

# A STAIN ON HIS CHARACTER

## *A Composite of Justice and Vindication*

by Lyn Roewade

*Elliot Burch, now living Below, justifies himself concerning the first and second season events that gave people of the tunnel community a negative impression of him without understanding his perspective on things.*

Mouse smiled at Vincent, who sat nearby. "Sure it is, Mouse knows - on Painted tunnels wall. Elizabeth put it there; poof!"

The others laughed. Vincent said to Elliot. "Remember those tunnels? You and I walked there, about a month ago."

"Yes. They're a great achievement, as well as being fine art."

"Shouldn't have blasted. Nearly broke Painted tunnels. Didn't need another tower up top," interposed Mouse. Although the occasion had taken place about four years previously, all present knew what he meant. He was not angry with Elliot, but wanted to make his point.

Elliot drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, gathering his thoughts. He would never hurt or harm anyone Below and they knew it, but in their feelings about their past, they were touchy.

"As you've just heard, Mouse," he began. "The very first time I ever saw those tunnels was around a month ago. I had heard about them only four months before that." He paused to let his words sink in. The others leaned forward intently. As a matter-of-fact, they had begun to realize that they had *'never'* heard about anything to do with Elliot Burch, from his point of view. Without looking, he could feel Vincent's piercing blue gaze, and continued.

"You have all had the pleasure, joy, instruction and great privilege of the Painted tunnels, all your lives long. You are lucky! Five months ago, I didn't know that they existed. Four years ago, I didn't know that *'you,'* or *'any'* of this world Below existed. The *'only'* reason I ordered blasting, was to make a deep and solid foundation to the tower, for the safety of the people who'd be in it." He looked into every face. "In my position then, you are all conscientious enough to have done the same, for the same reasons. Another tower? I'm an architect and an engineer - that perfect, safe building was my life's dream."

There was silent then, as thoughts were re-ordered. Vincent was looking at him with intensity; it must have been most traumatic for one who *'could'* only live Below. He murmured words to that effect, and saw Vincent visibly relaxing.

"One last thing. It was my lawyer (*I've often been unfortunate in my lawyers*) who messed up with that lady, Luz. He and Max Avery - who's now in prison, thank heavens; I'm so glad that I finally testified against him - were secretly working together. I never even knew. But when I did, I fired that lawyer and made him face up to the law. Yet *'I'* lost the permit for my building." He looked at the

floor, his mind in the past. "Oh well, I'm happier living here."

John leaned forward and patted him on the shoulder. "We didn't understand anything from your point of view, at that time. But we do now." At the general murmur of agreement, Elliot felt a weight slide off his heart.

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The reminiscences had been going on for some time. Elliot held Rebecca's hand; Jamie, Mouse, Sarah and Cullen were seated on either side of Vincent's big chair. Candles and old leather were the prevailing scents. Vincent had been recounting his and Father's experiences, when they were trapped in a rock slide at the Maze, and how they'd talked.

"Father might have been concussed, we were not sure. I had such faith that we would be rescued, but could not know all that was happening on the outside."

"Catherine, as a concerned Helper, got us the tungsten drill bits and plastic explosive that Mouse would use. It's not the sort of things she'd have had at home." Jamie reflected aloud, and then blinked at their amusement. "I always wondered where she got them - she never said."

Rebecca looked proudly at her husband. "From Elliot, who - still unaware of our world Below - never asked what she wanted them for." Only Vincent had found out, later and in passing, the actual source of these materials. The others looked at Elliot in amazement.

"I'll never forget any of it," Sarah said.

"So, you were a Helper before you even knew you were," Cullen grinned. Elliot nodded, a little sheepishly.

"I guess I was - that's great! I gave those things to Catherine willingly when she asked, knowing no reasons. And she said that because of this, that I could phone her again, and she would accept my calls."

More glances were exchanged, but he did not notice. "By the way, who was it who actually *'used'* the drill bits and the explosives? I never did hear."

Sarah told him that Mouse had done it. "And he had no experience with plastic explosive either."

