



“Come Below, Elliot...”

By Judith Nolan

“You can't stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.”

~ A.A. Milne

“I don’t have time for mysteries...” Elliot stared at the Winterfest candle in his hands. Seated behind his huge office desk in his habitual position, tie long discarded and shirt sleeves rolled up, he had been burning the metaphorical candle at both ends to get done all he wanted to do before dawn. He rarely slept or took the time to eat these days. The tasks at hand seemed endless and ponderous. He had been unavoidably preoccupied some weeks before, now he was playing serious catch up.

The afternoon had waned, stretching into late evening without his noticing or caring about what happened beyond the four, oak panelled walls of his lair. He had constructed the walls with soundproofing for that very purpose. Three armed guards were always on duty just outside the door. He left nothing to chance.

It wasn’t until the boy arrived—*Geoffrey*—looking like a tattered refugee from a pantomime, that Elliot felt uneasy with his self-imposed isolation. He was reminded that life beyond these office walls went blindly on without him. Seeing the kid again brought back so many memories, exposing unhealed wounds and regrets, memories of a night a few months ago, when Elliot had gotten more answers than he bargained for.

He surveyed the kid with resignation. Geoffrey even smelled like Catherine’s elusive lover, of spicy smoke and candle wax, at odds with their current surroundings that spoke strongly of money and power.

And where, exactly, had all that money and power gotten him? Elliot grimaced sourly. *Alone and talking to himself...*

“How did you get in this time?” Elliot scowled when the boy suddenly materialized right in front his desk like some crazy genie out of a bottle. “I thought I told you to knock next time.”

How he had managed to gain entry again was frustrating. He’d done it a number of times before, appearing without warning, bringing messages and requests from a mysterious world to which Elliot had yet to even see. He paid very good money to keep people out, unwanted visitors, and taxes on his limited stock of patience and time. But here he was again, tall and gangly, standing before Elliot’s desk, watching him with that oddly contented look. It was as if he knew something, something really big, that he wasn’t about to share. In his hands he held a candle, a large white, yellow and red candle he had pulled from a bulky leather sack slung over his right shoulder. Elliot’s stomach churned with distrust. *What now?*

“Your guards were all looking the other way, they must have heard something.” The boy shrugged. “Can’t see me, not if I don’t want them too.” He held out the candle. “This is for Winterfest, for when we get together and celebrate with all our helpers. It’s on the twelfth. Catherine said you gotta come.”

The boy’s dark eyes scanned the vastness of Elliot’s desk with its cluttered litter of files, blueprints, plans and assorted pens and pencils. “She said to say you’ve been working too hard and it’s time to take a break.” His gaze became thoughtful. “Father said you’ve been a great help to us these past few months and back when we needed your help to rescue him. He said it was time, but it was Catherine who sent you the candle. She wanted to be sure you’d come.”

“Catherine...” Tossing aside his pen, Elliot half-rose from behind his desk, watching the kid suspiciously, not making any move to take the candle. “How does she know what I do? And why? I mean, why now? She won’t even take my phone calls. I haven’t seen nor spoken to her for almost four months, not since we...” He sighed.

“I figured she still hated me.” He ran a distracted hand up around the back of his neck beneath the open collar of his shirt. “For what I did... back there at the tunnel...that night...”

“But you fixed that,” Geoffrey reasoned quietly. “You kept your word. You didn’t rat on us. You didn’t spill any of our secrets. That counts in my world. Ya gotta have trust.”

“No, I didn’t do that, did I?” Elliot’s shoulders sagged with relief. He suddenly felt ridiculously happy. “I kept my word...about all of it. Especially about *him*...”

“So I’ll mark you down as attending?” Geoffrey queried. “The details of when and where you’ll find out later. We’ll send someone to escort you down. So you don’t go and get yourself lost.”

“Yeah...” Elliot nodded. “Tell Cathy you couldn’t keep me away. The twelfth, you said...” He reached to tear the relevant page from his desk calendar. He crumpled it, throwing the ball of paper into the trash bin. “Tell her this time it’ll be different. *I’ll* be different. And tell her, thanks, for everything.”

“She knows...” Geoffrey shrugged. “And *he* does too...” The boy nodded. “But I’ll tell them, anyway.” His grin flashed as quickly as lightning. “It’s okay, Elliot.”

“Okay, then...” Elliot sighed. *Catherine trusted him. Finally!* He wanted to leap across the desk and hug the boy. Instead he accepted the impatiently proffered candle with a nod of thanks before sinking back into his seat.

“Who made this?” He studied its sturdy design and vivid colours, turning it over and over in his hands. It was functional, but elegant, he liked that it had purpose as well as meaning. “Cat suddenly got your tongue?” He looked up, about to ask what this Winterfest idea meant, but the kid had gone...*again!* Just up and vanished as swiftly and soundlessly as he’d arrived. It was really annoying when he did that.

“Ghosts...” Elliot breathed a rueful sigh, shaking his head. “Or maybe I’m just getting too old to believe in fairy stories.”

