

# Series 9 - Impressions

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- by Angie

## Fellow Prisoners

*The thoughts of a prisoner – they're not free either.*

*They keep returning to the same things*

*- Solon (556 BC)*

Vincent stood beneath the grate in the dust-filled culvert. He detected nothing but the scents he expected, although they were exotic in the extreme and made his nose twitch.

Devin had come here often, returned full of stories. No matter how he tried though, he had been unable to convince Vincent to accompany him, although it was one of the safest places he could have gone. His refusal would have made Father proud, had he known, but the reasons were his own. Vincent had not wanted to look at fellow prisoners.

When Catherine had come into his life, the dangers of the world Above had come with her. Then he had been captured by scientists, experiencing Father's worst nightmare first hand. Catherine had rescued him - but that near-death experience had changed him. He had realized, belatedly, that a cage worked both ways and that it was sometimes unclear who was the prisoner.

Tonight he had followed the Bronx River to a place that had been within easy walking distance all his life. In the intervening years there had been changes here. There were no concrete cells and ugly iron bars any more. The inmates were treated with respect – and their visitors were not there to ogle, but to learn.

He had come here out of curiosity, to see for himself – and if truth be told, to seek knowledge of a sort. There was only one inmate he wanted to see – had to see.

Vincent shifted the grate quietly, lifted himself through it and replaced it. He stood in deep shadow surrounded by a dense patch of trees. There was no moon and the sky was overcast. It was a warm night with a slight breeze. He sensed no one near by. The closest person was a guard who seemed to be asleep in one of the buildings. He knew he would have to be wary of security cameras, but he would avoid the pathways and viewing areas. He was not a tourist.

He had bathed carefully for two days, using no soap. His black wool cloak had been washed and aired in the Chamber of the Winds. He knew he would never be able to quite rid himself of the tunnel smells – but he had made every effort to diminish them for this special trip. He wore nothing but a pair of stretchy shorts. He had also fasted.

Soft-footed, he began to jog around the eastern perimeter, keeping to the trees and deep shadows. He reached the parking lot and turned west. Before long, he found his landmark and moved around the compound carefully, wanting the breeze carry his scent ahead of him. Then he saw the concrete “mountains” and began to climb.

He moved slowly now, looking for a place he had seen on the map, where he could look down into the enclosure. He reached it and hunkered down by a well-hidden chain link fence, searching. Yes, there were a pair of them, plus a couple of cubs. He sensed they were awake and aware of him. He kept himself still, although he quivered internally with excitement.

He wondered what he smelled like to them. He knew his scent was not entirely human.

He waited and was suddenly aware of a dark shape easing its way towards him through a patch of trees and then through dense underbrush. Vincent almost held his breath in anticipation.

The shape approached the fence along a narrow patch of rough grass, and Vincent saw that it was the big male, his eyes gleaming in the darkness, his mouth slightly open, canines showing. He sensed no danger to himself. The beast was well-fed and did not feel threatened.

Vincent slowly removed his cape and put it behind him. He opened his own mouth, exposing his canines and attempting to get eye contact. His empathic talent worked to some extent on animals, but this was his first exposure to a wild one, if a zoo resident could be called that.

The lion sidled up to the fence and shook his abundant mane, began scenting the air. Vincent shook his head in mimicry and crawled closer to the fence, wanting the lion to see him clearly. He examined the face opposite him with great interest.

He had recently come to accept the presence of a full-length mirror in his chamber because Catherine wanted it there. For the first time in his life, he did not avoid his own reflection, but it was hardly automatic for him to look at it. He had made a special point of doing so earlier in the evening.

Alike, yet not alike, he decided, not without relief.

Vincent tried to project calm and curiosity only. He sensed that the animal was now cautious and puzzled. The lion lifted its great head and looked him in the eyes. They looked at each other for long moments, before the lion made a whuffing sound and sat down, rubbing his flanks against the fence, his tail twitching slightly, but never taking his eyes off Vincent's.

Then the lion lifted one of his big paws and pressed it against the fence, claws sheathed. Vincent, sensing no danger, pressed a hand to meet it, felt the hard pads on his palm. They were warm, almost hot. The lion flexed it a little, as if trying to increase the contact. Vincent put his fingers through the fence and gently moved his fingers around the huge paw, stroking it lightly. He began to feel a vibration, realized the lion was purring. Vincent found himself responding in kind, knew at once that the lion felt it too.

