."Your mother is furious, of course. Most of those ornaments were from her family."

"Was he provoked?" Potter asks slowly, eyes fixed on the tree, which is now rustling towards the back right, about halfway down.

An icicle sails towards us. Potter catches it as my mother gasps. He hands it to her.

“Not at all.” The tree continues to rustle. I finger my wand and consider a stasis charm

“Spellwork has little effect, other than angering him,” my father says with a calm voice, pointedly not looking at me.

“Hmm.” Potter moves closer to the tree. “Does he have a name?”

“His name is Wendelbert.” I don’t know if it’s my imagination, but I think I see a tiny set of eyes watching us, and perhaps a dark green hood against the green of the tree, though I can barely make them out. “Wendelbert,” I say loudly, addressing the tree, “we’d like to talk to you.”

The tree shivers and then stops. Nothing happens.

“Wendelbert, please show yourself.” I step closer. A fine green mist emerges from the tree and floats toward me.

“Careful,” Potter shout as the cloud drifts across the room with surprising speed. He tackles me before I can inhale, and we both go sprawling on the enormous Persian rug that covers much of the floor. My father snatches a small square portrait from the wall fans the air wildly with it. The mist dissipates. I can hear Great-Great-Great Uncle Melanchthon cursing as Father hangs him back up.

“Smooth move, Malfoy,” Potter murmurs. I remain lying down, as we are now much closer to the tree. I’m crushed under Potter’s weight for the second time this afternoon, and I’ve no desire to thank him for saving me. “What do we do now?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” I say finally. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“Wendelbert, what will it take for you to stop hiding?” Potter asks boldly, standing up and holding out his hands to show the nutcracker that he’s not holding a wand. He’s a fool, but a brave one, I have to admit. “We’re prepared to bargain.”

A small, gruff voice, thick with a Bavarian accent, floats from the tree. “Let me see the dancer.”

“Oh.” My mother is standing in the doorway with a look of comprehension on her face. “I think he means the ballerina in my sitting room. She’s on the sidetable. I closed the doors recently because it was getting draughty. And he became upset shortly after.”

Potter faces the tree. “Is this the dancer, Wendelbert? The ballerina in Mrs Malfoy’s sitting room?”

The tree nods furiously in response. Several of the angels shake back and forth, and I’m afraid the icicles will fall. Of all of the completely mad things I’ve witnessed, I never thought I’d live to see Harry Potter negotiate with a Christmas tree. Or, rather, a German nutcracker taking refuge in a Christmas tree.

Potter adjusts his velvet hat. “Wendelbert, if we let you see the dancer, will you stop causing trouble?”

When there is no answer, Potter levitates the tree wandlessly several feet into the air. My mother puts a hand to her mouth, and even Father looks mildly impressed.

“Please, Wendelbert. We’d like to have everyone have a happy Christmas,” Potter says. “Promise.”

“I promise.” The answer comes from near the ceiling. “If I can see the dancer, I will be nice.”

Potter gently sets the tree down. He motions to my mother, who approaches the tree gingerly. She inclines her head. “Please come with me, Wendelbert.”

A small wooden wizard, about three feet high, jumps nimbly out of the tree and walks toward my

mother. He has a mulish set to his wide mouth, and he struts behind her. The lever in his back bounces with each step, sending his teeth clacking.

We trail behind them, and up the side stairs to the second floor. My mother touches her wand to the lock and the double doors open. On the brown and gold inlaid pearwood sideboard there is a beautiful old ballerina doll under a glass dome. My mother brushes her fingers across the top of the dome, and the ballerina dances. It's charming, doubly so because the crabbed old wooden nutcracker takes a perch near the table, looking up adoringly as the dancer spins.

"I was thinking of moving Celeste into the attic," my mother confesses. "I think she will stay here now. She's been with me since my girlhood." She looks down to the small wooden figure, now rapt in attention. "And I believe we should leave the door open. Lucius, perhaps you can help me find some sort of brazier to keep it warmer in here."

We exit the room quietly, leaving Wendelbert alone in his quiet devotion.

"I'm so glad you're staying for supper," she takes Potter by the crook of the arm, guiding him toward the dining room. "That was immensely helpful, you know. Poor Lucius was quite beside himself."

I try to wave behind her back to Potter, signalling that we should go, but the arse ignores me. "Thank you, Mrs Malfoy. I'm sure it was just an accident that we happened upon the solution. Besides, you solved the mystery."

As they enter the dining room, my father speaks softly into my ear. "Don't bother resisting. Your mother has her own ideas. And she'll make you pay for resistance."

I wish I didn't know what he meant. We share a defeated sigh.

* * 9 * *

I hadn't intended to go to the Gringotts holiday gala. Ever. But here I am, waiting in the vestibule for

Potter in my best dress robes, feeling and likely looking like an idiot.

The fact is I wasn't invited. Lower rung personnel never are. This event is a yearly gathering of wealthy and influential clients with the cream of the bank's representatives. My parents used to attend, of course, but they keep a lower profile these days. I've never broached the subject with either of them, and they haven't offered.

