



art by Tihomir Tikulin-Tico

The Power of the Cocoon

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

The living room had the usual appearance of Christmas aftermath, as though a herd of many-trunked elephants had rushed through, grabbed anything wrapped in paper, ripped the paper off, tossed it on the floor, then stomped on it. The multi-colored twinkly lights on the Christmas tree reflected from scraps of foil paper and the firework bursts of discarded metallic ribbon.

Emma's older sister Alice had carried her new supply of glam clothes and trending devices up to her room. Emma's younger brothers Oliver and Lowell had raced outside with their new Razor electric scooters, leaving the rest of their gifts in staggering stacks by the couch where they had unwrapped them.

Grandma Clare was sitting in the armchair by the fireplace, staring at the torn paper at her feet. Her gifts were tucked neatly into a box on the side table near her chair. She had deployed her knitting needles and was clicking away.

Dad was in the kitchen, frying ham for the afternoon meal. The smell made Emma's stomach growl, despite all the Christmas pancakes she'd eaten before the mad gift-unwrapping scramble of the morning.

Mom, hands on her hips as she stood by the door, looked over the living room and said, "Emma, would you and Gran clean up in here? The cousins are coming in a couple of hours, and I have a lot of things to do before they get here."

"Sure," Emma said.

"Thanks, sweetie." Mom dropped a kiss on Emma's cheek and rushed through the swinging door toward the kitchen.

Emma studied her own stack of gifts. Again this year she hadn't gotten a single thing she'd asked for. She was fifteen. She hadn't gotten what she wanted for Christmas since she'd asked for a Golden Angel Barbie when she was ten. Her favorite Christmas ever.

This year, she had a bunch of useful gifts, including nudges to study from Mom and Dad in the form of educational video games. Ugh. She'd gotten one silvery knit shirt that didn't totally suck. The rest of the gifts were things she'd never use or wear. Even Lowell, her favorite brother, had failed her. He'd bought her a shoot-to-kill video game he would enjoy much more than she would.

Gran put down her knitting needles. "Emma, dear, take your things upstairs and come back down. I've got a secret to show you."

"Oh, boy!" Gran's secrets were the best. Emma took her presents up and dumped them on her bed, then raced back downstairs and pulled a chair over next to Gran's.

"I don't know if you noticed," Gran said, resting her hand on Emma's knee, "but I didn't give you your present yet."

"Oh. No, Gran, I'm sorry. I didn't notice."

"That's fine, dear. I was saving your gift till now. Do you know how special you are?"

Emma felt heat in her cheeks. "You always say that, Gran, but it's not true. Alice is so talented! She has the voice of an angel. Everybody says she should be on American Idol. Lowell is the best at any sport he tries, and Oliver is so smart. I'm the brown bird in a family of peacocks."

Gran patted Emma's knee. "You're the one I teach the secrets to," she said.

Emma put her hand over Gran's. "Yes."

"Get out your needles and yarn."

Emma fetched the wickerwork basket where she kept her craft supplies, all things Gran had been teaching her. She pulled out the soft red-and-silver scarf she was knitting. She had about six inches on it so far. "Is this going to help us clean up the room?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. It's the best part of Christmas. I've been saving this secret for you for years now. Get your needles ready."

Emma finished a row and held her needles poised for the next stitch.

"Now," Gran whispered, "use your other eyes to look at the paper. What do you see?"

Emma blinked into the special sight Gran had been teaching her to use. "Oh!" she cried.

The room had turned into a forest of colored threads of light that formed images: heaps of holiday food, fashionable clothes, fantastically ornate toys, electronics--the huge-screen TV Dad had wanted, the bells-and-whistles laptop Mom had wanted, the iPhones all the kids had requested and not gotten--and a boy and girl, holding hands, who looked like Alice and her hoped-for boyfriend Blake, all glowing and idealized, with a taste/fragrance of spice, cocoa, and peppermint that tasted like joy.

"This is the power of the cocoon," Gran whispered. "What enwraps and conceals potential. Until you actually open the gifts, you don't know but that they'll be the most wonderful things you've ever seen or touched or used. Hope soaks into the paper all year, and especially all of December. Our fantasies of joy."

"Oh," Emma whispered. She held out her hand to a glowing image of her own dream gift, a thirty-six-color box of Prismacolor pencils and a big sketch pad. Gran had been teaching her the power of images, how if you captured an accurate picture of something, you could change it. Cameras didn't quite work--not enough of herself went into the capture to give her power over the image. She was taking drawing classes as her elective this year.

"There it lies, before us," Gran whispered. "Now, repeat these words after me, and knit it into your project. That locks it up until you want to let it loose again. You can drink it, or nibble on it, or wear it, or send it out to do work for you. Here are the words." Gran taught Emma the secret chant.

They knitted together, murmuring the chant over and over, and stitching dreams into interlocking loops to wear and savor later.

"Fantastic!" Mom said, startling Emma out of bright, tasty wishes.

Emma looked around. The room was clear of paper; only the presents people hadn't put away yet remained of the morning's unwrapping.

Emma stroked the length of scarf across her lap. Warmth wrapped her, and golden light, and the taste of gingerbread and whipped cream lay on her tongue. She shared a smile with Gran.

The End

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Over the past thirty years, Nina Kiriki Hoffman has sold more than 300 works of fiction to anthologies, magazines, and book publishers. Her novels have been published by Ace, Avon, Viking, and others. Her short fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Analog, F&SF, Weird Tales, Strange Horizons, Clarkesworld, Daily Science Fiction, and elsewhere. She has won a Stoker and a Nebula. Her latest publication is *Permeable Borders*, a short story collection from Fairwood Press, which received a starred review in *Publisher's Weekly*.