

A Gift of Words

Patricia Penn

*For Summaia,
who wanted to experience Christmas for the first time.*

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The warehouse was swarming with Fianna. They all brimmed with adrenaline after the fight, scratched and bruised and in just as much need of a healer as the humans they'd saved. Breathing hard, Hekate surveyed the carnage around her. It appeared that she was out of a job for a moment; her partner, Tamoh, was holding his bleeding shoulder, so they wouldn't be allowed to escort the prisoners to headquarters. Some of her colleagues were securing the exits, making sure that none of the human survivors escaped before their memories were wiped—and that none of the humans living in this neighborhood had come to investigate the ruckus. Other Fianna manacled the prisoners and checked the pulses of the enemy demons on the ground. The Fianna were the peacekeeper squad of the Boston demon clans, but these days, peacekeeping mostly translated to attack and try not to get killed.

Hekate threw the dead body closest to her a grimly satisfied look. Across the hall, her friend Cal Iveragh gave her a thumbs-up and smirked as if to say congratulations. Hekate rolled her eyes and huffed. She hadn't missed any of her targets, no; that went without saying.

"All right." The gravelly voice of Balor, their commander, rang through the room. "Turns out two of those bastards escaped through a back door. I want four teams of two out in the streets. Search the area until you find them. Lester and Crooks, you go up to the North End..." He rattled off names, then paused when his eyes fell on Hekate's partner. Tamoh grimaced apologetically through the pain. "Lorca..." Balor addressed Hekate. "You're with Iveragh, check Downtown. After all, I hear you two are inseparable these days."

Hekate glanced sharply at Cal. But no, Balor couldn't know about the two of them. They were among the strongest telepaths in the entire

demon community of Boston. It was impossible that they could have given anything away.

Cal looked straight ahead, ostensibly busy tucking her rune stone—her weapon of choice—into the neckline of her sweater.

Very well. Seemed like they'd spent the rest of the night on the job.



It hadn't been their first raid during this clan war, not even the first one this week. An informant had tipped them off about a group of vassals of the mutinous clan Dayville setting up camp in an abandoned warehouse down on Hanover Street. They had been luring unsuspecting humans into their lair, torturing them for fun and absorbing their energies to get high. It was disgusting, despicable business, and the reason why Hekate had sworn allegiance to Cal's clan Iveragh—so they could fight side-by-side.

That was probably what had prompted Balor's comment. Recently, too many had remarked on how much time she and Cal spent together. Hopefully nobody thought of them as anything but a young clan leader and her right-hand woman. Still, being partnered together on Fianna business wasn't exactly a hardship for either of them.

Roaming the streets of Downtown Boston, they soon became certain that the Dayvilles had to have left the area either through a portal or by taking a mundane human cab. Their muscles ached from the fight, and they grew more tired as the night progressed without Balor sending them new orders. Sadly, Cal's status as leader of Iveragh didn't excuse her from following her commander's orders like any soldier. However, for Hekate working with Cal felt like breathing. They

moved in synch, and when Cal came close, Hekate could sense her presence pulsating at the edge of her awareness.

Hekate could still clearly remember what Cal had smelled like a week before, the last time they had snuck away together. She could almost feel her skin under her fingers, picture her lean muscular frame beneath her warm winter parka—so deceptively human looking, and yet so powerful. They didn't talk about what they did with each other, though. They acted as if it wouldn't happen again, as it was a mistake—because it was a mistake and it could never happen again. There were no words among demons for what they were doing with each other, for two women doing those things—not as far as Hekate knew, anyway. It scared her, not knowing what it meant.

Hekate kept her eyes trained on the buildings and side alleys for signs of her prey instead of looking at Cal.

They'd just covered Long Wharf when they paused briefly, cold hands shoved deep in their pockets. Air condensed in front of their faces with every breath as they watched the sun dawn on the horizon. It spread pastels all across the fidgety grey sea, beautiful despite the muted clouds in the sky. Still there was no sign of the Dayvilles. However, their rune stones—Cal's around her neck, Hekate's on her belt—hadn't heated up to herald new orders. Their boss had to have special plans with those Dayvilles to waste this much man power.

