



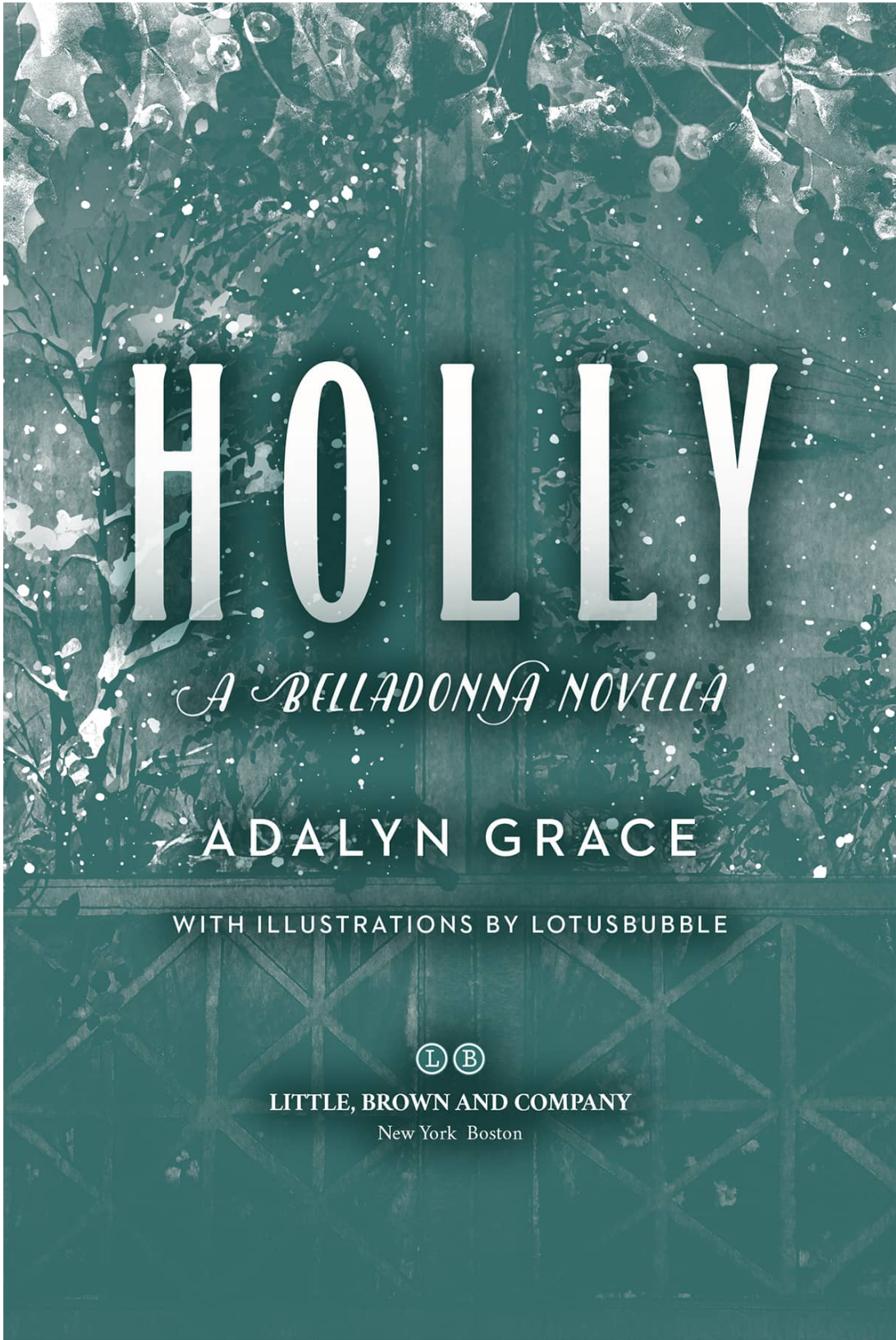
A *BELLADONNA* NOVELLA

HOLLY

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE BELLADONNA SERIES

ADALYN GRACE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY LOTUSBUBBLE



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In a town that looks like a fairy tale, there lives a girl who believed in this Christmas novella long before I did. This one is for her.

I'm sorry I changed the title, but I hope she loves what's inside.

