

## Alexis Hamilton

I never used to really appreciate Christmas.

Oh, I thought I did. When I was a kid, I certainly appreciated the materialistic aspects of it. When I'd grown up a little, enough to see it in a more spiritual light, I even thought I appreciated the religious and philosophical aspects. But I didn't.

I used to think that the Christmas Truce of 1914 was a miracle. Literally a miracle. I couldn't see how else people could have just...stopped fighting each other like that.

I understood the situation a little better, now. I'd been around to see some shit. I was still a raw novice compared to a lot of the Guards, but I'd been through some shit. And I understood why that truce would have happened, now.

War is hell. I'm nowhere near the first person to say it, of course, but it hasn't gotten any less true over the years. On any scale, war is hell.

I've never fought in a war, exactly. But with Winter, I did some things that were sort of similar, and then since I joined the Guards I've done more. I've fought my share of battles. I've killed. Hell, even before I started working with Winter, I did some ugly things. With the gang, and then with the skinwalker. I'd seen more than my share of darkness.

It's easy to let that wear you down. It's easy to let it in. It's very, very easy to let it become who you are.

You have to take a moment, every now and then, to remind yourself that it's not. You have to remind yourself that there's more to you than just darkness and violence. That there's more to the *world* than that.

Even monsters can't be monsters all the time.

That, to me, was what Christmas had become. It was a chance to feel human again. It was a chance to remember that there was light in the world.

I'd noticed that I wasn't alone, either. It was a general feeling, among the Guards. It wasn't even a religious thing, not really. Most Guards weren't Christian; I was something of an oddity in that, in fact.

But the *message*, that was something we could all appreciate. There was a very powerful message to it, one that had a great deal of appeal to us. The notion that things were going to be okay. That sacrifice had meaning. That no matter how much people fought, no matter how appalling the things we did were, we were still *people*.

*That* was what Christmas meant.

I'd heard that as a kid, too, of course. All the songs and sermons about peace and brotherhood and love for all the world. But, in one of those odd little twists of fate, you couldn't really *hear* it until you *needed* it.

I needed it tonight. Even if it was just for one day out of the year, I needed to feel like there was something more. Like maybe, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, things might turn out all right in the end.

I sat in the chapel and waited as the sun set and people slowly started to filter in. Each of them was holding a light—a candle, a lighter, a glimmer of magical light. I had my own, a spark of blue electric fire held in the air between my fingers.

There was no real signal for the song to start. One person just started singing, and then another joined in, until the whole room was singing. None of us were very good, and the song was predictably clumsy. But what it lacked in technical precision, it made up for in wholehearted feeling.

I added my voice to the chorus, with as much passion as anyone else. "Silent night," I sang, in that dim, flickering light. I had tears in my eyes, and I wasn't alone. "Holy night...."

### **Alexander Hoffman**

The holidays meant different things to different people.

For some, they were a time of peace and light. They were a time when people came together under a shared banner, though they might loathe each other every other day of the year. They were a time of unity and overcoming the barriers between them.

For others, they were a time of stress and strife. They were a time when they were bombarded with advertisements and annoying music. They were a time when money was tight and the nights were long and cold and the cheer and merriment all around grated like salt in an open wound.

For some—children, in particular, tended to feel this way—they were a simple time. They were a time of joy, and didn't need to be anything more complex than that. The context, the history, none of that mattered. They didn't need to think about any of that. For them, it was just a time to be happy.

In my case, things were a bit more complex. I could appreciate the context and the history. I had, after all, born witness to a considerable proportion of that history. Christmas had been a part of my life for a very long time now, and my opinions on the topic had gone through a predictable amount of change over that time.

At this point, for me, it was a season for remembrance. A time to reflect on days gone by. It was a time to pause and think back on what had gone before.

It was one of the very few times I allowed myself to think about the past. After a hundred years or so, it got to be an easy thing to do. There was so much past that it could easily weigh one down. The human mind had not been designed to bear up under the weight of so much time, and it invariably produced interesting psychological results when it was required to.