The streets started to fill with activity. As the patches of sky between the tall buildings transitioned from dark to grey, more humans poured outside. At ten o'clock, Hekate noticed how many there really were. Some even bumped into her and stupidly ignored her angry frown. When Hekate was pushed against her, Cal smirked good-naturedly, amused as always when Hekate glared.

By twelve, every traffic light produced endless car lines, and they had to circle around old people with canes, women with strollers, and

person after person wrapped in scarves and gloves. Hekate slowly grew suspicious. Even though this was Downtown Boston, it was a work day, and the air was so icy that there would certainly be snow soon. Yet, on their way down the broad Atlantic Street, the crowd became thicker.

They crossed the street and turned a corner, and suddenly, everything was packed with people of all ages and sizes. Cal came to an abrupt halt. Hekate had to fight an instinctual urge to reach for her rune stone when she followed suit.

Cal whistled under her breath.

"Look at that," she said appreciatively. Though her reaction was dignified, her eyes shone like a child's.

Hekate followed her gaze to find that the entire area was covered in light chains. The streets had broadened to transform into a pedestrian area—they'd reached Quincy Market. Rich whites and greens and reds and blues flashed around every tree growing along the street. Every lantern, and even parts of the historical market halls farther down the road, was dazzling. The crowd pushed through a funnel of booths and shops that had spilled onto the street for the occasion. Due to her height, Hekate had an excellent vantage point. The vendors wore costumes; elves and reindeers lined up left and right. A Santa stood at the ready to pose for pictures with children, and a Nativity scene with a mix of plastic and real animals was on display not far away. Hekate realized with a start that it was December 24.

"You can't honestly tell me you've never seen this area before when it was decorated," she told Cal in her usual dry tone. "You know the humans put on the light show for about two months each year?"

"Sure," Cal said, although her gaze was still focused on the streets. Hekate didn't believe her for one second. She knew Cal well enough, including her eerie ability to give the correct reply without having heard a word. "Christmas, right? Birth of the religious man."

“You sound so convincing, and yet...”

“This is amazing,” Cal said obliviously. And then, to Hekate’s shock, she felt the other woman’s fingers wrapping around her hand. “Come on, let’s look around.”

It was impossible not to follow. Hekate, after all, had always gone blindly wherever Cal led. Since she’d known her, that had been Hekate’s deepest flaw and her strongest need. Her hand was cold and so was Cal’s, but they immediately started to warm each other.

Hekate feebly told herself that Quincy Market was part of their perimeter, anyway.

As Cal stopped at almost every booth, it was as if the exhaustion of years of war and young leadership fell off her for a moment. Part of Hekate couldn’t help but wish that the relief had been caused at least a little by holding Hekate’s hand, not just by the humans’ Christmas shenanigans. This was Cal as she would have been if the dark times weren’t eating away at her. She certainly didn’t seem to care that the event looked more like a seized business opportunity than an actual fair. Cal inspected Christmas tree balls—beautiful, delicately crafted things of glass and silver—and Hekate watched, captivated by the way her face softened. Then she asked Hekate questions about the meaning of some ornaments, about tiny wooden angel figurines and golden stars shining like jewelry, though Hekate didn’t know much more about them than Cal did.

Raised a child of one of Boston’s leading clans, Hekate had never had much cause to care about the humans. She didn’t want them to be mistreated—because nobody should be mistreated—but humans were just there. The demons stayed away, keeping their existence hidden, and Hekate had never interacted with them much. She happily wore their clothes, listened to their music, and had recently bought her

first computer—the first Intel Pentium, newly released in 1993. But she was just as likely as not to know specific things about their lifestyle.

