

AN ON HIDDEN WINGS SHORT STORY



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The Best Gift



“Chelsierra, wait!” Becka pushed past the schoolhouse door and kicked her hooves into a trot to catch up to her friend on the dusty dirt road through town. With her long Centaur legs, she quickly passed the other exiting students and came alongside her smaller Human friend.

“I can’t wait! It’s only the most wonderful day of the year tomorrow!” Chelsierra flipped her sandy blond hair out of her hazel eyes with a shining grin like the springtime sun above.

Becka laughed, settled her schoolbook more securely in her arm, and refolded her long black wings along her horse back. “Giftday.” The very word tickled her tongue with the sweetness of her favorite fresh berry tarts. “I can’t wait for the feast!”

“The gifts?” Chelsierra raised an eyebrow.

Becka would give no hints about her gift for her one good friend, no matter how many times the girl prompted. Chelsierra had asked for gift ideas for others multiple times—no doubt seeking a clue. Becka doubted her friend would guess the pouch she’d woven under her mother’s master weaving tutelage—with a pattern she designed herself.

She quirked her mouth in a smile and dodged, “Decorating the Gift-day tree.”

“And the best part—dancing around the tree!” Chelsierra skipped a few steps ahead in a little caper past the blacksmith shop.

“Where do you want to gather decorations first?” Becka asked. “The meadow, for the wildflowers? Or—”

"Phew, such a long walk!" A boy's sharp voice sliced into their conversation. "How about a ride, Horsey?"

Becka went cold from the back of her neck to the tips of her wing feathers and horsetail.

The Human speaker's blue eyes flashed with mischief as he cut in front of her on the path, blocking her way. Two other Human boys about their age took point alongside him.

Despite her winged Centaur build that made her taller than most of her classmates besides the two Minotaur boys, she suddenly felt so small. Her voice dried up like a snowmelt stream in high summer.

"She's not a horse, she's a person just like us!" Chelsierra stepped forward, eye to eye with the boy. "Why aren't you offering to give us a ride, Ross-car?"

Rosscar turned his sneer on her. "I wasn't talking to you, Spot-face."

The scars on Chelsierra's cheeks from an old childhood illness flushed redder than the rest of her face.

No matter how unoriginal the jibes, they hurt no less. At her friend's distress, the icy feeling freezing Becka cracked. "We can't choose what we look like on the outside, but we can choose what we look like on the inside. How do you think insulting girls on Giftday Eve is making you look right now? Let's go, Chelsierra."

Becka looped her arm through her friend's and pushed between Rosscar and his crony to continue down the road. Whatever nasty comment he shot after her, she didn't listen. Chelsierra kept pace past a couple half-timber storefronts, but then her steps dragged in the dirt.

"We won't let them ruin Giftday Eve." Becka peered at her friend's downcast face. "There's too much fun in store, remember? What first? Decorations?" Her mind glittered with memories of the Giftday tree festooned with the first spring flowers, ribbons, and all the pretty baubles the villagers could find.

“Actually, I need to look for a gift. For my—um—mom.” Chelsierra worked a smile back onto her face. “I know just the place. We can pass through the meadow and pick flowers on the way back.”

With anticipation hurrying their steps again, they dropped off their books at their homes on the other end of the village of wooden houses and took off into the surrounding woods. Chelsierra led the way at a run, giggling as she jumped over fallen branches. Becka gave a push with her wings to sail over the obstacles, laughter bubbling out of her like the stream they ran alongside. With her horse legs, she could easily outrun her Human friend, but Chelsierra’s delight at zigzagging through the trees ahead of her made following far more fun.

The stream’s gurgle grew to a rushing sound like a heavy rainstorm, and the hillside swelled sharply. A small waterfall, about fifteen feet, cascaded down a rocky cleft in its side. Becka stopped, drinking in the joy of this special place. The stone behind the center of the waterfall shimmered like a giant jewel in luminous teal, unlike any she’d seen elsewhere. Last time they’d come by, the winter icicles had covered most of the waterfall, hiding the beauty in a glassy gray. With spring here again, she could stare at the water glittering over the rocks all afternoon. They’d had countless picnics here over the summers, dangling their feet into the stream as they sat on the bank.

Becka tore her gaze away to glance around. “What are we looking for? Mushrooms? Pine cones?”

Chelsierra moved all the way to the base of the waterfall and reached a hand to the rocky cleft. “Sure. Take a look around.”

Becka watched her friend suspiciously. “What are you doing?”

“Go ahead. This will only take a minute.” Chelsierra started to climb.

Alarm spiked through Becka. She rushed forward. “Wait, what if you slip? Maybe I should help. What do you need?”

“It’s my gift. I can get it.” Chelsierra had already scrambled several feet above the ground. She reached a hand through the waterfall. “Ooh, it’s cold!”