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ONE



BLYTHE

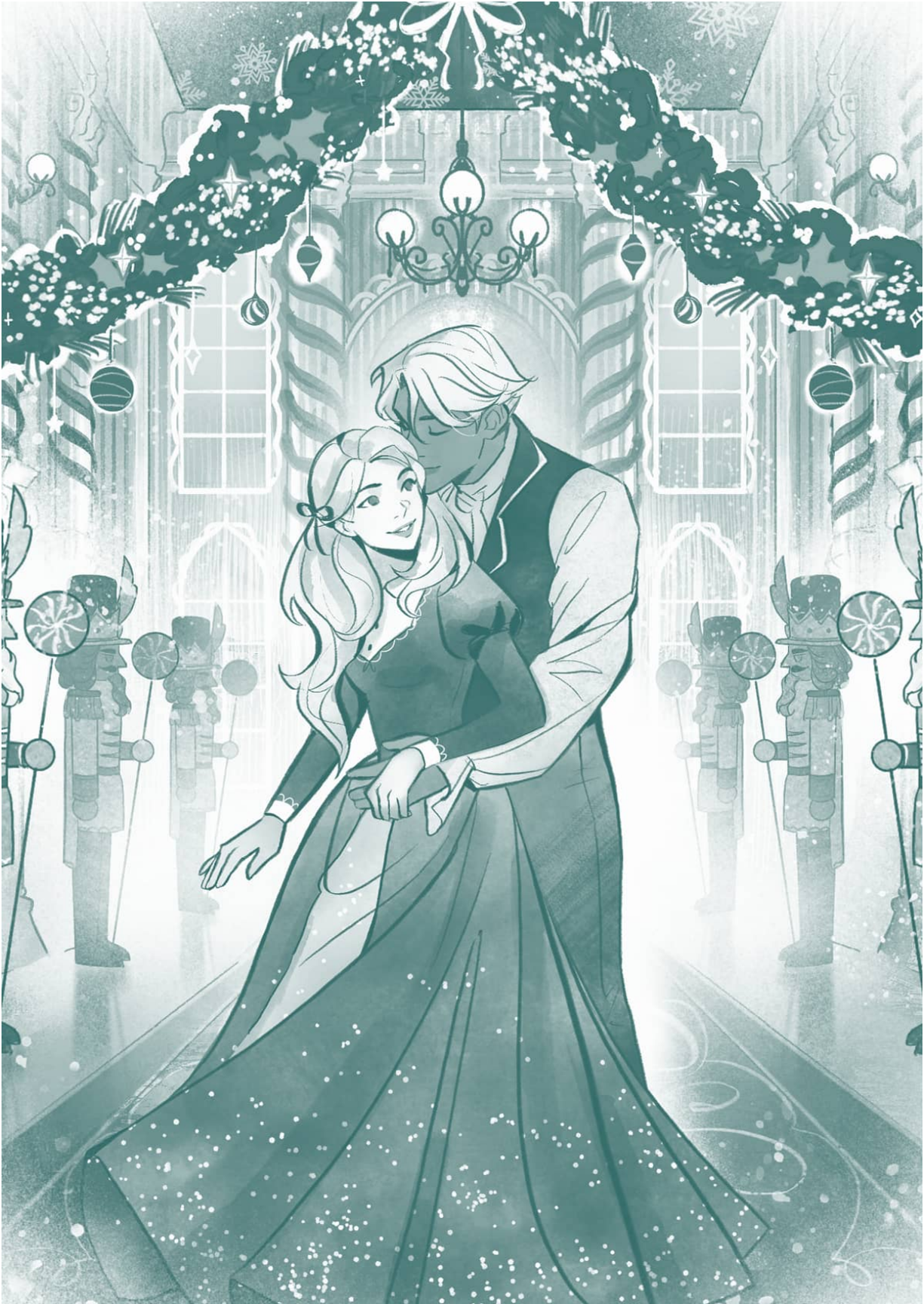
IT'S SAID THAT THE HOLLY SPRIG HAS LONG BEEN USED TO WARD OFF EVIL spirits.

As Blythe Dryden stood with her hands on her hips, assessing the foyer of Wisteria Gardens, she pondered how much of the plant she'd need to decorate with to ensure the most magnificent holiday season. Then she added another bough over the entryway, just for good measure.