It was impossible not to be drawn in now, though. There was a shivering girl selling red winter roses. There was a man who artfully fashioned chains out of metal scraps, another who sold used records of Christmas carols. They passed a quartet of teenage boys, who looked Hispanic like her, playing flutes. Begrudgingly Hekate dropped a ten in their hat despite the unsettling brilliant smile the youngest shot her around his mouth piece. Both Cal and the atmosphere all around relaxed Hekate against her will. Telepathic demons were trained to never loosen their psychic shielding, but it was hard to not absorb bits of their joy and holiday spirit—especially Cal's. And not just because she was still holding Hekate's hand.

"Are those supposed to be demons, you think?" asked Cal with a shoulder nudge to point out a pointy-eared band of men with big hats. Cal, who was usually loath to admit that there was something she didn't know about the humans she'd sworn to protect, although there were an awful lot of those things.

"Those are elves," Hekate informed her easily. She refrained from pointing out that the humans feared their kind way too much to allow their legends about them to be featured at such a joyous celebration. There was a reason why the demons hid from the humans despite looking the same, and why all the words the humans had for them were negative. To them, demon or succubus or vampire equaled evil.

Cal was drawn into a conversation with a man handing out flyers and let go of Hekate. He was wearing antler headgear for some reason, and Hekate knew without looking that his advertisements either had motorcycles or Metallica in them—Cal's human interests weren't particularly sophisticated. Hekate fell into the loose parade rest she

preferred while waiting at her usual spot on her Cal's left. The loss of contact left her feeling momentarily bereft until her gaze fell idly upon two kissing women.

It was as if the world froze.

Hekate knew a little more about Christmas than Cal, because she'd visited a few holiday bazaars, and she'd watch a movie or two. She was a demon, after all, not a hermit. However, she wasn't anywhere close to an expert. That became particularly obvious now, because in the demon world, a public display of this kind would have been impossible, and she would have supposed that the same were true for the humans.

As if on cue, somebody somewhere shouted, "Get off the street so the kids don't see, goddamned dykes!" But most of the crowd pushing past seemed to ignore both him and the...the dykes. One of the women ignored him entirely. The other gave him the finger. In a street full of demons, all this would have been unthinkable. The sight of two women kissing, in public or not, was unthinkable. Hands would be reaching for rune stones. Challenges would be spoken, the kind that couldn't be taken back. Reputations were guarded with the same determination as the clan houses in wartime.

The women were situated behind a makeshift display table. The one who had ignored the shouting man looked Hekate's age, twenty-three or twenty-four, sporting a cheerful purple Mohawk. As practically dressed as a Fian, almost like a man, the other woman was short and heavysset. She wore her hair in a fierce buzz cut that resembled Hekate's—an uncommon style for female demons and humans alike.

With a pang, Hekate realized that she'd somehow just assumed that she and Cal were alone in the world, and that nobody else did this. She'd thought they were just individual aberrations—freaks.

The kissing women grinned at each other for a moment, then let go, and turned their attention back to their display. Hekate gave Cal a quick look, torn. But Cal was still in deep conversation with the antler man.

Hekate made a decision.

"I'll be over there," she muttered, counting on the fact that Cal wasn't really listening, even though she nodded. She'd not made the Fianna attack squad by missing opportunities.

Her heart was certainly beating as loudly against her chest as if she were in the middle of a fight.

Weaving her way through the crowd, she made her way to the women. She came to a halt in front of a big, handmade banner—Christmas shelter for homeless LGBT! Donate now!

The short woman with the buzz cut sauntered up to her, giving her a once-over that normally would have made Hekate even more tense. But then something in the woman's face relaxed as if she'd decided she wouldn't need any armor here. It set Hekate off balance; humans and demons both usually had the opposite reaction to her.

Dykes. That man had called them that. Hekate soaked the word up, knowing she'd never let it go. Where there were words, there was knowledge and acceptance. There was a defense. She abruptly realized how hungry she was for all that. Suddenly, there was a lifeline in sight.

"What are you offering?" she asked, knowing that she sounded clipped and demanding, but the woman didn't seem to mind.