"Mouse was scared! Had to use it. Had read about it; others hadn't."

Elliot stared at him with open admiration. "How wonderful, Mouse! That was very brave of you. *'Your'* courage saved them all, saved everything!"

Mouse, with Vincent's approving hand on his shoulder, beamed his appreciation at such recognition! As his visitors left; Vincent stopped Elliot.

"I am interested and glad to hear what happened from another viewpoint. You were very generous, Elliot." He watched as his friends departed, then paced slowly up and down, caught up in a new perspective.

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As they were finishing their dinner, Devin seized the opportunity to find out facts. A situation had arisen before his return, and he had heard references to it.

"I met those elderly folks not long ago. The old guy was playing the piano - he's pretty good - and Vincent took me in afterwards, and introduced me. Things were said, and I got impressions. But I'd like to hear what you have to say."

Elliot put his spoon down and stared. "You mean, did I or did I not harass Holocaust survivors in order to reclaim and redevelop property?" Voices stilled. He had not spoken loudly, but many had heard.

"Something like that," Devin persisted. "Okay, I know it was nearly five years ago, but do you have any remembrance of what really happened?"

Elliot, his eyes unfocused, gazing into space, nodded. "Quite a bit. That whole area was run down, and I got the idea of redeveloping, and building a better place - that was my basic plan. I had so many projects, and so much business going at that time, that like any good leader I had to delegate jobs."

Father, on the other side of Devin, inclined his head at that.

"I was assured, that my agents were using two methods. One, verbal persuasion, and two, offers of money - many thousands of dollars cash to the tenants for them to relocate. I had my lawyer, Mr. Arthur, *'check'* on things, and I had to believe him."

He looked around. "That applies to everyone. Don't you think that someone who turns to the DA, for example, must trust what Joe Maxwell tells them?"

There were sounds of agreement. But Devin gestured to him to continue.

"When I found out in actual fact, very near the end of the whole business, not only that I *'and'* those old people were cheated financially, but what else was happening to them, I was very distressed. Then when the men attacked the old folks, I confronted my lawyer, and fired him." He rubbed his hand across his eyes.

"*'I'* was shrieked at, *'I'* was vilified, and *'I'* was given a bad reputation. When Catherine confronted me, she knew what was happening to those people, because Vincent had led her to them. She had the advantage of me, had already decided that I *'must'* know all the details. I begged her to believe me. I spoke from genuine ignorance - the details only came to me much later. So, we misunderstood each other," he finished tactfully.

William heaved himself forward. "I've been wondering how sincere you were in all this," he began. He stopped. Elliot was looking at him with eyes filled with pain.

"Now that you know me, do you think me capable of authorizing what those bullies did? It's because I'm not like that, that Gabriel was able to ruin me." He choked over his next words, and tears rolled down his cheeks. "Cleon - my friend that Gabriel had murdered, as a warning to me -- tried to tell me that."

William nodded slowly, satisfied. Devin put a hand on Elliot's arm.

"So, by the time you really knew all of what was going on, it was more or less all over?"

"Yes - yes, unfortunately. But as usual, everyone else was pure and noble, and I was cast as the only villain." There was silence, as Elliot wiped his eyes and took a gulp of water.

"I don't think you were responsible," William rumbled. "You aren't a villain to me."

A few minutes later, as the Dining chamber emptied, Devin walked alongside Elliot and put an arm around his shoulders.

"Sorry to make you relive those days, but wasn't it worth it, to clear the air?"

Elliot gasped. "You did that deliberately!"

"Sure! I know what it meant to be the black sheep of the family, and to have an undeserved bad reputation. For a long time, no one Below knew you, except by hearsay, filtered through one source only. All this needed to be said."

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"Oh, it's exciting to tell, but it was so frightening and dangerous at the time. We were on the run, and bullets were flying. The Goronistas killed two good men I had with me, and then chased us." The children were fascinated. The younger ones had gone to bed, and the older ones had urged Elliot to tell them some true adventures of his.

