

The Christmas Party

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Commander Straker picked up the report and started initialing items to show his approval for various SHADO materials to be purchased. He blinked as his eye fell on number 346 - mistletoe. He picked up the phone to call Miss Ealand.

"Yes sir?"

"Miss Ealand, just what is mistletoe doing on...?" Ed could hear a remarkably good voice singing Jingle Bells through the line. It sounded like Paul Foster. It took him a couple of seconds to make out Alec Freeman bellowing Ho-Ho-Ho's.

"Never mind, Miss Ealand, I have a feeling I know who's responsible," Straker grumbled, hanging up. He reached for his coffee mug and took a sip, frowning his forehead, for it was not coffee but hot cocoa. Floating in the cup were tiny red and green marshmallows. He pulled his mouth into a disapproving thin line. Probably Lieutenant Rogers again - she'd brought him his coffee earlier, giggling to herself as she often did. She knew how much it annoyed him.

Straker reflected to himself that people showed a surprising lack of professionalism around this time of the year. He set the cocoa down and looked at his watch. It was nearly noon, and he realized he was hungry. He finished the reports with a sigh and got up from his desk, deciding to head for the studio cafeteria upstairs.

Walking through the corridor he noticed several operatives with Santa Claus hats on. Straker moaned under his breath. 'It's all right,' he thought. 'I'll survive this time of year.'

In the cafeteria, he ignored the Christmas decorations, even gaudier than the ones in SHADO headquarters. Ed ordered a Chef's salad and coffee and sat down with it. But the thought that under different circumstances he'd be now picking out something delightful at Hamley's toy shop for John came unwanted into his mind and he quickly pushed it away. He did not see Alec Freeman watching him with a concerned look on his face.

"Happy Christmas, Ed."

"Hmmm? Didn't see you come up."

"At least you're eating," Alec said. He took a seat across from Ed. "But why here? You should get out. We've been quiet and Peter took care of the one problem that came up."

"I don't like it. It's been too quiet." Ed toyed with his fork.

"Maybe they have Christmas on their planet, too," grinned Alec. "They're all busy shopping." He sighed when Ed did not laugh.

"I seem to have lost my appetite," reflected Ed.

"Still painful, isn't it?" Alec said softly. The two men exchanged glances.

"Alec, I don't have time for this. No lectures."

"I didn't say a word. Look, don't you think you should get some shopping in for staff?" Alec grinned.

"Alec, I authorize seasonal bonuses on their checks. That's enough. Look, I am tired. Can you handle things here for a while? I think I'll go home and have a brief lie-in."

Alec frowned.

"You don't look well, Ed. You don't eat regularly and you hardly sleep. Sure, I guess it's too much to ask that you attend tonight's Christmas party? Of course if you're too tired?"

Alec watched Ed toss down his fork and walk away. Ed obviously hadn't heard a word.

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Ed idly drove into town. Going back home to a lonely flat would just rekindle too many memories. He parked and wandered through the shops, easily dodging the Christmas Eve crowds. He stopped, drawn to a window that displayed a sleek glass prism. It would add an extra touch of color to his office. Ed spun on a heel.

He'd heard crying. A little girl was curled up in a corner, terrified and weeping.

Ed approached her slowly.

"Nothing can be as bad as all that, can it? What's wrong?" Ed crouched down so that he'd be at her eye level.

"Mummy gone! Los--los--" the girl hiccupped.

"In this crowd, it's easy enough to get separated from your mother. Well, we'll soon get you taken care of. I'm Ed. What's your name?"

She looked at him uncertainly. "Not supposed to talk to strangers."

Ed grinned. "That isn't going to make my job easier."

"You talk funny."

"Oh, do I? Well, I'm American. Now we'll find us a police officer, shall we?" Ed reached over and took the girl's hand. He rose to his feet and walked with her until he found a phone and called into Metropolitan police force. Briefly he explained the situation. He smiled at what they told him, and hung up.

"Your mother isn't far from here, Lucy. We'll drive down to the station. Seems she's just as frantic as you were."

The girl looked hopeful. Ed smiled even more.

They walked together until he felt the pressure on his hand from her small grip tighten. Ed stopped. The girl was looking in awe at a rosy-cheeked, blonde-curved doll in a shop window. On an impulse, Ed guided her into the store, explained to the shop assistant, who lifted the doll out of the window. Ed watched Lucy's eyes widen in delight as he handed her the doll.

"Your daughter's a very lucky miss. That's the last one we had. It's musical."

Ed smiled thinly at the shop assistant as he took out his wallet. Later, several pounds poorer, he finally delivered little Lucy to her weeping mother. They embraced and Ed watched in satisfaction.

"Ah well, sir. Now that's what Christmas is all about," the desk officer said, watching the reunion.

"Yes. Yes, it is." Ed responded.

"See dolly?" Lucy asked her mother proudly.

"Now sweets, where ever did you get? . . ." The mother looked up, but Ed had gone.

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Paul Foster sang: "Now bring us a figgy pudding!"

Alec Freeman laughed as he sipped his champagne. The party had been going on for some time.

"Actually Paul, I'd rather have some of that spice cake," a familiar voice behind Alec said.

"Ed!" Paul shouted.

"Ed!" Alec exclaimed.

Edward Straker, casual in a dinner jacket, soft blue banded collar shirt and blue slacks, seemed amused. He helped himself to a generous slice of cake and his usual sweetened and creamed coffee.

"Glad you could make it, Ed." beamed Alec.

"I nearly didn't, you know. I ran into a lovely damsel in distress."

"Well, sir, you should have brought her," winked Paul.

"I imagine right now she's sleeping soundly. Anyway she was too short for me," Ed said casually. He started munching on a mouthful of cake.

Alec and Paul exchanged glances.

Ed grinned to himself. He just might make it through this irrational season after all.

The End