Abruptly, the lion dropped his paw and lay along the fence, his head still angled up to keep eye contact. Vincent got as close as he could until he could mimic the lion's posture. Pressed as close as they could get, their sides touching through the links, their joint purr danced between them. Vincent slowly moved so his head was immediately adjacent to that of the lion's, while still locking eyes. The lion waited, his mouth now panting slightly. Slowly Vincent pressed his face against the fence and the lion followed suit. He knew there was little danger. The links were too small to allow the lion to hurt him.

The lion's purr increased in tempo and as Vincent wondered what his next move should be, a long rough tongue shot out from the lion's mouth and rasped over his nose and mouth. The lion regarded him for a few moments longer, then rolled onto his back, legs in the air, belly exposed, his purr now clearly audible, his eyes still locked on Vincent's, as if begging for attention like a domestic cat.

Vincent was amazed and exhilarated. He desperately wanted to stroke that exposed belly, but he couldn't get his hand through the links. He looked up. The fence was very high and topped with barbed wire and an inward overhang. Although he might be able to climb over without damaging himself, he would not be able to return that way. He would be as much a prisoner as the lion – and in far more danger. Perhaps it was for the best. Affinity or not, the lion could be unpredictable if his space was invaded.

So Vincent remained where he was and put both hands against the fence, then reached his fingers through. The lion rolled onto his side again and moved his head so that he could lick Vincent's fingers. It was done with such gentleness, that Vincent found it almost erotic. His own purr was now almost as loud as the lion's.

The lion's head lifted suddenly, ears alert, and Vincent started, pulling his hands back. He realized that the lioness was nearby. She approached and sat on her haunches a few feet away, regarding the two of them. Vincent sensed her curiosity. She padded to her mate, then stepped over him to push her head against the fence. She regarded Vincent with such intensity that he drew away slightly. She turned her head to nuzzle her mate then rolled over him playfully. The lion nipped her shoulder and she sat down, but next to the fence, effectively separating him from Vincent.

She turned to look Vincent in the eyes. Then she lifted a paw to the fence as her mate had done. Vincent sensed no danger and placed his hand there. It was a little smaller than that of the lion, but just as warm. She moved her head to lick his fingers through the fence and he felt a mild purr through her paw. Then she dropped it, turned her back on them both and walked back into the enclosure, curiosity satisfied.

The lion had been watching his mate's every move. He rose and looked at Vincent again, then shook his head a little in a leonine shrug. He padded close to the fence and put his muzzle against it. Vincent pushed his own face into the links until he could feel the lion's soft nose on his own. Their joint purrs grew again. They breathed on each other for long moments, inhaling each other's scent. The lion's had a slight wildness to it, of dusty plains under a hot sun. He felt the lion quiver as if in response to this image and his tongue again rasped gently over Vincent's mouth. Vincent caught a slight odour of raw meat, but it was not unpleasant.

Suddenly the lion broke contact, turned away and slowly followed the path taken by the lioness. He looked back over his shoulder once, as if to imprint Vincent on his mind, then was lost in the night shadows.

After long moments, Vincent roused himself, put on his cloak and began his return to the tunnel entrance.

He was deep in thought. The experience had awakened something inside himself. He had felt a definite bond with the lion, who in turn had recognized something in him. The lion's exposure of his belly implied recognition of a superior, but in what sense, Vincent had no idea. Perhaps the lion did that for his keeper too. But that last face-to-face was different. He'd be willing to bet that the lion had not done that with any human.

The memory of their silent communication, their purrs vibrating between them, was one Vincent would cherish. Oddly, he felt liberated. There was now another prisoner who had reached out to the world, found something new in it, and enjoyed the discovery. It made Vincent feel less alone, less unique. He also knew he would never be able to explain this to anyone. He and the lion shared that as well.

END

# Fear

*Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up  
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear.*

-William Wordsworth

Fear – wasn't it the great leveler?

Vincent paced the attic room that was his and Catherine's bedroom. He had awakened with a familiar angst, unalleviated by early morning lovemaking and the routine of breakfast.

He had been careful to mask the emotion along their bond. Catherine was now next door in the brownstone, taking care of the paperwork of the Foundation she had set up, and their miracle son, Jacob, was below in classes.

