

Tis the Season

By C. Jade Wyton

Portia Jackson loves Christmas. To her, it's the best time of year! It reminds her of her family and, even if remembering her family can hurt, she's excited for the holidays. However, while in the school cafeteria getting lunch, Portia notices her usually fun-loving friend Becky Bloom is looking outright miserable. She tries to cheer her up, but finds it all goes wrong.

Contains depictions of violence.

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It was nearly Christmas! The best time of the year! The carols, the food, seeing your family—

Portia felt a small twinge of sadness in her chest when she thought of family, and her smile dropped as she remembered that the only biological family she had left was her father....

She paused just outside the cafeteria door and took a moment to steel herself against her grief.

*Deep breath.*

Deep breath.

Brave face....

'Okay,' Portia let out her breath before stepping into the crowded cafeteria.

She grinned widely when she saw the many Christmas themed decorations covering the walls.

Roof to floor, festive paper cutouts, flyers, and tinsel made by students of all year levels plastered every spare surface.

*It was beautiful, Portia thought. And exciting!*

Her first Christmas in Winter! She couldn't believe it.

She'd always dreamed of a white Christmas, instead of the sweltering summer dust she'd grown up with in Australia.... And though she'd been disappointed finding out that it rarely snowed in Shadow Oaks, she'd shrugged it off and reminded herself of the good things.

Christmas in Winter was still such a fun, novel concept for her. She wasn't going to let *one* thing not going her way get her down.

She spied her fellow barbarian classmates across the room and gave them a nod before collecting her food and starting her way over to her friends.

Angelo, Benny, Cackle, Hazelnut, Jareth—

*Hm. Becky wasn't sitting on Jareth's lap today,* Portia noticed. And she wasn't sitting with the girls.... She must have been wagging, again—

*No, hold on.*

Portia stopped, noticing the almost-empty table in the corner of the cafeteria.

Becky was there. Sitting by herself, alone at the table with nine empty seats.

*That was unusual,* Portia thought. *Becky never sat alone....*

Portia cast a glance to her barbarian friends, who were too busy wrestling

amongst each other realise Portia had gotten distracted, and then looked back to Becky.

Becky looked... *different*.

Something about the way she was sitting.

Her shoulders were slumped, and she looked like she wasn't eating.

Had Jareth not noticed her?

Portia would have thought that he would have been on top of looking after Becky.... He *usually* was.

Maybe she should go and see if Becky was alright, herself. Maybe convince her to come join the barbarians?

Yeah. That seemed like a good idea.

Portia sighed before forcing a grin onto her face again, and she glance to her distracted classmates once more before veering off to sit across from Becky.

'Sup, Beck?'

Becky looked up from her untouched lunch to glare at the triton. The dark purple bags under her eyes made her sharp look seem even more vicious as her gaze followed Portia.

She said nothing.

'Beck?'

It was now that Portia realised the girl's hair was a mess. She'd assumed, coming over, that it was just the usual frizz from her monk class and practising martial arts with Katie.... But now it was clear that it was completely unbrushed; tied in a messy ponytail that was sitting too low for Becky's usual style.

'You, uh.... You right, Beck?' Portia cautioned, her smile falling as Becky looked away. 'Hey? Something up?'

Becky ignored her.

'Shit, you look like crap!' Portia exclaimed, trying to be playful as she reached across the table to try and push some loose strands of hair from her friend's face. 'C'mon, why so glum, ay?'

Becky yanked her head away from Portia's hand with an angry grunt. To Portia's surprise, Becky's lip curled to bare her teeth, just for a moment, before her features softened back into exhaustion.

*This was really unlike Becky....*

'I'm *fine*,' she grumbled, her eyes turning back to her food.

'Clearly you ain't,' Portia pushed, frowning and taking her hand back.

'Seriously, what's wrong, mate? It's Christmas! Time for cheer!'

Portia grinned widely, showing her sharp and ridged teeth, and made a silly hand motion to try and get Becky to return the smile.

It wasn't reciprocated.