This evening, I finished my work in the laboratory and set it aside. I went upstairs, turning off the lights behind me, and then went up to the second floor. It was slightly dusty. I hadn't been up there in...oh, it must have been close to six months. Time passed so fast.

I started heating milk on the stovetop, then built a fire while it warmed. I finished making cocoa, then carried the cup into the other room.

I threw the windows open, with a low groan as long-stuck hinges opened again. I stood there for a moment, looking out into the snowy night, then went back to the armchair by the fireplace. I sat and wrapped myself in an old, faded blanket. I took another sip of cocoa, then grabbed an old, faded book from the table. I opened it, taking care not to damage the fragile binding, and began to read.

After a while, I realized that I was humming "Auld Lang Syne" to myself as I read the journal. Normally, I would have stopped.

Tonight I kept humming, and reading, while the fire burned and the snow fell and the cocoa got cold beside me.

Hours later, as the grey light of almost-dawn began to touch the horizon, I finally turned the last page and closed the book again. The fire was reduced to coals, and the half-empty cup on the table was cold to the touch.

I pushed the blanket aside and stood, moving just a bit stiffly. I walked to the window and once again looked out over the city. I very rarely felt any appreciable emotional response, anymore. But I felt a dull melancholy and the longing ache of a hole that had never quite filled in again, now.

"I still miss you," I said quietly into the night, and then closed the window, and went back downstairs.

## **Kyra Walker**

I walked in the door and my mother said, "I'm dying."

I stopped and stared. "What?"

"You were about to ask me why I asked you to come," she said, picking up a cup of coffee and stirring it. The bones of her wrist stood out sharply, and I could see her veins from across the room. At some point since I saw her last, she'd gotten old. "That's why. I'm dying."

"What's wrong?" I asked. I sounded calm and uncaring. I wasn't entirely sure whether it was an act.

"Cancer," she said simply. "Anaplastic thyroid cancer, specifically. My understanding is that I'll most likely be dead in a year. Probably less."

"Ah," I said. "And...you couldn't tell me that on the phone?"

She sighed. "I know that we haven't always been on the best of terms," she said.

I snorted. "Or any terms."

"Hush," she said sharply. "I'm the one who's dying. You can at least take the time to hear me out. We haven't always been on the best of terms. That's largely my fault. I've not done a very good job of accepting you for who you are."

"You don't say."

"Hush," she said again. "Kyra. I was wrong. I made a mistake. I'm sorry."

I was quiet for a few seconds. "You know," I said at last, "I wanted to hear that for years. I wanted to hear you apologize."

"I wanted to apologize," she admitted. "For a long time now. But there was always a reason not to. I could always tell myself that I'd do it later." She was silent for a moment. "I'll say that for the cancer, at least," she said. "It's made it much easier to convince myself not to procrastinate."

"And...what? You think that just saying you're sorry is going to make things better?"

She shook her head, smiling sadly. "I know better than that," she said. "I can't make things right at this point. I know that. I just...wanted to say that I was sorry. And ask whether you could forgive me."

I opened my mouth, but she raised her hand, cutting me off. Her hand shook slightly. "Hear me out," she said. "Now that I'm at the end of my life, I find myself thinking about the past. I don't have many regrets, on the whole. But I should have done better by you. I know that I don't deserve your forgiveness. But I had to ask."

I didn't say anything for a little while. She was content to sip her coffee and wait.

"You made some mistakes," I said at last, slowly. "But so have I. We all make mistakes. I can't say that you're *wrong*. But...sometimes people have to get better than they deserve. Because otherwise, what's the point of it all?"

After a second, she reached out and rested one shaking hand on my shoulder. After a second, I reached up and rested my hand on hers.

We sat and watched the snow fall together.

## Nicolas Pellegrini

I had always been partial to the sound of bells. It wasn't something I could entirely explain. It wasn't particularly logical. There was no rational reason for me to feel that way. And yet.

Normally I rode in the back of a car that someone else drove. It was expected of someone in my position. There were good reasons for it. It was safer, for one thing. It was good for my image. I very seldom disregarded those reasons.

But today was the exception. Today was the day I reminded myself why I'd started this whole enterprise in the first place.