Potter mentioned the event to me on Monday. I can't say I was shocked, but I didn't hide the fact that he was obviously invited because of his famous name, even if the goblins still don't trust him because of whatever he did that keeps the entire security personnel rotating outside of our alcove when he's in it.

When he found out I wasn't invited to the gala, he insisted I go with him. And by insisted, I mean pitched a tantrum when I said no and didn't speak to me for a couple of hours. Having grown up with Lucius Malfoy, I'm fairly well versed in tantrums, but Potter's earnest entreaties afterwards finally wore me down.

I suppose I should have been suspicious when my mother had my formal robes ready and pressed, but I was too nervous about attending with Potter to care. Now that I'm here and he's late, I have time to think it a bit odd she was so prepared. Nothing I can prove, of course. Not with my mother.

I hear a slight rustle behind me and then he's there, Potter, in beautifully cut charcoal robes with an asinine maroon and gold bowtie. He's had his hair cut - although I miss the scraggly curls somewhat, the trimmer shape suits him. I wonder if he saw a barber or an animal tamer to get that mop under control. It's completely unfair that he should look that edible.

"Draco," he smiles a bit tentatively. When I look at him, he glances down at his feet. It's like being back at the Yule Ball in fourth year except we're not at Hogwarts. Well. And I'm not a girl.

"Harry." I'm resolved to be calm and professional, as though I do this all the time. I can go to the most important gathering at the bank with Harry Potter. All in a day's work, really.

Before I can stop him, he loops his elbow through mine and propels me through the large white doors.

As we walk through the door, our names ring out through the room. I should have warned him about the announcing spell. “Mr Harry Potter and Mr Draco Malfoy.”

Several heads turn and the looks we receive range from priggish to approving to completely oblivious. I’m not paying attention, of course. Most of the tables are already full with their intended occupants. I gather we’ve arrived just before dinner, slightly to the left of fashionably late.

A waiter appears to guide us to our table. When I catch him sizing up Potter’s arse, I shoot him a frosty look. “All yours, beautiful,” he says with a subdued grin. I roll my eyes.

The table is full of people we do not know and that suits me. The food is excellent, of course. I concentrate on eating and making meaningless conversation with our tablemates. I’m not ignoring Potter, exactly, but I’m not paying him attention either. Whenever I do glance out of the corner of my eye, he seems to be watching me.

The waiters circulate among the tables, botttles of champagne in hand and then we toast the past year and the future fortunes of Gringotts and her customers. I manage to signal the salacious waiter and get a second glass of the surprisingly decent champagne. Merlin knows I’m not nearly drunk enough for dancing yet. When I do stand up, I'm a bit lightheaded. Potter takes my arm for a moment, then drops his hand as the tables disappear and couples of all shapes, sizes, ages, genders and races descend upon the floor in a slow-moving multi-coloured mass. I stand to the side, enjoying the melee from a distance, Potter next to me, until Shacklebolt appears to greet us both.

"Potter," he says after a moment's polite conversation. "There's someone I think you should meet."

Harry glances at me, obviously hesitant, and I hold up my empty champagne flute. "Bar," I say. "Thank God it's open." I purse my lips, pondering. "Although one wonders who talked the goblins into that."

"Don't drink yourself into oblivion," Harry says with a snort. "Flintlock might notice." "Hassenpfeffer," I say cheerfully to Harry's peal of laughter, and Shacklebolt quirks an eyebrow at us both. I pat his arm. "Potter can explain." With that, I retreat to the bar.

Drink in hand, I settle comfortably on the perimeter of the room. I can pick out Shacklebolt's tall figure in the crowd and Harry's form next to him. With a start, I realise that my Aunt Andromeda is standing directly next to Shacklebolt, her hand on his arm. When she glances over in my direction, I raise my snifter so she knows I've seen her. This explains quite a lot, actually, and I'm glad to have a leg up on the gossip. I wonder if Mother knows.

I decide to sneak out for air after a very fine cognac indeed. There are side passages leading from the ballroom to the halls on either side. I manage to find a quiet room with a bit of fresh air from the entryway. The closeness of the gathering was getting overwhelming, and now that I know my aunt's there, I have no desire to be observed. I have to say goodbye to Potter before I can leave. Although I'm tempted to get my cloak and disappear now, I can see my mother's frown hovering before me and I'm not yet brave enough or foolhardy enough to risk her displeasure, especially at a public event with Aunt Andromeda as a witness.

In the end, Harry finds me. I have just screwed my courage up to return when he appears in the doorway, backlit by the brighter lights from the hall chandeliers. "Malfoy. I've been looking all over for you."

He seems quite worried, and I'm a bit confused. He doesn't appear to be pissed, but looks can be deceiving. "Potter," I say cautiously, "I was just about to come back."

"Aren't you having a good time?" he asks, closing the distance between us. I have my back to a rich brocaded wall, and it's oddly worrying to have Potter advancing on me.