And so he paced. What was bothering him? It was November, dark, windy and cold. Why did these feelings always come upon him at this time of the year? In the days when he first came to know Catherine, he had looked forward to the shorter, darker days. They meant longer night hours to roam the world Above and more time to spend with Catherine on her balcony. Now, it just meant that his garden was dead and wet. He felt out of place.

He stopped pacing and stood in front of the mirror. There was nothing to equal himself in the world, as far as he knew. He could not even indulge in vanity, as there was no one to compare himself to. Catherine's love defined him, made him whole, but it could not change what he was – and what those in the outside world would see when they looked at him.

What did they see, he wondered. Yes, his face most closely resembled those great felines, but the resemblance was not total. He had blue eyes – which they could not boast. His facial shape was more human than beast and even those most afraid saw that - eventually.

He had once told Catherine, and later Charles, that he represented what humans feared the most – the unknown. But he was not unknown – not some bogey man, the stuff of nightmares barely visualized in the dark places of the mind. He was ... something else.

He kept the bond quiet with an effort. He felt ... confined. It was a feeling he knew well. He was over 30 and had lived his entire life underground, until he met Catherine. He had often wished he could walk in the sunlight like other men. He had contented himself with roaming the dark, and while that gave him some measure of freedom, it did not address the real issue. He had to go Above, or anywhere outside the home tunnels, cloaked and hidden.

That cloak was a part of him, he could not conceive of being anywhere without it. Even now, he knew exactly where it was. It might as well be a second skin – and in a very real sense it was. His clothes might hide most of his physical differences, but only his cloak covered his hair and hid his face. He could even keep his hands out of sight beneath it.

Looking in the mirror, he saw a man-beast in man's clothing. He would never be more, nor less, than that to those he hid from – those who didn't and couldn't know him.

True, he lived Above now, but only nominally. He was confined to the brownstones and their gardens.

He knew only too well the effect a first encounter had on those he met. How often had he seen them cringe, felt their fear, like a stink? No one had been able to mask that reaction and he had learned to stay still and show no emotion while this indignity took place. Even Catherine had been shocked that first time. She claimed it was because he had sneaked up behind her while she was trying to see the reflection of her stitched face, but he knew better. Even then, he could sense her emotions.

He had not felt fear, though, and that was something he cherished. Perhaps the sight of her face had made her numb to other kinds of fear, fear of the unknown, of himself specifically. In any case, she had soon warmed to him, made him feel special, wanted, even liked perhaps. Her emotions were in turmoil then, and he had carefully not tried to interpret them.

Lena had felt shock too. He had felt that slight frisson, seen her stiffen ever so slightly. Her business had made her hard, impossible to frighten. How many fears had she had to face over a bed? In any case, she had seen his hands moments before she saw his face and that had been long enough for her to school herself.

Brian's eyes had widened in shock that first time, when they had collided as the boy tried to escape. Was it fear of himself, fear of discovery, or fear of the unknown? A little of all three, Vincent guessed. Brian had said nothing, hadn't tried to run from him – as he had earlier run from Mouse, he'd heard later. Mouse! Of all people to be frightened of! How could anyone be frightened of Mouse?

Brian had been shocked into paralysis. That was interesting – although not an unusual reaction. They had

learned, later, that Brian lived in a kind of fantasy world. Vincent was sure those games he played included creatures far stranger and more dangerous than himself. Brian had not expected to see a fantasy become real, but he had come into the tunnels looking for something – and found more than he bargained for.

None of these reminiscences were any help at all to his present unease. Vincent looked in the mirror again. Even if he could shave off the excessive hair on his face, he would look no more human. His differences were too extreme. Oh, he could wear a ski mask or a motorcycle helmet – Devin had once brought him both - but they were not the answer he sought. He wanted to be accepted – to walk in freedom anywhere he chose, any time he chose. And that was something he could not do.

Why did he feel these urges, now, after all these years? Each day was a blessing and he knew it. He was loved by a special community, had a wife and son. What more could he want?

Vincent pulled up a chair and sat down in front of the mirror. He had to work this out. It was ridiculous that he should be feeling such roiling discomfort at his time of life. What was wrong with him? Would he never be satisfied?

Something nagged at him. When he first met a stranger, he kept silent and still. He wondered if there was something he should be doing.