I still took precautions, of course. One did not achieve success in my field by disregarding matters of safety entirely, ever. I was heavily armed, with Michaelson on my left and Andrews on my right. Carrie was holding my hand, her fingers cold on mine. I was still quite glad to have reached a reasonable agreement with her. The fae creature was a great deal more valuable of an employee than her childlike appearance might suggest.

Our unlikely group walked through the streets, the snow crunching beneath our feet. All around, people were resting safely in their beds. Lights burned in many windows, but many others were dark. People tended, by and large, to go to sleep early on this night.

It didn't take long for us to find what we were looking for. The man, wearing the typical uniform, was standing outside a grocery store, and just concluding his work for the evening. As we stood and watched, from just far enough away that he would most likely not notice, he rang his bell a few last times and then set it aside.

He collected his things, and then after a few minutes he left, carrying the money he'd collected. A considerable amount of money, enough to be a tempting target.

He started walking. He didn't have a car. That was part of why I had selected this store. We followed him, keeping enough of a distance that he was unlikely to realize he was being followed. He was a charitable man by nature, and suspicion didn't come naturally to him.

We followed him in silence for the next fifteen minutes, and I started to wonder whether I had guessed incorrectly.

Then another, much younger man stepped out of an alley, brandishing a knife.

Before he could do much more than that, we were on him. Andrews stepped up, with smooth precision, and plucked the knife out of his hand. Seconds later, Michaelson grabbed him and pinned his arms behind his back. Carrie and I were slower, but reached them within a few moments more.

"You were about to mug this man for money that strangers donated for charity," I said. "On Christmas Eve, no less. You should be ashamed. If I hear that you've done anything of this sort again, I will find you and you *will* regret it. The only reason I am being this lenient is out of respect for the principles of mercy and forgiveness which your attempted victim preaches. Do you understand?"

The man didn't react for a few seconds. Then Michaelson put a bit of pressure on the hold, jolting his captive back to reality, and he nodded frantically.

"Good," I said, gesturing very slightly. Michaelson let him go. "Get out of my sight."

He wasted no time in complying, slipping on the ice in his haste to get away. I turned to the other man in this little drama. "I apologize for the trouble," I said. I pulled a folded hundred-dollar bill out of my pocket and handed it to him. "I thought I'd better wait to give that to you until we were out of sight. It seems I was right."

He looked at the bill without comprehension for a moment, then quickly put it into the bucket he was carrying. "Thank you," he said. "God bless you."

Carrie let out a little delighted laugh, and Michaelson grinned. Even Andrews smiled slightly. I very nearly smiled myself.

"It's a bit late for that, I think," I said.

He shook his head. "It's never too late," he said firmly.

I didn't bother disagreeing. Some people were beyond the capacity of logic to convince. "Let us walk with you the rest of the way," I said instead. "In case anyone else gets foolish ideas."

He looked a bit dubious, but didn't argue. We walked with him in silence, escorting him until he was safely behind locked doors, and then turned away.

"It's interesting," Andrews said to me, as the others went to fetch the car. "Why did you this?"

"He was mugging people without my approval," I said. "You know that I don't allow criminals to operate in this city without my permission. It's bad for business."

Andrews shook his head. "No. This wasn't just business. Otherwise you'd just have sent someone to take care of it, rather than coming yourself."

I smiled, very slightly. "I've always been partial to the sound of bells," I said.

Andrews also smiled, but didn't say a word.

We stood in silence until I saw Michaelson and Carrie returning with the car. They stopped a short distance away, the headlights reflecting brightly off the snow-covered streets.

"I have to think that he's right," I said quietly. "That it's never too late. I have to remind myself that not everything is business."

"It isn't?"

I shook my head slowly. "No," I said. "Not quite."

He nodded, looking at me thoughtfully. Then we got in the car, and we drove away.

## Selene

There are few holidays, where I come from. With reason, of course. They aren't exactly in keeping with the theme. Even the most macabre of human holiday traditions have an element of lighthearted joy that's out of place in a Hellish environment.