"Not offering," she said amiably. "Collecting. And educating." She pointed meaningfully at a tin can with a slit in the lid, then at the leaflets and flyers laid out around. Although Hekate knew she was missing something here—LGBT didn't ring a bell at all—she could see when money was required to gain access, so she searched her pockets

for change. The woman looked as if she hadn't expected any different and swiftly moved to the educating part of the transaction.

"Now," she said, "you might have heard of the second partner adoption win. That was huge; that was a really big step. And we've got a so-called commission for LGBT students now, also good—let's hope it'll really go somewhere. But ain't every state as safe as Massachusetts, you know? Louisiana might reinstate its sodomy law; it's disgusting. All donations this year are going to Louisiana shelters, to make a point. We're having a Q and A on that whole issue at our Charlestown place after the holiday, couple of us dykes, some guys too. We've invited this human rights lawyer and all."

The woman had pointed at a makeshift leaflet looking as if it originated from a home printer with a broken cartridge. It's love, not sodomy. Safety is a human right! Another printout next to it said, Protect lesbian teens from homophobia!

Hekate wet her lips, mentally translating. Lesbian, lesbos, lesbios, Old Greek, he or she who is from Lesbos. Homophobia, also easy for a demon used to the old languages, fear of that which is the same. Her face hardened. She understood that one instinctually.

"You should come," the woman said, and Hekate nodded sharply, her hand already wrapped around one of the flyers. "Bring your girlfriend along." She nodded in Cal's direction.

Hekate stiffened.

"Or not," the woman said with a curious expression.

"We're just traveling through," Hekate muttered without making eye contact. And unsure how she should feel about the way the woman's face turned understanding and soft, a change so distinct she could make it out from the corner of her eye. It was as if Hekate had said something completely different, something she didn't even have words for.

“Well, then, I hope you’ve got a good hotel to stay at,” the woman said. And, as if she couldn’t stop herself after all, she quickly added, “Listen, it’s not... Most places in Boston are all right. If two women take a room together...not like you’ll get beaten up or thrown out or anything. Unless you run into some really bad eggs anyway. But it’s not like you want to spend the stay getting all the long looks, you know? Here.” Her hand vanished in her pocket, rummaging. It reappeared holding an assortment of business cards, and she started industriously skimming through them, picking two or three that she deemed the most fitting. “Here. That’s a good place, two blocks or so over, that one’s run by a trans guy. And that’s us; that’s Anna’s number right there—that’s my girlfriend—and that’s the address of our meeting place. Come to one of our meetups sometime. Ask for me. I’m Kerry.”

Hekate swallowed dryly. “We’re just traveling through,” she managed to repeat with a weak voice.

As if she wasn’t human at all, but a demon with a disconcerting amount of telepathic skill, Kerry seemed to look right through her. She gave her a strange motherly look that didn’t fit somebody that fierce. “Of course you are, that’s why I gave you the hotel information just now,” she said.

Hekate cleared her throat to say... She wasn’t even sure what she wanted to say. But then she suddenly sensed Cal’s attention turning toward her, felt her searching the crowd. She muttered a hurried goodbye and turned fast on her heel. The business cards were clutched in her hand so hard that their edges had to be leaving lines on the skin of her palm.

“Oh hey, so there’s been news,” Cal said as soon as Hekate returned to her side. Hekate didn’t slow down. She just kept moving, needing to put as much distance between her and Kerry as quickly as she could. Cal fell into step with her easily, obviously noticing nothing

amiss. "Guess who's graced us with an update. We're allowed to go home and everything. Mission's over. We don't even have to report in."

"Right," Hekate said, unable to properly catch her breath.

Cal shrugged. "Achna's team apprehended our two bad boys. In Natick of all places. So much for searching inside the city limits."

"About damn time," Hekate managed, hopefully sounding a little more like herself on this second try. She felt as if she were on high alert, the same way she'd felt when they'd first crashed into that building at the start of tonight's battle.