Should he put out a hand and greet them immediately? No, his hands were the most fearsome part of him, apart from his teeth. He definitely shouldn't smile either. He knew the sight of his canines aroused Catherine, but her reaction was not usual. His snarl turned his face into that of a beast, his roar into something primal, untamed, horrific. He had no illusions on that score. He hadn't seen himself in that state, nor did he want to.

Inside, he was still a man, even at his worst, and it hurt to be shunned, even for a moment, especially when he was being friendly.

Given enough time to prepare, he could meet a stranger fully-cloaked, his face hidden. Then he could let the power of his voice calm them, ask them not to be afraid and warn them that he was different. Their fright in these instances was less and more manageable, but it was still there. He had told them and they had heard him – even if they had been skeptical. But fear could not be allayed by words alone. They still had to see him, to really understand.

Fear. He could hardly expect people to forgo it when he knew it so well himself. His fears were different – but they defined him just the same. He had not forgotten Professor Hughes or the Silks. He could have easily died from either encounter - and almost had. That he had not was no tribute to his own strength or intelligence – those things he most valued in himself.

Catherine had saved him in the first instance and Howie in the second. He had fallen into the trap he feared the most – being caught Above – and had been unable to help himself.

He had seen that well-known fear of himself in the eyes of his tormentors, knew that these were people who would never see him other than as a beast. That was his greatest fear – to be misunderstood, dismissed as an unthinking animal. Yet, he had let both the Professor and the Silks think he was exactly that. It had been an instinctive reaction, but had it been the smartest thing to do? In retrospect, he was not so sure.

Just as surely, those seeing him for the first time Below, saw him as a freak. That was a word he hated more than any other. The Silks had called him that. It was an affront to his hard won dignity – and they probably knew it. Howie certainly knew, having been called that himself. Charles had called himself a freak. His life, compared to Vincent's, had been horrific. No one Below had ever demeaned Vincent that way.

So first impressions were important. Only later, when their fear subsided, did those who were introduced know him as Vincent. So, fear forced him to let his enemies as well as his friends see him first as nameless. That hardly seemed logical, or even sensible.

What could he do? He could use the power of his voice to calm. He always spoke after a few moments anyway. Should he perhaps speak sooner, before the fear he saw went to the next level – fight or flight? He knew that his voice was his best asset, along with his eyes. Those two things separated him from the beast he resembled, more even than his clothes and stature. They were what ultimately calmed new arrivals, made him approachable.

Vincent considered this. Could he do more on that first encounter? Should he quote Shakespeare, Wordsworth or Blake? What if the person was illiterate? How would he know? Even if they weren't and recognized the classics,

would they be able to comprehend what he was saying while looking at him that first time? He suspected not. Fear was a powerful, overwhelming emotion. He could probably sing "*The Marseillaise*" and accomplish no more, he thought ruefully.

Vincent sighed and slumped in his chair, peering at his reflection through his hair with something akin to disgust. How could he overcome the first shock at his appearance? Was it even possible?

He thought of saying "welcome" and then quickly discarded that idea. If he so much as pretended a smile, that welcome would almost certainly be misconstrued as an invitation into danger – like a spider inviting a fly into its parlour. He always tried to be studiously neutral, standing quiet, at ease, his hands hidden. That left the onus on the other person to stand and wait, which they usually did.

Catherine had shown her friends Kristopher's portrait as an introduction. That had worked reasonably well, but he could hardly carry it around, or hide behind it!

He never carried anything in the tunnels, except what he could wear on his person. Should he perhaps carry a book? Not a bad idea, he reflected, but where would he carry it? Should he keep one in an inner pocket – a nice leather-bound, gilt-lettered volume of poetic works? Impractical. He had to run on occasion. A book in his pocket would be a very uncomfortable companion – unless it was a very small book.

Vincent mentally rummaged through his collection. Yes, there were several books which were literally "pocket-sized". He had one of Shakespeare's sonnets, several from the various British publishers who produced the common man volumes of their day. Between them, they included just about every classic extant in plain, but sturdy editions. Then there were the Oxford University press books, nicely compact and beautifully bound. Why, he even had one of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Yes, surely a book in his hands would pacify quicker than any words he could utter. No one would expect a "beast" to be carrying a book – especially a nice little hardcover. They would have less to fear if they saw it, he reasoned.

He'd probably be able to put it to the test fairly soon. They still received refugees from Above, mostly recommended by Catherine. The Foundation helped those it could where they lived, but some needed more healing than the State was willing to accommodate. After a suitable screening and orientation session, they were sent Below.