“Be careful.” Becka shifted from hoof to hoof. Chelsierra’s toes now gripped the rock several inches above Becka’s head. Unlike Chelsierra, she could fly—but the narrow cleft around the falls would block her sizeable wingspan. Even if she transformed, her Seraph wings boasted the same size, and her little blackbird form couldn’t reach through the water for whatever her friend wanted. Though she didn’t mind flying high over the earth, seeing Chelsierra suspended ten feet in the air made her stomach twist in knots.

“Just a little farther, and then....” Chelsierra yelped and slipped from the wet stone.

Becka threw out her arms as the girl fell in a jumble between her and the stones. She snatched Chelsierra’s arm and hauled her back just before the Human fell under the crashing water. The two stumbled backward from the bank and tumbled in a tangle on the grass.

“That was close!” Chelsierra gasped with wide eyes.

Becka got her hooves back under her and stood. “Are you all right?”

“I think—ow!” Chelsierra started to stand but collapsed. “My ankle—it hurts!”

Becka dropped next to her.

Her eyes watered. “I think I sprained it.”

Becka’s heart pounded. What should she do for a sprained—or worse, possibly broken—ankle? She didn’t know how to tell. “We need help.” She glanced around. No one would hear them call this far from the village.

“We have to get back.” Chelsierra strained to stand again with a terrible grimace.

“Stop! You might make it worse.” Becka blew out a breath. “Climb on my back. I’ll carry you home.”

Chelsierra stared at her. “But nobody rides a Centaur. You’re not a horse. You’ve always told me that.”

"I'm not leaving you alone in the woods! It'll be dark by the time I can get back here with anyone." Becka scooted so the fur of her horse back brushed Chelsierra's knee. "Now get on."

The girl set one leg over Becka's back and pulled herself on, holding onto Becka's waist.

"You all right?" Becka peered over her shoulder.

"Yes." Chelsierra's voice came so much smaller than usual.

"Then let's go." Becka struggled to rise under the extra weight. She'd never carried anything so heavy, not even when she and her father loaded her mother's woven goods to take to the big market days in the capital. Her legs trembled like they wouldn't pull her up. But she gritted her teeth and tottered upright, Chelsierra clutching her tight to stay on.

With a shaky breath, Becka hurried toward the village—toward help.



Giftday dawned, the springtime sun crowning the sky with golden rays. The sweet and spicy scents of baking and cooking for the feast already filled the air as Becka passed between the cottages to Chelsierra's home. Her mother admitted Becka to Chelsierra's little bedroom tucked in the back of the house. She lay on her straw pallet with her ankle wrapped in cloth and propped up on a bucket.

"Happy Giftday!" Becka's front hooves rested inside the threshold of the tiny room, little larger than the bed and a nightstand, while her back hooves remained in the main area.

“Becka! Happy Giftday!” Chelsierra popped her eyes open and grinned. “Thank you again for getting me home yesterday.”

Her mother had offered the same thanks when Becka arrived.

“Glad I could help. How is it?”

“Just a sprain, but I have to stay off it for a while.” Chelsierra sighed and plopped her head back on her pillow. “Now I can’t go to any of the celebration because I can’t walk on it. Mom says it serves me right for being so reckless.” She shook her head. “Of all the days to miss! It couldn’t have been a school day instead?”

Becka laughed.

“You think it’s funny because you’ll still get to eat strawberry cinnamon tarts and dance around the Giftday tree,” Chelsierra huffed. “Out having fun while I’m stuck here.”

“You know it wouldn’t be nearly as fun without you there. I’ll take you.”

“Really?” Chelsierra’s eyes brightened, but then she squinted. “You’d let me ride on your back again?”

“I happened to notice your neighbor has a wheelbarrow outside. I’ll ask if I can push you there. Now hurry up and get ready for the festival.”

Within a few minutes, they set off with Chelsierra in the wheelbarrow, her legs and the hem of her nicest blue dress dangling off the front. They trundled to the edge of the village where everyone gathered around a huge oak tree. The girls found a bench where they could braid each other’s hair with leaves and flowers while the other villagers festooned the branches with garlands of wildflowers, ribbon bows, colored stones, and bits of glimmering glass.

A Faun boy from their school piped a merry tune while everyone worked. Becka’s father, Darven, and the other village men brought more benches and tables for the upcoming feast. Her mother, Miryam, organized the ladies to put out festive floral tablecloths—many she had woven. Becka and Chelsierra watched and giggled as the clearing between

the mighty tree and the houses turned into the magical site of the Gift-day celebration.

Finally, all the activity stilled, and the whole village gathered under the outstretched branches. All eyes fixed on the chaplain at the tree trunk.

“Today we celebrate all the Lifegiver has given us. For He created the world and all that is in it, every stone, plant, and creature. And He created all the peoples of the world, and breathed into them His own life-breath. He gave all a home around the great Lifetree, which this Giftday tree here symbolizes, where all lived in harmony with each other and the Lifegiver Himself. Today we acknowledge that all we have is a gift from the Lifegiver. Indeed, every good thing we enjoy comes from His hand. So let us give thanks and rejoice, and recount all the blessings He has bestowed upon us this year!”