"Now I say we finish looking at all this fun stuff first," Cal continued. "Sure, we could do with some sleep, but this Christmas thing will be over when we're off the next time, right? Did you know, by the way..." she added blithely as their walk slowed to a more normal pace, leaving her with opportunities to look at displays again. "...that humans give gifts to each other on the morning of the twenty-fifth? That guy just told me. Their children think that somebody throws them into the house through the chimney. So weird."

"You want me to give you a Christmas gift now; is that it?" Hekate replied, her normal dry tone making a reappearance without it being any of her conscious doing.

Cal smirked. "I'll never say no to a present."

"Well, that's a no. I couldn't properly aim it at your head through a chimney."

This time around, they came to a stop simultaneously; miraculously, nobody bumped into them from behind. The crowd was dividing in front of them to stream around a huge Christmas tree, and they paused to take in this sight as well. It wasn't quite as massive as the one at the Boston Common that Hekate had often seen when attending to clan business on Beacon Hill, but it still dwarfed the two of them, as well as all the booths and shops around. More importantly,

it was breathtakingly covered in row upon row of white Christmas lights, and it glittered like a giant diamond. It was beautiful, and it tickled Hekate just to look at it.

Dykes, she thought. Dykes, lesbians, LGBT. She had the gut impression that those words weren't much better to most of the humans than demons, succubi, vampires. But the thing was, when humans thought of demons as the spawn of evil, they were wrong. That meant they could be wrong about the other thing as well. Kerry thought they were wrong. There appeared to be whole groups of people who agreed with her. And that meant there was room for change.

The humans had words for them.

As the clan leader of Iveragh, Cal couldn't open herself up to public disapproval. And who even knew if she would get equally excited about learning those new words, or whether they just would mean that her secret became more real and therefore scarier. And the demon world wouldn't care that there were words, either. "The humans do it," was the last argument that would tease a positive reaction out of the Council of the Twelve.

And, yet, it didn't matter. Cal had taken Hekate's hand today and pulled her along. The humans were celebrating a holiday, handing out gifts, and now, the two of them were standing in front of a tree that looked astonishing in a way that nothing built without demonic energy had any right to look. Surely anything was possible. Hekate suddenly felt exhilarated.

She turned to face Cal, not caring that she ended up a little closer to her face than would have been decent—or rather, not caring that she cared so much about how close they were. She automatically glanced at Cal's lips before looking at her eyes again.

"Let's not go home at all," she heard herself say. "Let's go to a hotel. Everybody at the clan house will think we're still on duty. They won't miss us. Let's get a room."

"What?" Cal said, clearly startled, but she didn't move away. She seemed transfixed by Hekate as well, and that felt so empowering that she physically felt it running through her veins.

"I know a place," she said. "We can get a room together, and nobody will even blink."

It was as if that was all that had been needed to open the floodgates. It was, maybe, as if all that Cal had ever needed to hear was a firm I want. This wasn't how things usually went between them, this acknowledgement that there was something and that it would happen. Hekate knew that she herself had forced these encounters any number of times, although she'd never have admitted it to herself. In the end, though, it always seemed accidental when they found themselves alone with each other.

Now, there was no deniability.

A myriad of emotions moved across Cal's face at her words, caution and defensiveness, fear and confusion, but they cleared away as quickly as they had appeared, leaving behind an expression of raw need. Her gaze burned into Hekate's.

"Okay," she said breathlessly, sounding as if she'd suddenly run out of words. Then she whispered, "Show me."

So Hekate did.



Cal was a beautiful woman in a unique way, with long brown hair and a lean frame that never fully gave away the secret of how strong she was. She moved with a startling, dangerous grace, and she

brimmed with deadly, demonic powers. Hekate would never tire of undressing her.

Not that it took particularly long. They were well practiced at getting each other out of their clothes in a hurry. They had never had much time, and they were always fueled by a need to be quick so that nobody would notice something amiss—not to mention the desperate need that overruled clear thought. Now, they did have time. They just chose not to take it. This was planned. It was deliberate, and the fact that they'd be able to do it again once they were done just made their desire more urgent.

