

A Song For Christmas

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"Mind if I join you?"

Ed Straker looked up from his lunch to see Alec Freeman standing beside the chair at the opposite side of the small cafeteria table. Freeman sat down without waiting for Straker's answer.

"Be my guest," Straker said with more than a hint of irritation.

"Not very busy up here," Freeman observed, looking around the large room.

"The studio's in hiatus until after the first of the year," Straker said. "You know that."

"Got your Christmas shopping done?"

Straker gave a tiny shrug. "Kate doesn't do Christmas. Not her religion."

"I thought it was considered un-American not to do Christmas," Freeman said with a grin. Straker didn't smile back. "What about your religion?" Freeman asked more seriously.

"I really haven't celebrated Christmas since the day Mary threw me out of the house, on Christmas Eve. You remember."

"That was a long time ago."

"Not so long," Straker said. "I was hoping this Christmas would be different. I could walk into a store without automatically looking for something John would like, or being reminded of all Christmases I missed because I was here instead of there."

"What about Esther?"

Straker gave Freeman a rueful grin. "Darling Esther is in trouble at daycare again for telling the littler kids there is no Santa Claus or Father Christmas."

"I bet that went over well," Freeman said.

"Like a lead balloon. Then she started in on the teacher, about how the Bible was historically inaccurate and internally inconsistent."

"And how old is she?" Freeman asked with a cheerfully disbelieving grin.

"Six going on sixty," Straker replied. "I'd never realized what a barbarous little monster she was. I don't remember Jon ever being that way."

Freeman chuckled. "I figured all kids were barbarous little monsters and it was the job of the grownups to turn them into civilized human beings."

"Pity you haven't found the right woman, Alec. You'd make a great father," Straker said. Pain flickered across Freeman's face so quickly Straker might have missed it if he hadn't known Freeman so well. "I'm sorry."

"She loved Christmas," Freeman said. "She would have made a wonderful mother."

"Yes, I think she would have," Straker agreed.

A group of SHADO operatives in civilian dress came in and assembled around the grand

piano in the corner of the cafeteria.

The cafeteria was the only part of the studio open for business through the Christmas break. The cafeteria was always open, catering to the needs of SHADO, the six hundred employees of Harlington-Straker Studios as well as the local area companies too small to afford their own full service kitchens.

SHADO headquarters, hidden beneath the offices and soundstages, was on round-the-clock duty, as always, and was devoid of seasonal decoration. The operatives made up for it in the cafeteria, extravagantly decking the large room with garlands and holiday scenery. Someone had gotten into the studio's prop storage and borrowed a nativity scene which was now in the corner of the room behind the piano. Several operatives were putting the finishing touches on the Christmas tree for the party being held later that evening. The party in the Harlington-Straker cafeteria was one of SHADO's few holiday traditions.

"You know what you need?" Freeman asked, interrupting Straker's observation of the crew by the piano. Ford had sat down at the keys and was attempting to play 'O Come All Ye Faithful.' It was painful to listen to it.

"You need to get out more. See how the rest of the world is doing."

"I have work to do," Straker said. He winced as Ford hit another bad note. "Now I know why they used to shoot the piano player."

"They used to have John Gray play the piano for them, but he's in San Francisco now," Freeman said.

"Somehow, I don't think there's time to get him back here to stop Ford from torturing that poor instrument," Straker said.

"Well, if we could find someone else to play, then maybe Ford wouldn't need to torture the piano," Freeman said.

"Why don't you do it, then?" Straker asked.

"I have plans for this evening."

"Do I know her?" Straker wondered. Freeman grinned.

"We could hire somebody," Straker suggested as Ford hit another clinker.

"On this short notice, on a holiday? Besides, you didn't have anything else planned for this evening, did you?" Freeman asked.

"No," Straker conceded.

Freeman watched as Straker got up from the table and went over to the group at the piano. He could see the relief in Ford's face as Straker sat down at the keyboard.

* * *

The SHADO carolers met at the main entrance to the Children's Hospital. The six women were in long, dark dresses and the five men wore tuxedos. It was a little odd seeing them dressed so formally. If Straker hadn't known what to expect, he might not have recognized them.

"I thought you usually did Mayland?" Straker asked Johnson.

"Yes, sir, and the offices across the way did Children's, but something came up for them this year and so we traded," she explained. "It'll be different for us. At Mayland, it's usually old people we perform for."