Once per year, though, there's a grand celebration, timed to coincide with their New Year celebrations. That one was, I believe, selected because it was the one holiday all mortal societies had in common, in one form or another. We're a strictly equal-opportunity organization, after all.

On the surface, it was a twisted mockery of a holiday, just to twist the knife a little bit more.

It was the first time in a year that I'd been back, but it was surprisingly easy to adapt to being home again. There were some things you didn't forget. It was like riding a bicycle.

This section of the domain called Hell was a bright, barren wasteland. The sun blazed brightly overhead, baking the dusty ground. The air was hot as an oven, and there were no growing things in sight. Not even a twisted shrub or cactus could grow here. There was no scrap of shade to give relief from the punishing sunlight. The air was utterly still, not even a trace of a breeze to bring respite from the heat.

Here and there, people and *things* were staked out on the ground. They were tied down with strands of lights and tinsel, to add that festive touch to suit the season. The lights sparked and burned, and the tinsel was maddeningly itchy and cruelly sharp. They were only marginally less horrid than the usual restraints.

I walked through it all and it didn't touch me. The light slid away from the shadows on my skin, and my feet didn't quite touch the ground. The embers falling from the sky and the sparks flying from the lights alike bent in the air to get out of my way, as though they were afraid to get too close.

There were perks to being a native.

My destination was a few hundred yards from where the portal had dropped me. The fortress loomed over the burning plain, all sharp angles and narrow spires of black stone and iron. The angles

didn't all come together in ways that made sense; anyone trying to map the building would have to have a very open mind and a decent understanding of non-Euclidean geometry.

The exterior looked smooth and featureless, but I was invited, and I could feel the entrance calling to me. I followed that slow, regular pulse to a patch of stone that looked identical to any other section of the wall. I stepped straight into the wall without a moment's hesitation, and passed through it without any resistance. Had I not been invited in, the wall would have been a very solid barrier. When you had administrative access to fundamental physical laws, a thing like selective permeability was child's play.

Inside, I was in a great, gloomy hall. High, narrow stained glass windows lined the walls, evoking the aesthetic of a Gothic church. The windows depicted very different scenes than most people would associate with a church, though. The vast majority were sexual or violent in nature; most were both. Not every part of Hell was associated with those themes, but this place was a sort of headquarters for those demons that dealt in flesh. It had been built to suit that demographic.

They'd changed the layout since the last time I came. But, again, I was invited. Navigation wasn't an issue. I could feel my destination, and it was effectively impossible to get lost when every path lead where I was going. Again, having access to the ground level of reality made it disgustingly easy to pull tricks with space that would be nearly impossible otherwise.

I walked through the hall, up a set of stairs, and around a corner, and then I was there.

The room was large—not absurdly so, the way a lot of Otherside builders chose to make their buildings when they could warp space, but it wasn't cramped. The enormous windows looked out over the vast plains from close to a thousand feet up, though I hadn't climbed anywhere near that far. Black tinsel and violet lights gave the place a distinctly cheery atmosphere, although it might not have been seen that way elsewhere. There *was* an element of the macabre to this festival, after all. That was inevitable, all things considered.

The party had already started. It was a good bit tamer than one might have expected from such an event. The key was that everyone here had seen enough wild parties that it no longer had all that much appeal. They were something done for business, rather than pleasure.

So there was no pounding bass here, no mad orgies or drug-fueled craze. The music was gentle, an orchestra playing softly in the background. People sipped drinks, chatted quietly, or played cards. Even by human standards, it would have been seen as quite a tame party.

I accepted a glass of brandy and sipped at it, savoring the delicate, smoky taste. I couldn't actually get drunk, of course. None of us could. Alcohol had no physiological effect on us. We'd been built to tempt others into doing foolish things, after all, not to be tempted ourselves. The drinks here were strictly for the taste.

I took my drink and sat on one of the leather couches. I sank into it slowly. A moment later an imp popped a black tasseled hat on my head, then flitted away, cackling. I swatted at him as he left, but I wasn't really upset.

As I sat and let the conversation wash over me, I almost let out a sigh of relief.

And that was the reason these festivities were more than just a cruel joke.

