

Elliot's First Yuletide

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“You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough...”

~ ~ Mae West ~ ~



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Elliot stood before the panoramic window of his penthouse apartment, looking down on the frenetic city, far below. It was almost midnight, but there were still streams of people scurrying along the snowy streets.

They all seemed to be in a rush to be somewhere else. *So much to do and so little time left to do it in...*

While I'm stuck here... Elliot moved his shoulders impatiently. *With this lot...* He glanced behind him at the crowded room.

A sense of intense restlessness stirred in his blood. It was all he could do to remain still.

Here, in his top-floor apartment, high above the city's congestion and noise, no-one seemed in any hurry to be elsewhere. But then, Elliot Burch's Christmas parties were duly famous for their costly lavishness, and the invitations were highly sought-after among the New York City elite. It all greased the wheels of high finance and big business.

An ironic laugh echoed through Elliot's chest. *But she isn't here...*

He knew Catherine Chandler had other places to be tonight. Elliot tried not to be envious of the abiding love Catherine had found with Vincent. But despite his good intentions, the thought made him feel even more restless to get away from here.

Elliot knew he wanted to see Catherine again, to know she was happy. Perhaps absorb a little of that incredible magic the underworld community seemed to possess against the odds.

He'd recently received an invitation to his very first Yuletide, to be observed Below, on the shortest day of the year. Delivered once again, by the laconic Geoffrey, Catherine's note had gone a long way to releasing the knot of tension that had inhabited Elliot's stomach since he had attended Summerfest last June.

That night Catherine had reassured him she would be in touch again, *soon...*

"Fairy tales..." Elliot shook his head.

The ensuing silence since their last meeting had been nerve-racking. The delay in meaningful communication, costly to Burch Properties Group, both in time, and Elliot's attention to the critical

details of his various projects. He found himself miles away, and deep beneath the city, in the moments he should have been paying close attention to the work he needed to perform.

He laid a hand over the carefully concealed note in his hip pocket. This time he had been instructed to pack a bag and expect to remain Below for a few days. Elliot hadn't hesitated to send his acceptance.

He could not spare a few hours, let alone days, but he no longer cared. His people would simply have to cope without him. It's what he paid them very well for, after all.

Once upon a time, he had been more than happy with his place in life. It meant that Elliot Burch had finally arrived, and Stosh Kasmerick was dead and buried. Corporate functions, like this tonight, were an essential part of how the newly-created Elliot conducted his business.

But no longer...

Unaware of their host's increasing restlessness, the band in the corner of the room began to play another tune. Music and laughter

filled the space. The joyous *bonhomie* of people having a very good time that would last well into the following day.

Elliot frowned over the incipient headache settling behind his eyes. He felt isolated and disconnected. These people were not his friends. Some were not even acquaintances. They were astute and ruthless businessmen who could make or break several of his current projects.

They came every year to extract their pound of flesh for services rendered. It was how business was done in this city. It was a game Elliot knew all too well how to play.

But now... He glanced down. Clasped in his right hand, the full glass of very expensive *Dom Perignon* champagne remained neglected, as it had done for several hours now. He knew it was no way to treat such a fine vintage, but...

He raised his free hand to the knot in the silk tie at his throat, dragging it down to allow him some space to breathe. Releasing the confinement of the top button on his dress shirt was the next step towards relief. More buttons would soon follow.

Where he was going, corporate attire was decidedly optional and most certainly not needed. And he was impatient to change into a pair of serviceable jeans and a sweatshirt, and make good his escape.

He lifted his eyebrows at his butler-for-the-night, courtesy of the caterers. The man had hovered attentively the whole evening, an extra exacerbation to Elliot's already irritated mood.

The butler approached him immediately. "Yes, sir." His worried glance assessed Elliot's wine glass. "Shall I change that for you, sir? Surely it is warm by now." He extended an open hand, but Elliot ignored it.

"Close it down." Elliot jerked his chin towards the laughing crowd. "You've got thirty minutes. Get them all out of here. There's a bonus in it for you, if you can do it in less."

"Close it down...?" The man's subservient expression froze. "But, sir, it's barely midnight. I was hired on the understanding that this party would continue at least until dawn. And I--"

“You will still be paid the agreed amount,” Elliot interjected evenly. He glanced at his wristwatch. “You now have twenty-nine minutes.”

“Of course, sir.” The butler snapped to attention. His thoughts about the vagaries of the very rich were clearly written on his face, but he was too well-trained to comment further.

He squared his shoulders and moved away through the crowd, whispering to the circulating waiters and making his sincere apologies on Mr. Burch’s behalf to the assembled guests, as he showed them firmly towards the door.

As they were being ushered out, some of the guests looked in Elliot’s direction, seeking clarity, but he ignored them. He didn’t care to hear their opinions, or complaints. There would be time enough for those later.

Knowing his orders were being obeyed implicitly, he retreated to his bedroom, snapping the doors shut behind him. He had already packed a bag.

When he finally returned to the main room, all was quiet and orderly. He was alone. It was almost as if the party had never happened. Slinging his bag, one-handed, over his shoulder, Elliot took stock of his surroundings.



The room before him dissolved into a vision of dusty brick junctions where three tunnels converged into a roughly oblong space. Two of them were open faced, while the third was hidden behind a barred metal gate and a round, heavy steel door. A distant tapping echoed into the dreaming silence, saying to those who understood the code, that there was more here than met the casual eye.

“Okay, good...” Elliot smiled, as he pushed his fingers through his hair, disordering the neatness.

He breathed deeply, with satisfaction. A weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He was running away from his Up Top life, and he loved the idea.

His heartbeat picked up, tripping over itself in his eagerness to be gone. He needed to hurry. It was well past time he ventured back into those same tunnels, and renewed some very dear acquaintances...

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*“Don't walk behind me; I may not lead.
Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow.
Just walk beside me and be my friend...”*

~ ~ Albert Camus ~ ~



*“When the light has dawned on Christmas Day,
we will lift our voices in endless praise.
When the light has dawned on Christmas Day
we will say...
There are miracles all around.*

*Miracles here to be found.
Hid in every heart is an answered prayer.
Like a candle's flame, hope will lead us there..."*

~ ~ Susan Boyle ~ ~