But one fairy story in particular still haunted him. He vividly remembered the night he had finally overstepped the unseen boundary into that secret world below the city... *his city*. Abandoning his work and leaving his protesting bodyguards far behind, he had trailed Catherine for weeks, watching everything she did and everywhere she went. To his puzzlement she often went into the drainage tunnel in the middle of Central Park, re-emerging soon thereafter. A few times, especially on Friday nights and weekends, she did not reappear until early the next morning, and she was always alone.

Those nights had been the longest to endure, wasting Elliot's precious time as he huddled against the cold in the shelter of some trees. But he couldn't seem to tear himself away, he had to know who she was seeing, why she had forced him to abandon his tower project, and why had she needed those explosives and detonators? He'd joked about hard rock mining at the time, but it had been much more than that. She had been in deep emotional pain and serious trouble when she had come to demand he instantly supply what she needed without any explanation, they both knew that. Like it was a case of life or death...

After that night, to Elliot's amazement, Catherine had kept her word. She had seen him on several occasions over the following three weeks. They had gone out to dinner and she had allowed him to escort her to the opera. They had been photographed and speculated about in the press. Elliot couldn't help that, even though Catherine seemed deeply displeased to be exposed in that way. She had placed limits on anything more than that.

Stay the night with him, make love with him, assuage the intense ache for her softness that burned deep within him, she steadfastly refused to do, no matter how many times he asked. *Okay, begged...* It was like she had already made promises to someone else, and she wasn't about to break them.

He knew it wasn't Tom Gunther, not down some dark, dank drainage hole in the park. That relationship had ended some months before. The man had moved on and not looked back, recently marrying a New York heiress who was rolling in seriously useful connections and old money.

It drove Elliot crazy that Catherine would not let him in, help him understand who or what she was protecting so carefully and completely. Suddenly their enforced acquaintance had dropped away. She stopped taking his calls, she ignored his messages and his occasional dropping in at her place of work, as if he was an annoying puppy that needed to be taught its true place in her life, as if she had other places to be, other people to see, another man to share her life with... *and her bed, no doubt.*

Elliot didn't operate like that. He went after what he wanted, it was who he was, and it had been there right in front of him, all along. He was just too blind, too in love to see it. What she wouldn't share with him, she was sharing with someone else. Elliot knew he had been used, he could see that.

"A means to an end." He grimaced at the memories. They left a bitter taste in his mouth. All along she had someone else waiting in the wings, waiting for her return to him, duty done. *But who was it?*

Therefore when he wasn't seeing her any more, he took to following her. There were some nights when Catherine never reappeared from beneath the ground at all. It puzzled him, until he realized that somewhere there must be another way out, because she would always appear at work on Monday morning, leaving Elliot frustrated and fuming. He detested secrets. If he couldn't see something, measure it, weigh or understand it, he drove himself onward until he knew everything, every facet. And yet nothing of what Catherine did over those weeks made any sense at all.

Finally Elliot bolstered his nerve enough to follow her into that drainage tunnel, all the way in to where her secrets were hidden. He walked into a greater mystery than he could ever have imagined. Even now he could only shake his head in wonder. How had he been so blind, for so long?

She must have heard him coming before he found her, because he heard her say to someone, “Go! Go, before they see you...” There was a muffled reply which she overrode frantically with, “No, you can’t stay. I’ll be all right. Just go! *Now!*”

“I mean you no harm...” Elliot raised both hands to show he was unarmed. “I just wanted to know, Catherine.”

“*Elliot!*” Catherine whirled around the moment he stepped into the open within a sandy floored junction where three tunnels converged. “Why are you here? Did you follow me? How *dare* you!”

She was standing at bay before a half-open, barred gate, trying to obscure his clear view of someone behind her with her slender body. A massive, circular, steel door had been rolled back and within the shadows of the old brick tunnel mouth a large man stood, a hood half-obscuring his features, a black cloak swirling around his massive frame as he turned away.

But Elliot had already seen enough to know he would never forget that man’s face as long as he lived. “Stay, please...” Elliot held out a hand to detain him. “I just want to understand all of this, any of this. *Please!*”

The other man paused in his retreat beyond the steel door. Elliot saw his broad shoulders sag, his head half turning. He caught the glint of eyes reflecting in the depths of his hood as he looked back, obviously considering his options. Then he turned fully, his massive hand settling on Catherine's slender shoulder even as she continued to push at him with her hands, still mutely urging him to flee. "It is too late, Catherine. We must make the best of the situation. I am sure Elliot means us no harm. He loves you too well to do that."

"Thanks, I think..." Elliot's shocked eyes swiftly noted that the man's hand was covered in fur, *and had claws*, and he stood there with his mouth wide open for several seconds. He hadn't known what he would find down this cramped and damp tunnel...*but a man with the face of a lion and an unforgettable voice he had not expected. Had he somehow strayed into a crazy version of Alice's Wonderland...?* He would have laughed at the absurdity of it all, if it hadn't been so deadly serious. Catherine was glaring at him like she wanted to do him physical harm.

