

Fire and Silence

A Villain for Christmas short story

Alice Winters

Note: This short story should be read after A Villain for Christmas. Reading it before will spoil big parts of the book and it will also not make sense. If you enjoy the short and want to hear more about Nolan and Lex, please let me know!

NOLAN

Silence, silence, silence.

I'm surrounded by people yet almost coated in silence. The voices had become deafening, to the point where I was drowning. I'd thought I could never escape. It was so extreme that I couldn't sleep, I couldn't even function anymore. But then Marauder made it all go away.

I feel weird, euphoric, strange, confused. But the voices are *gone*. Almost.

I can still hear some, but they're whispers, and after the years of pounding noise in my brain, I will welcome whispers with open arms. I can ignore whispers. But the whispers are getting louder. Is my power returning to me?

But at what cost has this come? What cost was it? My brain feels weak, it's hard to even think about what has been happening. It's like it hurts to concentrate anymore, so I just push it away and listen. Because when I listen to Marauder, the voices become calm.

I feel something tug at my leg and look down as a small terrier paws at my pants. He's the size of my cat but looks frazzled with hair sticking every which way. "Hey, buddy," I say as I kneel down and pet the wiry head. He claws at my pants, clearly wanting to be picked up so he doesn't get trampled in this mass of people.

Someone slams into me, snapping me back to the party that rages on around me. People are drinking and laughing, some are dancing and moving to the music.

"I'm so sorry," the young man says as he sets a hand against my shoulder, and I realize that he'd spilled his drink all down me and I hadn't even noticed. Even though the voices are gone, I feel weird. Hazy, almost. Which is why I didn't even notice the man spilling his drink on me until he said something.

I look around for the dog I'd been petting, but he's scampered off.

The apologetic man smiles. "I am the biggest klutz alive. I even scared your dog off. I'm sorry! My mom used to say that I'd lose my head if it wasn't attached. Not because I'd forget it but because I'd like trip and knock my head off... you know what? It made sense when I was like five." He gives me a nervous laugh, but what I notice most of all isn't what he looks like, or what he sounds like, but the pattern of his thoughts.

They're oddly calming, almost soothing, and I find it strange. I can hear his thoughts, but I can't understand them. My power is currently too weak for that when I'm in a room filled with others, but I can feel him, and he feels oddly peaceful.

"It's okay," I say before giving him a smile. "Let me get you another one." What am I doing? I'm supposed to be on lookout, not getting some strange man a drink, but something about his mind intrigues me.

He's very average-looking with light hair and brown eyes. I don't recognize him, but he feels strangely familiar in this chaotic world.

He gives me a huge smile. "I would love that, but I should be the one getting *you* something. I literally walked straight into you because I may or may not have been playing on my phone. The embarrassing thing is that I make fun of people for doing that and here I am... playing a game on my phone at a party. I'm phenomenal at parties, if you can't tell."

I smile. "I've noticed. Do you have any other party tricks?" I ask as I walk over to the serving table and pick up some napkins to mop at my shirt. Before I get to it, he grabs a handful and starts blotting my shirt.

"Well... I can pinpoint the dog and zero in on it. That must have been how I ran into you. I subconsciously headed for the dog you were petting. I can also disappear in plain sight."

I'm not sure how he could disappear. I feel like I could find his mind out of a crowd with my eyes closed. But why? Besides my family, no one's minds are ever unique. They're all a whirlwind of thoughts that drag me down and drive me crazy. And really, only Landon's voice stands out and I feel like it's because I'm closest to him.

Landon... where is Landon? Marauder wanted to take his power and wanted to use him and...

"Something wrong?" the young man asks.

"No! I'm fine. There's just so much noise in here... a lot going on."

Which is why I avoid parties.

"Oh, tell me about it! I came with friends and lost them immediately, but they're drinkers and partiers... so it's probably for the best," he says as he runs the napkins down my chest. "Beautiful!"

I look down at the huge red stain on my black and white pin-striped shirt and snort. "Is it?"

He bites his lip. "I'll buy you a new shirt. As long as you're not like rich and it's made of baby zedonk hair or something."

"A what?"

"You know, like when a zebra and a donkey do the nasty, you get zedonk. Don't just... never... you know what? Sometimes when I'm nervous I say things that make no sense and then I think I'm hilarious, when I'm clearly not."

I smile at him. "That's okay, you're amusing me," I admit.

"What would you like to drink? I'll treat you for ruining your zebra-skinned clothes."

"It's not even zebra-patterned!"

He shrugs as he gives me an amused look. "But it's black and white."

"And I do like that you're going to treat me to a drink that's free."