For the first time in this war and in her life, Hekate felt fueled by a real sense of agenda, a first glimpse at what she really wanted. And it wasn't that she knew exactly what that should be yet, except that it should involve Cal—but it was such a breathtaking start. She pushed Cal onto the bed. She kissed her, deeply, then moved to her throat and collarbone. When her mouth reached Cal's breasts, and her hand finally slid between her legs, Cal moaned helplessly; she looked at Hekate with such a desperate look that said, I'm so sorry for wanting this so much and I'm sorry I need you to take the lead when that should be my job. Hekate soothed her with a kiss that said it was perfect this way.

Telepaths were taught to keep their walls up, but that was a lot to ask if all you wanted was to crawl into each other and stay there forever. When they climaxed, one quickly followed by the other, their shielding shattered. For a moment, they really were in synch. Everything became a shared more and together and need you and have you, and they both knew with certainty that everything would be all right.



They'd been on their feet for over twenty-four hours. When they finally fell asleep huddled against each other, they didn't wake up once through all of the afternoon or the following night. Hekate finally blinked her eyes open at dawn, and she lay there for a moment wondering why such unexpectedly bright light was falling through the window. Then she noticed the soft white snowflakes tumbling down outside, the snow film on the surrounding rooftops reflecting the sun. Right. It was Christmas morning. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she remembered snow was significant to that fact. Hekate couldn't quite recall the exact reason, but it still looked beautiful. It looked peaceful.

Cal was sprawled all across her, her hair spread out over Hekate's breasts and the blanket, her face buried in the crook of Hekate's neck. She felt very warm and incredibly soft. As Hekate took in the novel sensation of waking up so close to each other, Cal started to move, stretching as much as she could without releasing Hekate. She made a contented sound.

Hekate tried not to sigh, forbidding herself to move. The war had made her cynical, after all, and she thought that probably this would be over in a second. Cal would fully wake and give her a shocked look. She would blame yesterday's sleep deprivation or the adrenaline of battle. She'd do her mightiest to act as if this had never happened and be quick to leave the hotel. It was quite possible, after all, that only Hekate felt as if the world had changed. It might still be the same world for Cal, who hadn't seen Kerry kissing her girlfriend on the street. Hekate didn't even know if she should tell her about all that.

Then Cal was moving, apparently trying to find a more comfortable position on the pillow.

Her breath tickled against Hekate's throat.

"I think I like Christmas the best of all the human holidays," she muttered lazily.

Hekate snorted a surprised laugh.

"You don't even know what it celebrates."

"No," Cal agreed, her voice muffled. "But I like the part with the gifts."

Hekate smiled.



A bell chimed above the door when Hekate pushed it open. A slow workday lay behind her—most workdays were slow now that the clean-up of the war was finished. Still, it had been a long war; some had thought it wouldn't ever end. So many had died, and entire clans had gone down. So Hekate glowered at the human women at the closest table when they looked up, just out of principle.

The women answered by giving her a cheerful wave.

Her lips twitched after all, at that.

It was 1996. The LGBT Coalition took over this Charlestown pub as it did every other Tuesday, and the first couple of members had already trickled in. The guest of honor was probably here already, in the back room, preparing their handouts or whatever they'd brought for their speech. Some activist from the West Coast had been scheduled for tonight, Hekate was reasonably sure.

"Haven't seen you in a while," the bartender said as she handed Hekate a diet coke. Anna still sported a proud purple Mohawk, though these days it was streaked with green for flavor. Her presence probably meant that Kerry was around somewhere as well.

Hekate sank on the bar stool, accepted the proffered bottle, and gratefully took a sip.

“I’m hard to keep away,” she replied.

It was good to belong.

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Patricia's lesfic exists in German as well and can be found at www.patricia-penn.de.

About The Author

Patricia is interested in obscure trivia, good cognac und true crime. She spends her days teaching companies marketing, living in the Taunus Mountains close to Frankfurt, Germany alongside her Golden Retriever. On occasion she has also been known to knit or to debate what should happen next with a horse. Her last girlfriend emigrated to Mexico – hopefully not because of her.

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