*Hmm....*

Out of the corner of her eye, Portia noticed her classmates watching them and talking amongst themselves. Too far away to hear *exactly* what they were saying, but the way they were mumbling made Portia's skin crawl.

What the hell was the problem with them, today?

*Whatever.*

Portia pushed her nerves aside and turned back to Becky.

She may not have known what was going on, but she knew that her friend was

feeling down and needed cheering up.

Simple!

Or, maybe not so simple....

Portia noticed Becky grimace, and frowned as the half-elf moved to the other end of the table.

‘Ay, ay, what?’ Portia’s frown deepened, and she followed her friend to her new seat. ‘Becky! Beck. C’mon.’

Becky gave another grunt and picked up her fork, taking a bite of her lunch.

‘Right, if you ain’t gonna talk then you can be that way,’ Portia scoffed, taking a bite out of her own lunch. ‘I’m only trying to give you a laugh, yeah? But if you wanna be a Grumpy Gus, then fine. Be grumpy.’

Becky’s glare came back, but she didn’t speak.

‘What’s your problem, Beck? C’mon, was it something I did?’

Becky swallowed her food, and then looked Portia up and down. ‘What are you wearing?’ she asked, dryly.

‘My new Christmas dress! And antlers! Not real ones, course,’ Portia beamed, perking up at her friend’s question— *Maybe she was getting through to Becky?* ‘Like it? I was thinking the green was better than the red, but hey! I’m fairly sure that T is colourblind so not like he’ll notice or anything. Shit, that was kinda mean. You think T will like this? Hell, I reckon Jareth would love to see you in a Christmas outfit like this, too....’

Portia trailed off as she saw her friend’s face. She had never seen Becky look so disgusted in her *life*.

The half-elf’s eyes tightened as Portia asked if she liked the outfit— And then her nose scrunched in a scowl at the suggestion she wear something similar.

‘It’s childish,’ Becky finally spoke, her voice full of venom before she stuffed a very wet-looking carrot into her mouth.

‘*Childish?!?*’ Portia exclaimed. ‘What— You calling me a kid?’

‘Hmp. Well. *If the boot fits,*’ Becky mumbled, taking another forkful of food.

Portia reeled back in shock.

*The fuck, Becky?!?*

She cast a glance up to the barbarians, and realised immediately that something was wrong as they all watched on in tense, stunned silence— Except for Jareth, who was shaking his head and motioning for Portia to be quiet, mouthing something she couldn’t quite catch....

*No? No? Leave her?*

Portia frowned.

The hell was the problem with them, that *Jareth* would be telling her to leave Becky alone in this state?

Had they broken up and not told her, or something...?

Portia turned back to Becky.

‘What’s your problem, Beck?’ Portia grumbled. ‘You wake up on the wrong side of the bed, or what?’

‘No, I’m just old enough to know that Christmas is for babies and *freaks,*’ Becky grumbled, and Portia felt herself growling as Becky continued. ‘So which would you rather me call you? You’re my friend, so I’ll give you the choice! Are you a baby, or a freak?’

Portia tightened her fist, feeling herself beginning to tremble. ‘Becky, don’t you fucking *dare!*’ she snapped, loudly. ‘Don’t you fucking *dare* call me a freak!’

Portia felt the entire air of the cafeteria change as all of her nearby classmates fell silent; their eyes on the two women.

She looked up to the barbarians again and saw the panicked looks in their eyes as they all motioned for Portia to stop.

*Stop!*

*Stop!*

*For the love of God, STOP!*

Portia took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down.

*Becky doesn’t know*, she reminded herself. *Becky doesn’t know you’re trans.*

*She doesn’t mean it in that way.*

‘Don’t call me a freak, Becky,’ Portia said, her voice trembling.

‘Why not?’ Becky chided.

Portia swallowed, realising that she couldn’t say why.... Not in front of everyone.

She couldn’t just out herself like that.

That had been one of the few *good* things about uprooting her entire life and moving out of Australia— She only had to come out to people she *wanted* to come out to.... And she was *not* ready to come out to *the entire school*....