A playful grin covers his face. "I'm just giving like that. People call me Santa because I've got a big sack and love to share," he says.

I start laughing, and it feels good. When's the last time I laughed? "A big... sac?"

It takes a moment for it to dawn on him. "Oh my god. That... no! I wasn't... you know what? I'm rolling with it. Yep... I like hauling around my big ol' sac. It's a lot of work, but I do it because I'm selfless like that. Now me and my big sac would like to buy you a drink that costs me nothing. What would you like?"

"Just water is fine."

"Water? You here with your granny? Live a little."

"Fine. Surprise me."

"Ooh, I like the sound of that," he purrs before walking up to the counter and coming back with two vibrant green drinks that have clearly been dyed to add a little holiday spirit. "I feel like a witch. Muwhahaha! Take a suckle of my poison!"

I take it from him as he takes a sip of his and promptly gags. "That good?" I tease.

"Holy shit sticks. What *is* that?" he says as he quickly blinks back tears.

I tentatively take a tiny sip that instantly burns. “Is this acid? Are you trying to kill me?”

“That would mean I’m trying to kill myself as well, and I’m too pretty to die!” he says. “Let’s chug it.”

“Let’s not!”

He starts laughing as he grabs my wrist, fingers wrapping around me as he tugs me after him. “Wait... I suppose I didn’t ask if you wanted me to kidnap you. Oh my gosh, how embarrassing. If you’re like ‘Hey, man. You’re fucking weird, go sit in the corner with the dog,’ I’ll get it.”

I smile at him because even if he is a little forward, my mind is so calm around him. I feel like I would follow him anywhere just for the peace that is wrapping around me. “Hey, if you’re planning on sitting in the corner with the dog, count me in.”

“Do you like dogs?”

“I’m more of a cat person, but I love dogs as well.”

“That’s hot,” he decides, which makes me shake my head. “When I was a kid, I wanted to be a veterinarian.”

“And now?”

“Ooh, hard question. Do you want an honest, honest answer? Or just like a joke, because the joke will be better, I promise.”

“Honest.”

“Alright. Here’s as honest as I’ll ever get with you. I want to be... part of a family. Stupid, huh? It’s not really a job, but it’s what I want. I get jealous of all those sappy assholes with the awesome families and people who care about them. Mostly around Christmas. The Christmas family holiday togetherness gets to me a little, I think. Forget I said any of that. My god. I don’t know why I said any of that. It was stupid.”

I think about my family, and it makes me ache for some reason. “It’s not stupid at all. My family’s made up of... uniquely crazy people, but I love them.”

He smiles at me. “Rub it in.”

I look at him in horror. “Oh my god! No! I’m sorry!”

He starts laughing. Like a full belly laugh. “I’m just joking! I just wanted to tease you a bit.”

“Oh... well... I’m sure you’ll find that someday.”

“My plan is to get rich and buy myself a family. That way, if they suck, I can just fire them and get a new one.”

“You’re not allowed. That’s what having a family is all about. You’re stuck with them whether you like them or not. Do you want my family? One brother doesn’t want to do anything but read, the other brother could give a rock a run for its money by who can be dumber. And my parents... don’t get me started on them.”

“It’s clear you’re close to your family.”

“I miss them.”

“Why do you miss them? Why aren’t you with them?”

I try to think about it, but every time I do that haze comes back and with it comes the voices. But if I ignore it and fixate everything on...wait a minute. “What’s your name?”

“Huh?”

“We’ve been talking for like fifteen minutes and you never told me your name.”

“Oh!” He starts laughing. “It’s Alex! And you?”

“Nolan,” I say before wondering if I shouldn’t have given him my real name.

“I went to school with a Nolan. When he found out I was gay, he pulled me to the side and asked me how I figured out I was gay. Of course, I told him that I got a letter like how Harry Potter got his Hogwarts letter. And of course, the moment I got home I wrote him this magnificent letter welcoming him to Gaywarts and slipped it into his mailbox. So he comes to school the next day telling *everyone* about his letter, and that’s when the teacher explains to him that people don’t get a gay letter.”

I start laughing. “Sounds like you knew how to make friends,” I say.

“I was a... strange child, but everyone loved me, so it worked. He ended up coming out years later, so really, I think I was kind of like a fortune teller.”

“Or maybe he could have used your guidance back when he asked?”

“Hmm...” He thinks about it for a moment. “Nah, my solution was *way* better. I mean, you gotta give to me. Gaywarts? Man, I was the smartest kid ever.”

“It is pretty funny, and I love that that’s how it ended.”