"Of course," I say, shoulders pressed to the fabric behind me, wooden rail digging into my back. "Thank you very much for bringing me. It's been quite an experience."

He tilts his head, close enough now that I can see the green of his eyes behind the glimmer of his lenses. "You don't mean that, though, do you?"

I shrug. "Experiences come in many forms. Nearly being killed by flatware is also an experience."

He laughs. I like the way he laughs. I must be drunker than I think. I smile back and somehow,

somewhere something relaxes inside of me, just like that.

“You see, I fancy the hell out of you,” he confides earnestly. I bite my lip and keep smiling because he must be taking the piss. “And I didn’t know how else to get you out on a date.”

And then I realise he’s serious.

"Harry," I say, but before I can truly panic and cock everything up--as is my usual wont--his lips are descending to mine, almost in slow motion as I perceive it, and they’re warm, he’s warm, pressing against me, his lips moving, his tongue sliding against mine and my body wrapping itself around him like the shameless traitor that it is, my hands rising up of their own accord to grip the fabric across his broad shoulders.

We kiss for hours, eras, days, long enough that I’m breathless and panting when we stop, and then we start again. His lips are rough, demanding, unrefined, and utterly perfect. I’ve never been kissed with such abandon, such persistent and complete thoroughness. I forget the rail at my back, my shoulder blades against the wall; I forget we’re at a formal dress gala and surrounded by people I work for. I kiss him back with hunger and with passion, with more drunken enthusiasm than I knew I could muster. I cling to him, my hips pressed to his, allowing him to hold me, allowing him to possess my mouth and then grappling to possess his. It’s a disaster of stunning proportions, and I’m so very glad it can’t possibly be happening. I kiss him back harder.

There’s a significant pause and my lips are dry and cold. Potter’s hand is on my chest and his head is down, his forelock nearly touching my throat. “Malfoy,” he say breathlessly.

“Oh God, Potter.” I allow my head to drop back against the wall. “Did we just...”

When I look up, his eyes are boring into mine, glass green, grass green, werelight green, phosphorescent in their intensity. “Yes. If you mean snog, then yes, yes we did.”

I reach to push him away. I have to leave. This situation is so far out of control, I don’t even know what to

do except to deny it ever happened.

He catches my wrist. “Malfoy, wait.”

Every moment that I look at him is a moment that makes it more difficult to deny this is real. He looks devastatingly good, lips puffy and red, jaw rubbed a bit pink, eyes hungry. I want him terribly and the thought shocks me to the marrow. I’m so very afraid he can tell from my face. I pull my hand out of his grasp.

“Hasenpfeffer,” I whisper.

His mouth quirks in a small smile. “I don’t think it works when we’re not wearing those godawful hats. And would you really want to undo that?”

I nod, not able to speak, not able to meet his gaze. I’m sure I’m blushing furiously.

“I don’t believe you,” he says decisively after a moment of searching my face. “Come back to mine if you like. Or invite me to yours.”

My eyebrows are raised to the heavens. I must be watching a Pensieve of someone else’s life: it has that dreamy quality to it. “Potter, what on earth are you talking about?”

“I’ve been thinking about shagging you for the whole party. I know it’s rude of me, but I’m sorry. I’ve been attracted to you for years and I’ve never had the stones to do anything about it.” He bites his lip. “Please?”

“No.” I say. His face almost crumples, but then his mouth takes on a firm set, jaw jutting. He’s stubborn, of that you can be sure, even in the face of apparent defeat. I continue. “I’m the one who’s been obsessed with you for years. Years, Potter. Blaise mocks me every chance he gets that we’re working

together and I’ve never told you.”

The kindness on his face, the utter look of astonishment is my undoing. “Really? Me?”

My answer is a fierce bite to his lip. I thread my fingers through his hair and drag my lips across the stubble on his jaw. “Yes, Potter. You.”

His thumb trails across my collarbone and he murmurs, “Do we need mistletoe for this?”

I nip at the skin of his throat, raising a small red mark, and he utters a stifled moan. “No. But we might need a bed.”

"Right." Potter shifts me to his side, while keeping a firm arm around my waist. He marches us out into the side hall. When he suddenly lets go, I'm surprised, but then I see why.

Shacklebolt and Aunt Andromeda are standing in front of the cloakroom. He's draping her cloak over her shoulders and she's turning back to smile at him. He coughs when he sees me and she swivels to meet my eye.

"Draco." Her face is pink, but her blue eyes are firm.

"We never saw each other," I offer.

"Agreed." She kisses me on the cheek, smiles at Harry, and then she and Kingsley leave the vestibule arm in arm.

Potter gathers our cloaks and holds mine out for me. I wrap myself in the charcoal wool and then his arm is around me again. We walk outside into the chill December air.

"Ready," he asks.

I nod recklessly.

With a smile he Apparates us from the pavement in front of Gringotts.

Perhaps the holidays do have their own sort of magic. I’m certainly ready to believe.

Don't forget to go back to H/D Holidays on LJ and leave feedback!