"When can we go home?" a child's voice asked as the group started to enter the building.

"When we're done," Straker said, holding out his hand to Esther. She stamped her patent leather shod foot in a fit of pique, tugging at her blue velvet dress.

"I want to go home now!" she whined. "I want to open my presents."

"One, in my family they're opened Christmas morning; and two, what makes you think you're getting anything?" Straker asked.

"It's Christmas!" she shrilled.

"We've had this discussion," Straker reminded her.

"I hate you!"

"You're in very good company and we're still not going home," Straker said sternly, grabbing her arm and leading her into the building to join the others.

"Sorry," Straker murmured to the group, suddenly wishing he could do as Esther wanted and simply go home. This was a part of his life he wanted to keep separate from SHADO and the studio. It was embarrassing having Esther behave like a spoiled, uncontrollable brat in front of people he supervised.

Besides, what had seemed like a good idea earlier in the day didn't look quite so appealing on a cold, dreary night with a cranky child in tow.

"It's okay, sir," Ford said. "I've got three at home. It does get better, eventually."

"When?"

"When they're old enough to leave home, sir," Louis Graham quipped from the back of the group.

* * *

The fifth floor patient lounge was decorated with plastic greenery and festive lights. A large artificial Christmas tree stood in one corner with wrapped boxes beneath it. The floor nurses were settling the audience in - a dozen children whose ages ranged from three to about twelve, though it was hard to tell with some of them. Most of the children were in wheelchairs with special adaptive fittings.

One child had family helping him, or her - it was hard to tell from the bald head and the swollen and misshapen face and body. The other children were alone except for the nursing staff and each other.

"The children who could go home for Christmas, have," one of the nurses explained.

Johnson and Peterson both looked like they were ready to cry. Ford and Graham didn't look to be in much better shape. Ford's three were in the same age range as the kids in the room. Graham's were a little older, but not much.

If this was what Freeman meant by 'getting out and seeing what the world was doing', Straker wasn't sure he really wanted anything to do with it.

"Pull it together people," he said, settling in at the piano and taking a deep breath "It's show time."

He motioned for Esther to sit beside him on the bench. The singers arranged themselves around the piano and forced themselves to smile as they opened their music.

Ayshea Johnson had a strong, almost professional quality, voice. Peterson's voice wasn't bad either. Ford and Anderson also had good voices. The four of them easily carried the rest of the group

At some point, Esther left the piano bench. Between pieces, Straker turned to check where she'd gone. She was easy to spot - the only short person in the room in a blue velvet dress. She was in deep conversation with a horribly disfigured wheelchair-bound child in the far back of the room. At least Esther was in deep conversation. Her companion was on a respirator and couldn't speak at all. One of the nurses caught Straker's eye and nodded approvingly, but there was something very sad in her smile.

Straker turned back to the music, a rousing rendition of 'God rest Ye Merry Gentlemen'.

An additional baritone voice sang out from the doorway. Straker turned his head just enough to see Paul Foster making his way through the room to join the group. Johnson had a smile of relief on her face as she handed him the music.

"Sorry I'm late," Foster apologized when the song was over. "We had a little problem just as I was leaving work."

"Oh?"

"Peter took care of it," Foster said. "Father Christmas is waiting outside, so we'd better do 'Here Comes Santa Claus' next."

Father Christmas arrived during the final refrain with a deep bellowing ho-ho-ho that sounded very familiar. Johnson and Peterson were hiding grins as they watched the red costumed figure greet the nurses and the children.

"I wondered where Alec always got off to on Christmas Eve," Foster said, not bothering to hide his own grin.

It was Alec Freeman under the padding and curly white beard, handing out small packages to the hospital staff and the patients. With a clatter of leather against tile, Esther ran to the tree and started reading off the labels on the larger packages, calling out the names. Freeman and the nurses handed out the larger packages.

But one package Esther reserved for herself, weaving her way through the wheelchairs to deliver it to her new friend at the back of the room. His hands didn't work very well, so Esther helped him open the package. It was a portable compact disk player with several CDs. The two of them inspected the disks and Esther's mouth pulled into a pout. The pout disappeared almost as quickly as it came as she ran to where Straker and the others waited.

"Bobby wants to hear Alvin's song," she announced. "It's not on the CDs."

"Alvin's song?" Johnson asked.

Esther nodded. "You know, the Chipmunks."

Johnson still looked mystified, but both Ford and Graham nodded in understanding.