“I know. What about you? Any embarrassing childhood stories you’d like to tell me? We’ve only known each other for minutes, but we might as well toss it all out on the table now.”

I think about my childhood filled with villain tasks and crazy parents. Breaking into stores and stealing stuff. It makes me ache to be with my family, even if they weren’t the best of people. “Nope. I was actually perfect as a child.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. I hope someday I can grow up to be just like you, then.”

“I mean, you could try, but don’t be heartbroken when you don’t even come close. By the way... what am I supposed to do with this horrendous drink?” I ask.

“You could dump it down my shirt like I did to you, so I don’t have to buy you a new donkz-skinned shirt.”

“Now you’re just making shit up.”

He snickers. “You’re the one choosing to wear it.”

“I don’t look like a zebra or a donkey or... whatever that third thing is.”

“A donkbra.”

“Yes, that.”

“Nah, you’re too cute for that. Do you want to dance?”

“Does it look like this body knows how to dance?” I ask.

“That’s why I asked. I want to be the best dancer for once.”

“No thanks to the dancing. Sitting in the corner with the dog sounds better.”

He grins at me and holds his hand out. “Live a little.”

And for some reason, I set my hand right into his and a grin explodes across his face. He does a little body jig in front of me, swaying his cute ass as he pulls me toward the dance floor. As we’re nearing it, a girl in a sexy Santa outfit who’d clearly been hired to work for the party rushes up to us, arms laden down with reindeer antler headbands and Santa hats. She slides between us, almost pulling our hands apart as she pops out her ass, right into Alex’s groin, and sets a Santa hat on my head before turning around.

“And you look like a naughty, naughty reindeer,” she says as she slides a reindeer headband onto his head. And then off she goes for the next unsuspecting victim.

Alex looks up at me with wide eyes as one of his antlers flops over, whatever had been

holding it up inside clearly broken. “I think I just made it to second base with a woman and it was terrifying,” he says. “I think this reindeer is broken.”

“So’s your antler,” I say with a grin.

He pops the headband off, looks at the hanging antler and nods. “Drooping like my penis,” he says as he holds it down at groin level.

“Is your penis that big too?”

“It’s a lot to handle, I know, but it’s a burden I was born with. And I don’t know about you, Santa, but I know just where you can park your sleigh.”

“Oh my god.”

He starts laughing. “I’m joking. I’m not that forward. Usually. Really. I’m drunk on the one sip of kerosene they tried passing off as alcohol,” he decides as he sets his drink on a random person’s table. “Do you want your arsenic?”

“No thanks.”

He grabs it and sets it on another table before yanking me onto the dance floor. “*Santa, baby,*” he starts singing, and I’m surprised by his rich voice. “*Won’t you come into my chimney tonight...* I don’t think those are the lyrics. I think I just made it dirty.”

“You mean it wasn’t dirty before?” I ask as he drapes his arms over my neck.

“I don’t know! But my mind is like a gutter. What about you, Santa?” he asks as he sways back and forth, and I find myself mesmerized by him. He could literally jump into the chicken dance, and I’m convinced I would find him breathtaking just because my power is in love with his mind.

“Have I taken your breath away with my phenomenal dancing skills? I call this one the seat belt,” he says as he starts miming putting a seat belt on.

“You have... you’re astounding.”

He snickers. “Thank you. I’m channeling my great-grandfather who worked the stripper pole for many years. There weren’t poles back then, so he just twirled around the hitching posts.”

“Do you even know what you’re going on about?”

“I don’t know. When I’m nervous my mouth just runs. I feel like I have to fill the air with words. I’m so awkward at these things... and you saved me from embarrassing myself too much. Like I’ve embarrassed myself some, especially with the dirty jokes, but you seem semi-amused.”

“Or maybe it’s pity?” I joke.

“*Or* it’s pity. Wanna bet money on how many more times I can embarrass myself?”

“If it means you’ll hang around longer, sure,” I say, and I even surprise myself.

He grins at me, and that’s when Racer steps up to me and clears his throat. It feels like everything crashes back down onto me. The noise, the voices, Marauder. I feel stifled again, my mind a thick fog I can’t work my way through.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Racer asks.

“This your boyfriend?” Alex whispers.

I snort because there’s no way in hell I’d do anything with Racer besides punch him in the face for disrupting everything. I open my mouth, dying to tell him to fuck off, but Racer narrows his eyes and I feel that suppressing feeling washing over me again. “Let’s go.”

“Give me a minute—”

He grabs my arm, grip tightening. “Now.”

I narrow my eyes before glancing down at his hand. I step into him. “Get your hand off me.”