Becka joined in with the cheer as the men waved their hats and the ladies their scarves. The rush of voices lifted her spirits like an updraft in a swell of joy.

With another prayer of thanks, the chaplain announced, “Let the feast begin!”

Becka piled two plates high with all the berry tarts, butter scones, seasoned meats, and potato hash they could hold—one for her, and one for Chelsierra. Around the long tables, families and friends ate and shared their gratitude for all the last year had brought and their hopes for the year ahead. Becka and her Centaur father stood at the foot of the table with her Seraph mother and Chelsierra on the ends of the benches on either side.

Then the music of the fiddles, flutes, and drums struck up, and the people followed their tune to encircle the oak tree in the age-old steps of the Giftday dance. At once, Chelsierra’s joyous expression turned pained as her and Becka’s parents moved with the rest of the table’s occupants to join the throng. “Go ahead. There’s no point in us both missing it. I’ll watch from here.”

Becka's heart felt like a stone had fallen on it. Everyone always danced around the tree—and Chelsierra with more delight than most. "I want you to enjoy the dance too."

"We can't dance with a wheelbarrow." She pointed with her chin to the gathering dancers. "You go enjoy it for both of us."

"No," Becka decided. She came alongside her friend once again. "Get on my back. We're dancing."

Chelsierra's eyes widened. "But everyone will see you this time."

Becka's stomach clenched at Rosscar's comment—how he would make even more fun of her if they bumped into him, but she shook the thought away. They might not cross paths with him at all. "Quick, before they start without us!"

Chelsierra boosted herself from the bench to the table, then onto Becka's back. Carrying the Human girl's weight came much easier when Becka started from a standing position. She trotted to the circle where her parents held their hands out to welcome them in. She took Darven's hand with her left, Chelsierra's over her shoulder with her right, and let the girl take Miryam's hand.

The music swelled, and the dance began. In that special moment, all differences slipped from mind as Human, Centaur, Faun, and Minotaur all danced in one ring. To the right and to the left, their steps trod a time-honored path. The dance grew more complex. The dancers let go to clap their hands and weave among each other with twirls and bows. Becka barely felt the weight on her back with Chelsierra's laughter buoying them up. Two lines of dancers formed and bobbed in opposite directions, making partners for a spin around each other's elbows before passing to the next person for pat-a-cake.

"So you *do* give rides, Horsey?" Rosscar came face to face with Becka.

She pulled her hands back before he could clap them and stumbled as they circled each other, face flushed.

"I'm not riding." Chelsierra flung out her arms. "I'm flying!"

The dance whirled them past Rosscar to a grinning housewife, who grasped Becka's arm to swing her to the next partner. A few steps left Becka's chagrin behind. No matter what anyone said, this moment with her friend—giving her the most wonderful experience of the year—was worth it.

The musicians finished with a twiddle on the strings and pounding of the drums. Laughing and panting, the dancers scattered, some to enjoy the next song, others to explore the tay and desserts. Becka helped Chelsierra down to a bench.

Delight brightened her friend's eyes. "That—that was the best Gift-day dance ever!"

Becka grinned. "It was!"

"I couldn't have enjoyed any of this without you—all you've done for me. Thank you."

"My pleasure. But we haven't enjoyed everything yet. We've had the decorations, the feast, the dance. There's just one thing missing." Becka reached into the waist pocket of her shirt.

Chelsierra's gaze flicked to the movement. "The gifts?"

Becka nodded and withdrew the pouch she'd woven with a rabbit. "Bet you didn't guess this!"

"I should have! It's my favorite animal. It's so beautiful!" Chelsierra beamed. "Thank you. About yours—"

"It's all right. I know you didn't get a chance to find gifts because of what happened."

"Actually, what I was going to say, is yours is the one I was getting yesterday. Not my mom's." Chelsierra reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a simple string necklace with a brilliant teal stone tied in the center.

Becka gasped. "The stone from the waterfall?"

"Grabbed one before I fell—and managed not to drop it! I see how you always stare at them. Thought you might like to have one of your own."

Becka's cheeks stretched with her grin as she slipped the string over her head. The stone shone in the sunlight with brilliance like the blue sky above—now her prettiest and most prized possession. “Chelsierra, this—this is the best Giftday gift ever.”

“No.” Chelsierra smiled and took Becka's hands. “The best gift ever is your friendship.”

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About the Author



Adare Elyse writes middle grade and young adult fantasy and science fiction novels when she isn't busy dressing in medieval costume, contriving puns with her clever husband, or singing showtunes to her little Shireling. Her work has earned multiple awards, including a Realm Award, and featured in various publications. Powered by tea and epic music, she draws inspiration from the nearby beautiful Rocky Mountains, her travels around the world, and her passion to share uplifting truth in fiction.

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