"The Chipmunk Christmas song," Ford explained. "You know. Bum-bah-da-bum Bum-bah-dum."

Straker recalled the tune - Esther was wearing out the tape at home - and played a few bars of the introduction.

"That's it," Graham agreed.

"It isn't part of the repertoire," Straker reminded them.

"So?" Esther asked, hands on her hips. "It's a present for Bobby. It's for Christmas."

"But we don't have the words," Johnson reminded them. Esther pulled on her sleeve.

"I know them," Esther said and softly sang the words to the adults.

Within a few moments, the SHADO Christmas choir was singing the Chipmunk song with Esther contributing the solo, 'Me, I want a hula-hoop', with happy gusto.

At the end of the song, a shrill alarm sounded and cut off. Esther's eyes were wide as she watched the door. Straker turned to see a nurse wheeling Esther's new friend, Bobby, out of the room. Freeman's head was bowed, but it was hard to read his expression beneath the false beard.

One of the nurses came forward. Her eyes were tearing. "Thank you for singing that song for him. We looked all over and just couldn't find a copy. You made him very happy."

"Where'd he go?" Esther asked.

Straker opened his mouth to start to explain, but discovered he couldn't. How do you explain death to a child who has never experienced real loss?

The nurse crouched down to be at Esther's eye level. "Bobby was a very sick little boy," the nurse said. "We didn't think he was going make it to Christmas."

"Daddy!" Esther wailed in anguish.

"Esther, sometimes things happen we can't do anything about," Straker found himself saying.

"It's not fair," she protested, starting to cry.

"No, it isn't," Straker agreed. "But, life isn't fair and bad things happen and sometimes all we can do is try to make the world a better place than it was when we got here."

"It's not fair," she complained again, wiping her face on her sleeve. Johnson pulled a tissue from her skirt pocket and handed it to the little girl. Esther wiped her nose and hiccuped as she tried to stop her tears.

"Let's wrap this up, people," Straker said to the singers. They were all upset and it showed in their faces as they tried to compose themselves for the last carol. They had all lost comrades in the war against the aliens, but the death of a child they didn't know was affecting all of them. He only hoped he didn't look as bad as they did.

Johnson's voice was shaking as she began the first verse and even Foster, always so cool under fire, was having trouble.

* * *

"I don't suppose we'll see you at the party at work," Freeman said as they were getting ready to leave.

"I haven't decided," Straker said, taking a quick look at his watch. "I have something I want to do first."

"I understand," Freeman said, even though Straker knew he probably didn't.

* * *

The service had already started when they walked into the church. Esther's eyes were wide with wonder at the candlelit nave, the incense, and the crucifix on the wall behind the purple draped altar.

Straker realized the last time he had been in a church was the day after John's death. He had never taken his son to mass. Mary hadn't cared about religion and Straker had always assumed there would be time when John was older to introduce him to church. That was a mistake he wasn't going to repeat with Esther.

She was asleep before the service was over, exhausted from her long day. On their way out, Straker lit two candles, something he had never done before. One was for Jon and all things that would never be; the other for Bobby, a child he hadn't known, hadn't even met, whose dying wish had been nothing more than a song.

* * *

"I thought you weren't coming," Foster said when Straker finally walked into the party carrying a sleeping blonde child.

"It's not that late," Straker said. "Besides, I thought I'd drive Kate home."

"She's still downstairs, but I can cut her loose, finish the shift."

"Thanks, Paul," Straker said. "Merry Christmas," he called as Foster headed for the elevator.

Freeman was watching and came over. "Ed, I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"For talking you into that."

"I volunteered, remember?" Straker reminded him. "I need to get out occasionally and see

how the world's doing?"

"Hell of a way to start," Freeman said.

Straker looked around the room, at the operatives - some in still in uniform, all involved in the secret war against alien invaders. Some of them wouldn't make it to next year's Christmas party. The war would intervene, sending some of them to outlying bases, some to their graves.

"Alec, death is always with us, simply because we're human. Sometimes we need to be reminded exactly how human we are, and how much even a small thing can matter, even a song."

"Isn't it a little late at night for philosophy?"

Straker shook his head and beckoned for Lieutenant Johnson to come over.

"Yes, sir?"

"Lieutenant, let the offices across the way know we'll be keeping Children's Hospital."

"Sir?"

Straker gave Freeman a sidelong glance. "We can't let Father Christmas keep fixing the world all by himself, can we?"