He retrieves it and I turn to Alex. “I apologize, you’re going to have to go back to talking to the dog in the corner. I need to go.”

“Boo. I would try to fight him for you, but I think I’d get my ass kicked,” he says as he waves at Racer who towers over him, even though Alex isn’t short.

I snort. “Don’t worry, I can fight my own battles, but I had a prior... engagement that I have to fulfill. It was nice meeting you.”

He bites his lip. “Yeah... you sure you don’t want to hang around some more? I mean... you could reschedule with them, can’t you?”

Oh god, do I want to. I want to escape it all and follow him around as he makes everything in my brain lessen, but I can’t because I know that if I do, Marauder could make the voices come back—all of them—and I can’t live like that again.

“Sorry,” I say as I turn from him and follow Racer.

Every step I take away from him, the pounding in my head grows worse, the whispered voices thicken. Why does this keep happening? Why can’t it just go away? Why can everyone else control their powers and I’m left with this insanity beating violently against my brain? It feels like I’m constantly being kicked in the head again and again.

“What the fuck were you doing? You were supposed to be on lookout,” Racer growls. I don’t bother answering him because I don’t give a shit what he has to say. All I know is that he shouldn’t fuck with me when my head is pounding like this.

I don’t even know what we’re doing until he pulls the door open to a room and I hear a woman walking up to him. I plan to stay back, but that’s when I feel a familiar mind. One that is as soothing as it is crazy.

Landon.

Oh no. Racer can’t get to him first. Is that what he’s reaching into the room for?

I rush forward as Racer steps inside, and I shout, “Landon—” preparing to make him move or run, but he’s not there. Instead, there’s a woman and a man I don’t recognize standing with Hazel. And... a man tied up on the ground?

“They’re trying to steal the globe!” Hazel shouts as she runs for the door.

Lex

I know I was supposed to keep Nolan preoccupied, but I didn’t know what to do once Racer got there. If Nolan wasn’t willingly going to allow me to drag him after me, what was I going to do? Burn him into submission?

I feel uneasy at the thought but realize that I should probably find the others. I squeeze through the thickening crowd. There are so many people here now that I feel like I can barely move without bumping into others. I’m tall... ish, but I still can’t see either of them, and Landon is small enough he’d probably get lost in this crowd.

Fuck.

I wander for a bit to see if I can find anything else before meeting up with the others. Just as I’m planning on reaching out to Landon and August, I see Hazel making her way to the front of

the room. The noise begins to die down as she stands there in a pretty red dress and an “I’m a bitch” look on her face.

“Evening, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to talk to all of you for just a moment before the festivities begin!”

And that’s when I see that she has the globe in her hand. I can *feel* her words the moment she begins speaking them and I turn away, praying that her power won’t affect me. If she took control of me with my power of fire, she could kill so many. I’ve lived with it for years and I can’t control it. In the wrong hands, it would spell destruction, and that’s what they want.

I quickly back away, shielding my face, which seems to be helping me, because everyone else seems mesmerized by her already as she speaks about the hell of the superhero group.

That’s when I see August and Landon and rush for them. I grab onto Landon’s arm and he spins around to face me before realizing it’s me.

“Landon, I turned away when she was talking, and it didn’t seem to affect me. Maybe she needs visual attention? Or maybe it doesn’t affect supers? But she just... everyone got pissed about the superheroes and then she was just gone. I don’t know where Nolan went either,” I admit.

“Fuck. I bet Racer pulled them back,” August says.

That’s when I realize that I was able to notice them because the illusion is gone. I open my mouth to say something, but the earpiece comes to life and Valerie begins speaking before I can do anything. “Wyatt said there are mobs heading toward the Superheroes United base. I think they’re planning on targeting it and bringing it down.”

August plugs one ear to hear better. “We’re headed out now, or at least trying to. It’s hard to get anywhere when everyone is pushing and shoving, but we’ll stop them before they reach it,” August says. He rushes for the door as a woman I don’t recognize steps in front of it, like she’s planning on blocking our path. The lights in the room flicker as she looks up at us, confident in what she’s about to do.

“Guys, they’re heading toward the van. Hurry up, we need to move before they realize we’re inside,” Valerie says through the device in my ear.

August rushes forward, ready to face her as I watch from where I stand. I know I should do something, but with so many people moving around, will I be able to control it? Will my power take control of me? I bite my lip as I think of what could happen if I lose control.

“Don’t touch her!” Landon yells as electricity sparks around her.

August pulls back and suddenly all of the furniture in the room flings to the right, directly in front of us, slamming into the far wall. None of it touches the woman, but it makes her jerk back. Landon seems disappointed in his power to control anything. If he had his power, I could just sit back and let him handle all of it.