It was fortunate that she'd mastered her powers since learning she was the reincarnation of Life, as Blythe could now grow as much holly as it took to repel demons, spirits, or any other mischievous deities that decided to take a sudden interest in her family. She'd shove every bough down their throats if necessary, because this year, they were all going to have a perfect Christmas.

Wisteria had transformed since Aris's return. For years Blythe had missed the magic that once pulsed through the home's very essence. Now, with its owner returned, Wisteria's heart had resumed its proud beating. Giant statues of fantastical beasts loomed near the grand oak doors, welcoming all who entered into a spacious foyer adorned with intricately carved nutcrackers taller than she was, and well-decorated snowmen that never seemed to melt. The gold-trimmed ceiling showcased a perfect wintry sky, painted with stars and snowflakes.

The hearth burned bright, its flames matching the warm pink glow of strange sconces that lit the room. One of them was shaped like a boar and matched the handle of Blythe's old bedroom from when she'd first arrived at the palace, betrothed to a man she despised. The memory had her smiling as she draped another bough of holly over its tusks, her heels clicking a familiar echo across the marble floors. Withdrawing several paces to admire her work, Blythe startled when she backed into a firm chest. Strong arms slipped around her, embracing her from behind, and Blythe relaxed into the warmth of the familiar touch. Into a comfort that she wished she could bottle up and carry with her forever.



“You’ve outdone yourself,” Aris noted, pulling her closer. She folded into him, tipping her head to the side as he bent to kiss it. Her eyes fluttered shut as he peppered kisses down her neck, and she squealed when he ended one of them with a gentle nip.

“It’s not too much?” she asked, forced to finally take stock of her hard work. It was, admittedly, very green. But that was nothing some well-placed ornaments couldn’t fix.

“Nothing you do will ever be too much.” His lips curled devilishly as they sank down to her bodice.

“Liar.” Blythe snorted, slipping her fingers into his blond locks to keep him close. It’d been only four months since her husband had returned to her, and Blythe was still familiarizing herself with this new body of his—broader chested and a few inches taller than his previous form. His jawline was squarer and more pronounced, his skin a shade darker, and while the changes were just enough to feel jarring, there was enough about Aris that had felt familiar from the moment she’d laid eyes on him. One look and she’d known that the missing piece of her soul had finally made its way home to her.

His eyes were the same, as were the deftness of his clever hands and the way that light always seemed to pull toward him. There were a few *other* differences as well, though certainly none that Blythe could complain about. In fact, she’d probably be continuing to familiarize herself with those differences now, if not for the fact that it was just days before Christmas and their family was in town to celebrate.

Family who did not seem to understand when to make themselves scarce.

“At least there will be no mistaking which holiday we’re celebrating,” Syllas noted from behind, announcing his arrival with a gentle clearing of his throat. Aris groaned against Blythe’s skin, begrudgingly peeling himself away, though he kept one arm slung around her hips.

“A bell, brother,” Aris declared. “I shall secure a bell to that cowl of yours before Christmas is through, I swear it.”

“I would love to see you try.” The cowl in question slipped from his figure

alongside his shadows, revealing Death's human form. Sylas was dressed in a dapper black suit with polished boots, and his bone-white hair was tied at the nape of his neck. The only bit of skin he showed was from the collar up, his hands obscured in leather gloves to prevent any unintended harm from his lethal touch.

Taunting seemed to be one of the reaper's favorite pastimes, and he sported a grin reminiscent of Blythe's father's whenever he had a particularly favorable hand at cards. Sylas crossed the foyer to stand beside his brother, head tipped back to admire the boughs of holly.

He arched a brow at her. "Are you feeling particularly festive this year, dear sister?"

Blythe shot the reaper a sour look, feeling foolish that she'd ever allowed herself to fear this ridiculous man. It'd taken her several months to breathe easy around Sylas after first meeting him, but now, years later, he was a comfort. A strange and curious man with an odd sense of playfulness she rather enjoyed in a brother. It was a nice change of pace, especially considering that the last one had tried to kill her. Twice.

"I'm no fool," she told him. "Our collective luck does not tend to hold up well on Christmas. We need every bit of good fortune we can get if we're to make it through the holidays unscathed."

"It's only another day," Sylas told her. "You will find no better or worse luck because of it."