"How *could* you?" she accused with a stabbing finger, stepping towards him. "I trusted you. You have no business being here. There's nothing here for you here. Go home! Forget anything you think you've seen here tonight!"

"I just needed to know, Cathy..." Elliot held his hands out pleadingly, his grey eyes still assessing the man behind her. "You wouldn't talk to me or return my calls. And after that crazy request of yours for plastic explosives and drill bits, I thought we had an understanding..."

He did have the good sense to look somewhat ashamed and apologetic, but he hadn't been able to stand the not knowing what she was doing, or *who she was meeting*, any longer. He had done his best to win her, and all he had to show for it was a throbbing headache the size of Manhattan and an intense desire to just go home. He felt drained. He couldn't sleep, eat, or even think, and it was now affecting his ability to function properly. *His work was suffering, and that he could not allow any longer.*

"Well, now you know." Catherine snapped at him. "So, what do you intend to do with the knowledge? I will not allow you to hurt Vincent or those he cares for and protects. Be very sure of that. I can and will bring the weight of the whole D.A.'s office down on your head if you so much as breathe one word of this to anyone!"

"Vincent...so that's your name." Elliot traded acknowledging stares with the man he'd been hunting for months. "Okay, so now I know. Now I will keep your secrets. All of them." He waved a hand at Vincent. "Just please don't try to shut me out of all of this. I care for you, Cathy, I always have. I would never hurt you. You know that. I would do anything for you, help you in any way I can."

"Yes, I know that." Catherine nodded slowly. "And we will always be grateful to you for helping us, without strings." She glanced back at Vincent who nodded slowly. "Very well, if Vincent is prepared to trust you, then I will trust you. But I still don't like it. You could have asked."

"And what would you have told me?" Elliot's steeply raised eyebrow said it all. "How could you have told me?"

“I think we must make the best of the choice that has already been made for us.” Vincent folded his arms beneath his mantle and leaned back against the side of the tunnel. “But we still have a lot to be thankful for. Without Elliot’s generous help for a complete stranger that day...I would not be here now.” He shook his head. “The proof of his words will be in what Elliot chooses to do next with the new information he now possesses.”

“All I want now is to go home and get a good night’s sleep.” Elliot laughed as he ran a tired hand up around the back of his neck. “Keeping track of you two is wearing me out.” He approached Vincent, holding out his hand. “I will keep your secrets.” He frowned critically at Vincent’s face. “Though I’m not sure anyone would believe me anyway. You are truly amazing.”

Elliot smiled now. The memory was as fresh as if it had been yesterday. The two men had shaken hands, curiously falling into a conversation neither had expected to conduct. They had talked for some time about the city they both loved, like they were old friends meeting by chance in the park, they had fallen easily into conversation. *It had been...an interesting evening.* Catherine had looked on in bemusement, appearing none too pleased, but powerless to act. She had simmered quietly, contributing little to the conversation, and Elliot knew he would not make any more progress with her for some time.

He shook his head as he lifted the candle into the light, turning it once more between his palms. He had finally gotten the answers he wanted and some semblance of peace. Of course Catherine still denied his phone calls. She had refused to speak to him at all for nearly four

months now. Geoffrey had been his only contact with the tunnels and the boy revealed nothing, no matter how many times Elliot asked him.

There was also the old sax man playing down in the street. They had exchanged money for a note several times, often a request for assistance or supplies for some urgent project or other that Elliot could help them with. Once Elliot had even been accosted in a secluded corner of one of his own building sites by an odd-ball kid who said his name was Mouse. That had been an experience that burned long in Elliot's memory. The boy had wanted more explosives, and some of those nice detonators. He had rubbed his hands together in glee, looking hopeful and more than a little crazy! Elliot had been wise enough not to supply him. But his firm refusal had not appeared to put a dent in the boy's boundless enthusiasm. He'd just grinned and said, "Okay, fine. Okay, good, next time. Mouse come back. Elliot's stuff real good."

"The odd company you keep, Catherine..." Elliot stared at the candle in his hands. "But now you trust me again, or Vincent does, at least."

He thought about Vincent often...and Catherine, of how they had trusted him, of how little they asked in return, of how much he would have loved Catherine, if only she'd allowed him to show her. But her choice had been made, even before they'd first met on the night he'd gifted the art collection to the Met. He found he couldn't begrudge her the love she'd found with Vincent. He was an unusual man and someone Elliot would be proud to call his friend.

"God help me, I don't have many of those, not genuine friends anyway." He shook his head, smiling grimly. "Am I getting old and maudlin, or is it

just the whiskey talking?” He lifted the cut crystal tumbler at his elbow. “To fairy tales and all those who believe in them, heaven help them!” He drained it of the rich amber liquid in one long swallow.

The slowly spreading warmth drove the chill from around his heart. Finally the invitation had been issued, Catherine finally trusted him enough to ask him to attend this Winterfest party of theirs. It was well past time he ventured back and renewed some old acquaintances...

~THE END~