Most of us enjoyed our work. Of course we did. The work itself was not unpleasant, at least not in my opinion—and that opinion was not an uncommon one, here. It was fun, interesting, challenging work, with plenty of variety. Not to mention that it was, typically, quite pleasant physically.

On another level, there was a pleasure to be had in a difficult task done well. There was a satisfaction in being *good* at things, and we were very, very good. The thrill of finishing a job that almost no one else could have was an incredibly rewarding feeling.

And then there was the context underlying it. We all knew how important our work was, how vital it was to the world. There was a satisfaction there, as well. The feeling of being important, of contributing something to the world, of *belonging* to something larger than yourself, was rewarding enough to border on being addictive. I should know; it was a lure I'd used on other people fairly often.

Taken as a whole, it wasn't hard to see why we would enjoy our work. I didn't have any difficulty seeing why people very, very seldom chose to quit, though they could at any time.

But all the same, there were limits. Everyone needed to relax, every now and again. Even the most dedicated of workers needed a break every now and again. Otherwise the quality of the work would inevitably suffer.

For us, this was that break. The jokes and decorations and parties aside, this was the time we set aside to stop and take a breather. It was the time we took to remind ourselves of who we were, and what we were, and most importantly of *why* we were.

Later, there would be other things to do. There were friends and associates I hadn't spoken with recently, people I owed a visit. Coyote, of course, would be beyond displeased if I didn't stop by his party as well. I had plans.

But for now, for this one moment, I just sat and let my breath out, as all of Hell did the same around me.

**Edward Frodsham**

I seldom used the banquet table. It usually just plain wasn't needed. There weren't many occasions I wanted to have that many people over, and when I did we didn't often need a table. At a barbecue, people could stand around or sit on the ground. At a meeting, well, the same thing applied.

The only consistent exception to this rule of thumb was Christmas dinner. That dinner was more than a meal; it was an institution. I'd hosted Christmas dinner for the pack every year since the late nineteenth century, without fail. Come rain or snow or bloody conflict, there would be Christmas dinner. That kind of consistent ritual was important, I felt.

It drew a crowd. The whole pack was there, usually. It wasn't *required*, but people didn't want to miss it. That was close to fifty, right there, and fifty werewolves at that, which meant they ate for a couple hundred. Then there were mates, and kids, and a handful of friends who could be trusted not to make fools of themselves.

It was a lot of people. A godawful lot of people. I'd had to have that table built special, and the basement too, just to *fit* the damn thing. It wasn't an easy thing to feed them all, either. It seemed half of town spent the days leading up to Christmas cooking for it, and there still weren't usually leftovers.

I was the first person there, of course. Anything else would have been strange. I sat at the head of the table, and waited as people filed in and sat. They were talking, laughing, jostling each other. A lot of them had food of one kind or another.

It started to get crowded as more and more people showed up. People started pushing the chairs closer together to fit stools or overturned crates between them. A couple of people were even sitting on each other's laps.

But no matter how crowded it got, one chair was left strictly alone. Nobody touched it, let alone sat in it. The chair at the foot of the table was empty. It had a place setting in front of it, and a glass of wine. I'd never cared for wine myself, but it seemed more appropriate than beer or whiskey.

I wasn't entirely sure where the tradition had come from. I did it because my father had done it, and he did it because *his* father had done it, and before that, who knew?

But I always did it. It was what you did. You set a place and poured a drink for absent friends, so they'd know they had a place to come back to.

It was a silly little superstition. I knew that. But it was a silly little superstition that *meant* something to me. It was a way to remember those who wouldn't be coming back. And it was a way to remember that there was a place for those who might.

After everyone was seated, I took a knife and cut the ham. On that cue, people started piling food onto their plates. Another silly tradition, although not one that mattered to me half so much. Most of the people here weren't susceptible to poison anyway.

Hours later, when everyone was finished and gone back to their homes and it was just me, I stood and stretched stiffly. I walked over to the empty chair, and stood there looking at it for a moment.

"If you ever make it back," I said, picking up the glass, "there's a place for you. It's never too late to come home."

I poured the wine out onto the floor, and then went upstairs.