“We have to move. What’s going on?” Valerie asks as I hear loud noises coming from their end.

“Go without us, we have a bit of a dilemma,” August says.

The villain lifts her hands and electricity sparks along the ground as it races toward us, and I know that if I don’t do something, someone could get hurt. August and Landon don’t have the powers to fight this. When they still have the others to face, they shouldn’t be wasting their power on someone like her.

I take a deep breath and step between August and Landon and draw my hand up as electricity races for us. My fire flows freely, rushing forward, thrilled to be set free. It clashes with her electricity, fighting against it.

“I’ll deal with her,” I say as the fire spikes, then explodes. It’s so eager to be free that it makes me nervous. It’s like a being of its own. One that cannot be controlled.

Landon hesitates, but August pulls him back and they begin to run. Now it’s just me and the woman. I call my fire off and watch her for a moment. “Please just walk away,” I say.

She flings her hand through the air and the light bulbs break, sending the place into darkness. I call my fire, lighting up the room as she rushes at me, clearly planning on touching me, telling me that she could shock me if I let her get close enough that she could. But I only let a little fire out at a time. I can’t let it free; I can’t risk it. But as she keeps moving, she begins to realize that the only fire I throw in front of her is small flames that she can easily move through.

I back up as she draws closer until I slam into a chair. I trip and nearly fall as she moves confidently now. She’s not afraid of me. She thinks I’m weak. But I *am* weak. Because I can’t control this fucking fire that rages inside me. It’s rumbling in me, wishing to tear out of me and destroy everything in its path.

I should have left this to August or Landon; even with Landon’s power giving him fits, it still listens better than mine.

And that’s when the dog Nolan had been petting when I ran into him races into the room looking confused. He sees me, and the villain swings her hand, making the dog cry as I look at the woman in horror.

“You’re seriously going to hurt a dog?” I say as I reach over and scoop him up as he whimpers in my arms.

“I think you should worry about yourself,” she says as electricity races after me. In a moment of panic, as the dog scrambles in my arms out of fear, I throw my fire up to stop her. It was just meant to push her back, to keep her away, to keep the dog and me safe.

But the power *flows* out of me. It’s like a dam has broken and it floods out. It slips free of me as the flames burst out of the ground like they’re made of nothing but air. I try to stop it, I try to clamp the fire back down, but my power is free and uncontrollable. I beg it to come back, I beg it to stop, but the flames eat up the ground as I hug the terrified animal tightly. The woman jerks back and begins to run, fear encompassing her as I fight to stop it, order it to stop, but nothing happens. I stuff the dog under my jacket, hoping to keep him safe.

“Please, stop,” I beg even though I know it won’t listen. Flames rush in a circle around me, whipping out as they *eat* everything. The floor, the carpet, the furniture. It’s like it’s a wild creature, consuming it all.

And I feel like a child again. A child as I stand there, watching it take everything again. And I pray that everyone escaped the house while they still could. Most seemed to have left with Hazel. Did they all get out? Or did I kill someone again?

Instead, I’m left standing there as the fire eats everything but the circle of ground I stand on, blistering heat rising around me, but never hurting me or singeing me. I am the only thing my power has never harmed.

As soon as the fire consumes the house, it seems satisfied. It doesn’t reach out any farther, leaving me standing in the middle of ash and destruction until someone from Superheroes United

arrives. I refuse to go to them as they call for me. I don't deserve to.

A moment later, Valerie is there, and I wonder how long I've stood here for.

"Lex, come here," she says.

When I don't, she comes to me with protective shoes on to withstand the heat. She walks up to me and stops in front of me. "Come on, Lex."

"I didn't mean to." My voice is shaking, almost a whisper.

"I know you didn't. It's okay. Come on."

"I told you I can't do this. I can't be a super. I don't want to be," I whisper. "I can't save people. I just destroy things."

She pushes my hair back as my stomach aches. "It's okay. You've saved many lives, Lex. This was an accident."

"Were there people in the building?"

"I don't know. I think everyone got out. Come on, the news stations will be here soon, and I don't want you here."

She urges me forward and I step out of the small ring of unburnt ground and into the ash. The dog pokes his head out as I walk through the destruction, knowing that's all I'll ever be able to do.

I'm so sick of destroying everything.

I just want it to end.

I just want to be normal.

Note: If you want Lex and Nolan's story, please let me know! I'd love to hear what you think! It helps me decide what to work on next! Also, a big thank you to Courtney for doing a quick proof/edit of this!