Portia let out a heavy breath before matching Becky’s fierce gaze.

‘Don’t call me a freak, Becky,’ she said, seriously, hoping her tone was enough to get her point across. ‘I’m not a freak.’

For a second, Becky’s eyes softened— But then she gave a grunt and turned away. She picked up her drink as she did, though it was clear it was just so she had an excuse to avoid apologising.

*At least she seemed to have gotten the message....*

Still, though, Portia didn’t look away. Her gaze dug into her friend viciously.

*What the hell was Becky’s problem, anyway?!*

What had Portia done to make the woman so mad at her?!

Becky finished her drink with a loud slurp and slammed the empty carton down on the table. ‘You should just go,’ she said, sounding equal parts angry and exhausted. ‘Go find someone who actually *wants* company.’

‘Oh, what? Am I not good enough for ya or something?!’ Portia growled, feeling the anger bubble back up as she raised her hands in offence.

Becky’s lip twitched, and Portia felt the rage building and building. But she swallowed it down, even as it reached its boiling point, and was determined not to give in.

*Becky was her friend.* And whatever the hell was going on with her, right now, she wasn’t going to let it get under her skin.

‘Well you’re being a right grinch, ain’t ya!’ she remarked.

It was meant to be a joke, but Portia realised too late that the anger in her voice made it seem more insulting than playful.

Becky simply rolled her eyes and looked away. ‘So *go*,’ she growled. ‘And leave me alone.’

‘Alright, fine. I will,’ Portia frowned. ‘But first, I want you to apologise.’

‘For what?’ Becky growled. ‘You coming over here and bothering me? I don’t

think so.'

'For being real fucking nasty when all I'm doing is just trying to be a good friend to ya, ay!' Portia shot back.

'Hah! Good friend?' Becky scoffed. 'No. How about *you* apologise to *me*? First for being an eyesore, second for being a nuisance.'

That was *it*!

'What'd you *fucking* call me?' Portia slammed her hands on the table. 'You have a problem with how I look, ay?! You think I'm a nuisance, too?! Well, I could say the same for you, Miss *Bimbo Slut*! Why don't you get a fucking personality that's not ripped right outta a fucking movie?!'

The entire cafeteria broke out into whispers and hurried mumbles as Portia pushed herself to her feet to glare Becky down.

'For real! What is your fucking problem with me, Beck?!' Portia growled. 'The *fuck* I ever do to you?! I thought we were mates, didn't I?! Guess I was fucking wrong, then!'

Becky's ears gave an uncomfortable twitch as Portia raised her voice, and she visibly winced, and for a moment Portia wondered if the softening at the edges of her eyes meant she was going to relent....

But then Becky's brow furrowed again and she mimicked Portia, slamming her hands on the table as she rose to her own feet.

'You *wish* you had half the personality I have,' Becky replied, her voice breaking. 'Then maybe you wouldn't have to throw a block party every other weekend just to get people to pay attention to you!'

'Nah, I'll just grow a pair of tits, ay!' Portia retorted. 'Then I won't even *need* a personality, just a fucking camera and one of your low-cut tops!'

Portia saw the blow hit, and felt her chest tighten.

*Stop*, she willed herself. *Walk away*.

There was a tense silence between the two, as the whispers in the cafeteria grew more intense.

*Leave it.*

*Cool off and come back later.*

*It's not worth it.*

And then the whispers got louder, and louder, until Portia couldn't hear herself think— She whipped around to her classmates, flashing her pointed teeth at them.

'Oi! Shut the *fuck* up!' she shouted before turning back to Becky. 'Beck, I'm just trying to understand you, here. What'd I do wrong, huh?'

'You moved here, for one,' Becky growled.

Portia felt herself scowl and, even though she was *screaming* at herself to turn around and walk away, she continued to argue. '*What?* Am I a threat to you or something? Am I gonna burst your little bimbo-bubble? Ruin your social standing? Take your place? Cos that ain't what I'm trying to do! I just wanna make some *fucking friends*! If you think me being popular is a threat to your own popularity, that's *your* problem.'