Vincent always stayed out of sight for a while, but he disliked being an outcast, even for that short time. No one asked him to do so, but he tried to postpone the inevitable. He never got used to that first encounter. Well, sight was the key. A book in plain sight might just work. He'd try it.

Vincent went down to his chamber and began looking through his books. He piled likely compact editions on his table. Then, in a space he'd cleared on one shelf, there was a small *whumph* as a book fell down. He looked at the old, dull green cover with its faded lettering and picked up the small book.

It didn't look familiar, although he recognized the title, of course. For some reason, he had never read it, never even considered reading it. He had never seen a copy below, never even thought to ask after one. He liked fairy tales for their historical value, like *Beowulf*. but this one had no such connection, as far as he knew. He knew it was very old. No one had mentioned it to him, and it certainly had never been part of his studies. Had Father deliberately kept it from him? That would not have been out-of-character, given the topic and its execution.

Only one person could have found this book and hidden it so well. Devin! He must have brought it back from one of his forays above. His brother was secretive on occasion and even had places he went to be alone. Had he read this, Vincent wondered.

Looking around, Vincent realized that this chamber, despite his changes, had plenty of places where forgotten treasures could hide. And books were different. Once they were in a bookcase, and a full one at that, why would he move them?

He sat in his chair and opened the book. It seemed singularly suitable for his purposes, he thought. Almost certainly it would "break the ice", if it could be seen.

He began to read. It was not a long book. Something fell out of it as he read and he picked it off his lap and looked at it. Another puzzle, he thought, and lay it carefully on the table.

He had finished the book and sat musing on the contents when Catherine walked in.

“What were you reading?” she asked, bending down to plant a kiss on his upturned lips.

Vincent showed her the front cover and she smiled.

“Where on earth did you find that? It looks like it has been around since the French Revolution! Looks like it didn’t quite miss the guillotine either!”

He looked at the book more closely. Catherine was right. Two of the upper corners were shaved neatly off.

Vincent laughed, and immediately felt better. Catherine always knew how to lift him out of his funks.

“Why were you reading that, of all books?” she asked, her curiosity finally getting the better of her discretion.

Vincent explained his plan and Catherine sat on his lap and looked in his eyes.

“Vincent, I think that’s a wonderful idea. But the title on this book is so faded, I’m not sure anyone will be able to read it from even a foot away.”

“No matter, Catherine. I could carry any book, but this one seems appropriate – even if only you and I know its title. And look what fell out from the pages. I think it’s a sign.”

Catherine looked at the small flattened rosebud on the table. It would have been red once, but now it was a deep, russet brown. Vincent placed the book on the table and carefully lifted the flower onto it. It seemed to belong there.

“Yes, undoubtedly a sign,” she murmured. “But that book doesn’t really reflect your life, Vincent. You will not turn into a poster-boy prince – thank goodness! I want you just as you are, my beautiful, beautiful beast.”

Vincent sighed. Catherine was the only one who called him that, at least to his face. The words, he knew, came from a pop song she loved. From her lips the phrase was seductive, arousing. He pulled her close and gave her a deep kiss. He spoke softly.

“Catherine, your beauty has transformed me – and there is no life for me without you. I share that with the hero of that story.”

“Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder,” Catherine whispered. “I often wonder if our heroine, later, wasn’t a little sorry that the spell was undone. She had loved him for what he was, at the last, not for what he wasn’t. It seems cruel that she discovered that, only to be denied the chance to enjoy the revelation. To me, she seemed a little wistful. I’ll bet he would have been good in bed too.”

“Catherine! You are incorrigible!”

Catherine laughed and after a moment Vincent joined her. The matching passion in their eyes soon had them move to the big bed, where in due course, they reaffirmed their love.

The little book with its rose adornment, sat on the table. Its faded gold title caught the mellow glow of the stained glass window.

*“Beauty and the Beast - by Marie Le Prince de Beaumont” .*

END

# Vincent's Tale

*Did I hear it half in a doze  
Long since, I know not where?  
Did I dream it an hour ago  
When asleep in this arm chair?  
- Alfred Lord Tennyson*

Vincent was experiencing a dull, throbbing pain that was new to him. He had been cut, shot, burnt, buried under rocks, but the pain was always short-lived. He healed quickly, did not get sick and headaches were something other people got.