"I'll never forget standing with Cathy on the quay, watching the helicopter I'd ordered to take my sick father to safety. And then it blew up." His eyes reflected that horror of the past. "Then we ran for our lives."

"Did they corner you?" Dustin asked.

"Yes, and we slipped Below through a manhole. I heard some - some fierce sounds," he went on cautiously, aware that Father and Vincent were seated well in the background, listening.

"It seems that Vincent coped with those who would have killed us then. I shudder to think how we'd have ended without his help." He glanced shyly at his friend, who smiled. "No wonder Cathy was always so secure, so apparently daredevil - she knew who would come to her rescue and back her up, at no matter the cost!" He missed Father's and Vincent's mutual startled glances. "I can never be grateful enough to Vincent for his help."

The children were glad; this was always good to hear. Their friend continued.

"He helped me then, and we hadn't even met. And some months ago, he told me it was because I'd given the stuff which enabled Mouse to save Father and himself, when they were trapped by the rock slide. He has a long memory - and he's wonderful!"

The laughter rang pleasantly around the chamber.

Elliot, mused as he watched the happy, chattering children leave, on how fortunate they were. The old saying, *'home is where the heart is,'* was proven daily Below. They had love, protection, security and sufficient material needs satisfied. This must be the happiest life. Nothing was perfect, he'd heard - but this had to be the nearest thing.

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Most of the serious business was over, and minor items were being dealt with by the full Council. Most of them were tired of sitting, and longed for a hot, reviving cup of tea.

"There is no more official business," Father announced. "But, there is one matter I've been

discussing with Vincent, and would like to share with you."

Mary, Rebecca and Jamie tried not to catch each others' eyes. Father was a dear man, and very likely it was genuinely important. But it had been a long day.

"Do we need to hear it now?" There were smiles all round at that. Everyone knew how Pascal longed to return to his pipe chamber. Devin and Vincent chuckled, and Mouse and William exchanged grins.

Cheerfully, Father was undeterred.

"It won't take too long, Pascal. I'll come right to the point. There is a member of our community, humble and conscientious, who came to our world with a very mixed reputation, which preceded him."

He looked over his glasses at each of them and smiled at Rebecca; then waved a hand at Vincent, who spoke softly but earnestly.

"All of you have been most kind and tactful - but it is no secret as to why any of us ever thought ill of Elliot. He has recently been faced with searching questions. Every time, he answered from the heart. You know I can sense emotions; believe me, he resonated with truth and sincerity."

Father put his spectacles on the table, and spoke again. "It is our considered opinion that Elliot has been, from time to time, misrepresented - often quite severely. It also seems that we were all guilty of pre-judging him. Many here didn't *'quite'* trust him completely. There are as the saying goes, two sides to every story and, not knowing his side, our perceptions were inaccurate and unclear."

In the general accord, Devin took the opportunity to say a few words too.

"A lesson anyone can and should learn is, never to judge anyone solely on a single source of information. And never to jump to hasty conclusions about anyone."

A head poked into the chamber entrance, and Kipper asked if they'd like some hot chocolate. A Helper had sent down a large quantity, and they hoped William didn't mind having some used right away. The big cook was pleased.

"Bring it on - we're parched with work, goodness and humility!" And the meeting ended in good humour.

Vincent and Devin stood to one side, enjoying careful sips of their steaming drinks.

"Rebecca is so happy her Elliot is completely cleared," Vincent murmured. "I had noticed her being a little defensive at times."

"Yeah, and it's not surprising. He's a good guy, and I can't imagine him doing a dirty trick to anyone."

"He and I have saved each other's lives on a number of occasions. Now we have relaxed into friendship, and I treasure that."

"You know, since he's settled in and I've come back, we're more like the *'Three Musketeers'*."

Father heard the last part of that sentence as he approached time, and looked wary.

"That sounds alarming, Devin. Are you two back to plotting mischief again?"

"Again, Father?" Vincent's indignation was ostentatiously a pretense. "We were merely planning to have Elliot with us more often, now that he is vindicated, and without a stain on his character." And at Father's round-eyed expression, the two brothers joined in joyous merriment.

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