Perhaps, but history had Blythe unwilling to take that risk. Upon Aris's return, the two had made the decision to move Wisteria Gardens, which had drawn too much attention to remain safe where it was. They had finally decided on a new town—one right on the outskirts of Brude, a city Blythe had fallen in love with and whose very bones reminded her of falling in love with Aris. And with Elijah fully aware of the truths of his family and what they were, either Sylas or Aris could retrieve him from anywhere for a visit. Now Blythe had her father, a new brother, her dearest cousin, and the love of her life. And with them all, she was determined to make their very first Christmas together as a true family positively perfect. Or else someone

would pay.

For years she'd awaited this moment, remembering the single Christmas that she and Aris had spent together as a pair. It was during the holidays that she'd first realized she loved him. It was then that they had slept together for the first time. For twenty-seven years after that, Blythe's bed had remained cold and her heart was left aching. But this year, all would be perfect. They deserved that much.

He deserved that much, and she didn't want anyone to take this from them.

And speaking of Aris... Blythe disentangled herself from her husband's grasp, voice lowering as she approached Sylas. "How is that *thing* I asked for your help with?" she asked, choosing her words carefully. She could practically feel Aris's curiosity festering.

"I intend to take care of the present very soon," Sylas offered with a smug grin that he turned decidedly toward Aris. "It's quite a good one."

"A present?" Aris echoed. Blythe hadn't expected her husband to look so affronted. "But I don't need anything."

"You are my husband and this is to be our first Christmas together where neither of us is dead or dying," Blythe said with the utmost sternness. "It's a cause for celebration, Aris. Of *course* I'm going to get you something." And for good measure she added, "Sylas has been instructed not to give you so much as a hint, so don't even try."

"I'm very good at keeping my word," Sylas announced proudly, hands folded behind his back. "And secrets, for the most part. Tell me what you got for Blythe and I'll keep yours, too."

"You're as nosy as my wife," Aris admonished, to which Sylas only shrugged.

"As if you aren't?"

"Nosiness is perhaps the one thing this family has in common," Blythe said. "Though, I'm sure to everyone's surprise, I wish to know nothing about my gifts. If you insist on discussing them, you may take your conversation elsewhere." She nudged Aris away.

“It’ll be fine. Now get out of here, both of you. I’ve more decorating to do, and you’re in my way.” From her bare palm emerged yet more holly, and Sylas laughed.

“Very well,” he said. “Join me for a drink, brother?”

“Later, perhaps.” Aris was already glancing behind his shoulder, seeming lost in thought. “There’s something I must check on first.”

“Could that something have to do with finding a present?”

Aris’s brows pulled lower. “You are a blight upon humanity.”

Sylas only smiled as Aris bent to kiss Blythe quickly on the head before he brushed past his brother, disappearing in a hurry down the hall.

In his absence, Blythe sighed. “Must you always tease him so?”

The reaper smiled. “I’m afraid it’s how we show our love.”

“Well, your love seems to have put him in a panic.”

“He would have been in more of one when we gave him our gift and he realized he forgot to ready one in return. Speaking of which...” Sylas peered out the window to the darkening sky. “It’s time I take my leave.”

“And you have faith this will work?”

He adjusted his gloves, triple-checking them before setting his hand atop Blythe’s head and ruffling her hair. “No. But I intend to try.”

Blythe went to swat his hand away, but Sylas was already gone, disappeared into the shadows.

“You really do need a bell,” she called after him, smiling as she made her way back across the foyer. There was, after all, much holly left to be hung.

TWO



ARIS

ARIS DRYDEN WAS NOT A MAN KNOWN FOR HIS GENEROSITY. HE DID NOT often give gifts, as he despised having to constantly outdo himself the next time. Once, he might have thought to whisk Blythe away to some exotic locale, but with Elijah growing older, Aris recognized that family time held more value for his wife than any lavish trip. Moreover, Blythe had changed over the nearly three decades since they'd been separated. The last thing he wanted was to embarrass himself with a gift that no longer suited her tastes.

She was, of course, still Blythe. Her tongue was just as sharp and she was no less a menace now than she'd been twenty-seven years ago. But time had slipped away from him, and he'd been too distracted getting Wisteria and his new life in order to have considered what he might get her.

