



## **Seasonal Work** *by Nina Kiriki Hoffman*



I tied the last bow on the last package the woman had brought to my gift-wrapping station. "The present goes to . . . ?" I held my pen poised over the gift card.

"Excuse me?" she said.

"Who is it for?"

"I'll make out the card when I get the present home, thank you, young man."

"I have very nice handwriting," I said, "and this way you won't get any of them mixed up." I looked at the stack of presents. She had three this size and shape, and four others that resembled each other. Six assorted that she might be able to figure out for herself. I had my doubts.

"Oh, my. You're right." She stared at her stack of wrapped presents.

"This one's the powder blue terrycloth bathrobe," I said, patting the last wrapped.

She checked her list. "That's for Bob."

BOB, I wrote. "This one's a set of green bath towels."

"For Mother."

I wrote. "This one's a fuzzy blanket throw with a leopard pattern on it."

"For Misty, my sister." She stared at the rest of her packages in despair, until I told her what each one held. My memory for gifts was excellent. Always has been.

She gave me a five dollar tip.

The girl next in line stepped up to the counter but wouldn't look into my eyes. She set her heart down in front of me. Spun glass, beautiful, fragile — a typical teenage girl's heart. "For Josh," she whispered.

I gift-boxed the heart, wrapped it in red tissue paper, hesitated over the tag. Josh was already getting six hearts for Christmas. And he wasn't the type who knew how to take care of them. He'd probably break them all.

"Are you sure?" I murmured.

She nodded, gaze focused on the tips of her shoes.

"Look at me." I stared at her until she looked up. Amber-brown eyes, shy young beauty so fresh it had no idea of its future. She was perfect, the way a hundred young girls in the mall were perfect. I touched her face. Something quickened and flashed in her eyes. I knew she could see me now. "Moira. Give this to someone who knows what to do with it," I whispered.

"All right."

STEPHEN, I wrote on the gift tag, and handed the package to her.

The next girl in line was a little older. She stared me straight in the eye and set a lovely bile-colored curse down in front of me. "For Josh," she said.

I wrapped it in green paper and put a red bow on it. I smiled when I handed it back to her, and she smiled too, the smile of one who had been mortally wounded.

The rest of the week was easy because I knew what one of my presents would be.

It had been a long time since I got a heart for Christmas. The glass powders and stings as you take the first bite. It's the best taste in the world.

The End

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