'It's *cute* that you think I think of you as a threat to the social ladder,' Becky snarled. 'Or that it's *me* you'd have to climb over to get up top.... But if you *do* want to be one of the popular girls, though, maybe I can give you some advice?'

‘Go on then,’ Portia growled, rolling her eyes. ‘What’s your advice, then?’

The half-elf leant in close, dropping her voice to a whisper. ‘*The pretty blonde elf in the pink-and-blue dress is the one you want to be friends with, if popularity is what matters to you. Maybe you should be talking to her instead of this crazy bimbo....*’

‘*Right then,*’ Portia scoffed, matching Becky’s volume and tone. ‘*Maybe I will talk with her! Maybe I’ll get to know her. And maybe she’ll be a better friend than you—*’

The words were barely out of Portia’s mouth before Becky’s fist met Portia’s nose.

The triton stumbled back, tripping over her chair and falling to the floor. Then she looked up to see Becky had leapt onto the cafeteria table and kicked both trays of food aside.

She then opened her arms wide.

It was a clear invitation— And that was it for Portia.

The anger she had tried so hard to quell inside of her erupted, and all she saw was red-hot rage as she lunged at Becky.

She tackled the woman off the table and they tumbled to the floor in a heap.

There was screaming, and cheering, and the clattering of chairs as students both crowded around them and fled the cafeteria in fear.

Portia lay blow after blow into Becky— And then she was lifted into the air by large orcish hands, and the last she saw of Becky was Jareth hefting her over his shoulder and out the cafeteria doors.

Portia gave a snarl and writhed in Benny’s grasp as she saw Becky disappear.

‘Portia! Enough!’ Benny snapped. ‘Stop! It’s over!’

‘No! Lemme go, Benny! She wanted to fight! I’ll give her a fucking fight!’

‘No, Portia, she didn’t!’ Benny exclaimed. ‘She *didn’t* want to fight you!’

‘What the fuck do you mean by that?! Of *course* she fucking did!’ Portia snarled. ‘She fucking— She fucking *punched* me, Benny! Didn’t you fucking see it?!’

‘I did! Of course I did but—’ Benny pulled Portia away, dragging her out of the cafeteria and into the hall opposite where Jareth took Becky. He deposited her on the floor and then let out a heavy, tired sigh. ‘Portia, she didn’t want to fight. *She wanted you to hurt her.*’

‘The fuck you mean by that, Benny?’ Portia spat. ‘What? She *wanted* me to beat her up? Why the fuck’d she want that?’

‘Because she’s fucking *crazy*, Portia!’ Benny exclaimed. ‘Look she’s— She’s not herself right now—’

‘Oh, *I’ll fucking say!*’ Portia snapped. ‘Fucking hell. I was trying to cheer her up, and she tries to fucking *bash* me!’

‘Portia. She wasn’t trying to “bash” you,’ Benny sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. ‘She wasn’t even fighting back.’

Portia paused, her breathing heavy as she caught her breath.

*Not fighting back?*

Becky wasn’t... fighting back?

Portia had barely noticed it while it was happening... but now that Benny mentioned it she realised it *was* strange that, besides the initial punch, Becky

hadn't landed a single blow.

That was... definitely not right. Becky was a trained fighter! Portia had seen first-hand how good Becky was at getting a hit in— Her *entire strategy* was getting in as many blows as she could! For Becky to not land a *single* hit meant that she....

'She threw the fucking fight?' Portia realised out loud, frowning when Benny nodded. 'Why the fuck would she pick a fight just to deliberately lose?!'

'I... I think she's looking for a reason to feel bad,' Benny said. 'She does this every year.... She tries to make up something to be upset about, because otherwise she has to think about the *real* reason she feels like shit.'

'And what's that, ay?'

Benny bit his lip, and shook his head. 'It's complicated.'

'Oh, I don't even get to fucking *know* why one of my best friends just turned on me, huh?' Portia threw up her hands in frustration before turning away from Benny and, without another word, stormed away down the hall.

—END—

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