It needed to be *spectacular*. A gift that was worthy of the woman who had waited all these years for his return. The wife who, after all this time, had finally made her way back into his life.

What did one even get for a person that special?

He'd have to get her father something, too, of course. Elijah had always been generous with him, and if Blythe was sharing gifts, then Elijah undoubtedly would be, as well. Then there was his pest of a brother... good God, the list just kept growing. He might as well start referring to himself as Saint Nicholas, as soon he would be expected to come bearing gifts for each

of their new neighbors and their children.

Aris dragged his fingers down his face, groaning. It would have been nice to discuss ideas with his brother, but Death's wagging brows and devilish smirk suggested he knew Aris hadn't yet secured a gift for Blythe. He was right, obviously, but Aris would be damned before he let his buffoon of a brother know for sure. Which led Aris to where he was now, pacing the halls in search of the single soul who might be able to help him navigate this conundrum.

He found Signa Farrow in, of all places, the room he'd gifted to Blythe twenty-seven Christmases prior. It had been a library then, and he'd restored it to that state upon his return. He would have returned to Wisteria sooner, had he been reborn with his memories. Instead, Aris had been born to a family of dressmakers. They were a good family, and he'd lived a relatively normal life as their son for twelve years. Of course, he'd had his quirks—things he wanted would suddenly appear as he thought about them, the light always seeming to follow him in peculiar ways, skin that tended to have a faint glow, and a compulsive need to create that befuddled his family. In an effort to satisfy that need, he'd decided to apprentice under his father, and it was then that Aris had begun to realize the extent of his abilities.

He'd learned more quickly than anyone in the trade and had crafted beautiful suits and gowns—some of which had even made their way into Blythe's hands, hanging in her armoire when he'd returned to Wisteria. She hadn't known they were his, which meant more to him than she ever could have realized. Even apart, they'd still found ways to be with each other.

Aris had spent seven years running his own shop, though the work was little more than a front as he dove deeper into his powers, realizing that his creative prowess extended well beyond clothing. The first time he'd crafted a tapestry and experienced the life of the fate he wove, Aris believed himself mad or dying. But as the urge to craft another and another struck in a hungry cycle, he realized there was something more to it. A curious magic that only he experienced.

It did not help that he chased his own memories with every stitch,

weaving some nights until his fingers bled and he lost all sense of self, simply because he knew there was something more. He would find himself reminiscing over a laugh from a voice he'd never heard and the sweetness of lips he had never tasted.

For years Aris hunted down those hints of Blythe—those glimpses of his past life—until he remembered who and what he was. He had left his shop to find Blythe that same night and had become lost in her maze of briars not an hour later. It wasn't until he'd stepped back through the doors of Wisteria Gardens with his wife in hand that his soul felt whole again.

Still, the sight had been jarring.

Wisteria's walls had all been painted with murals of Blythe's memories. He'd expected her to abandon the palace, yet there were signs of her everywhere he looked. He'd even been able to see the phantom progression of her growth into her powers. Several walls had been torn apart with vines that eroded the stone. Certain rooms were made entirely uninhabitable, filled with thorns he never wished to think about. On the outside, though, was a garden well-tended, with flourishing hellebore and wolfsbane. Daisies and roses and flowers so beautiful they seemed as if from a dream. His chest had ached thinking about all he'd missed, though he was glad Blythe was on her way to mastering her powers even without his help.

He supposed he had his brother and sister-in-law to thank for that...

Signa sat beneath a towering Christmas tree strewn with flickering candles and dusted white. Gaudy ornaments covered branches so well decorated that Aris had to squint to see any of the greenery. Her dark hair was tied haphazardly atop her head as bows and wrapping paper surrounded her. Death's hound lay beside her, one eye half opened. When Gundry spotted Aris, his tail began thumping against the floor, causing Signa to look up.

"Stop where you are," she demanded, her eyes narrowing as she shielded a present from view. "Give me a moment before you spoil the surprise."

It took him a beat to realize that it'd been *his* present Signa was wrapping, and he tried not to look as horrified by that as he felt.

He was lucky there was still several days left until Christmas. Several days to, apparently, find superbly wonderful gifts to shower upon everyone he knew. Which was why he was there, tossing back his tailcoat to take a seat on the floor in front of Signa Farrow once she gave her permission.