He found he could not sit in his big chair, could not even walk comfortably. Miserable, he sat on the edge of the bed in his chamber. He had brought a lunch tray back to his chamber, but had not been able to eat it. He had no appetite.

He picked up a book of Tennyson's works and opened it at random. He began to read of *Godiva*, 'the woman of a thousand summers back'. Who dared her Earl to 'Prove to me what it is I would not do'.

In spite of his pain, Vincent found the thought of her long hair fascinating.

*She shower'd the rippled ringlets to her knee*

What would Catherine look like with hair that long, he wondered.

Vincent moved to try and get more comfortable and regretted it, wincing as his backside ache increased. He put down the book and gave into self-pity.

Catherine, he knew, was aware of his pain and was doing what she could to finish her business Above in the brownstone. He felt her relief as she did so. Then she was on her way.

Vincent waited. He wanted her in his arms, soothing him, even though he knew she could not relieve the physical ache.

She fairly ran into the room, shedding her gloves onto his chair. Bringing the fresh chill of the upper tunnels with her, she stood in front of Vincent and took his hands in hers.

"What is it? What's wrong? Tell me!"

Vincent looked at her and gathered her to him. For a wonder, it didn't hurt and he relaxed just a little.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you Catherine. I had an accident. I was working with Kanin trying to stop a frozen leak when I slipped on the ice and fell on my behind. I can hardly move now."

Catherine looked gratifyingly concerned.

"Vincent, I'll bet you fell on your tailbone. I know that pain. I fell skating once. I think you should get Peter to look at it. As it happens, both he and Father are still in the brownstone's clinic testing out some new breathing apparatus. Come."

Why hadn't he thought of that himself? Was his brain as well as his bum affected? He sighed and lifted himself, painfully, from the bed. He hated to be fussed over, but if Catherine thought that he should have the infernal thing looked at, he would do so. He could not go on like this. He shuffled over to his cloak and threw it around himself. Catherine was immediately at his elbow, holding his arm.

They moved slowly to the brownstone's hidden entrance, Vincent becoming more and more discouraged. He felt worse than before. Every step was painful. When they reached the basement stairs, Catherine left him and ran up to tell Peter and Father he was coming.

Vincent was in such obvious pain by the time he walked slowly into the clinic, that Peter suggested he undress. Catherine helped him do so and Jacob and Peter helped him to get up on the examining table and lie on his stomach. Vincent found the position almost a relief. The pain retreated to a dull ache.

While Catherine watched, Peter began his examination, Jacob angling the articulated light and a magnifier so he could look more closely. He did not take long. He beckoned to Jacob, who looked and nodded. Peter looked at Catherine knowingly. She raised her eyebrows in a question and he nodded.

"Ok Vincent, we're finished. Perhaps you'd better just roll onto your side for a moment. It must hurt to sit. You've bruised your tailbone very badly but there's more. I need to give you a scientific explanation, so bear with me.

"Vincent, every embryo has a tail which grows from the coccyx or tailbone. In some animals it continues to grow, in others it disappears after a few weeks and is absorbed back into the body. In either case, the place where the tail would emerge through the skin is weak. In some people, the exit point does not completely close as the embryo matures and it remains a kind of muscular slit, called a sinus, and is only thinly covered with skin. The

flaw can go unnoticed indefinitely, unless something happens to inflame it - such as injuring the tailbone. Then the bone becomes bruised and swollen and the skin can rupture and the sinus is exposed. There is a risk of infection and the problem can become chronic if it isn't fixed. It can be repaired with minor surgery. Catherine had one of these as a girl. It's more common in women because their pelvis is angled differently to men. But plenty of men have the problem. You have such an opening."

Vincent looked at Peter.

"You mean that I have a hole where a tail might have emerged, if I had developed one."

"Yes. As I said, it's a weakness in the area that affects a lot of people. Yours is not bad, just a small hole really, but it should be repaired before it causes more trouble. I can do it, but it will require a general anaesthetic and you'll have to sleep on your stomach for a couple of days. It will be very painful, but I'll work out a dosage of painkillers. You'll also need help to keep the area clean after ...um ... normal bodily functions."

"I'm willing," Catherine piped up from across the room. Vincent turned to look at her in amazement. Was this what it meant to be married? He shuddered but realized he had no choice.

"Very well, Peter. The pain is getting worse and I'm barely functional now. When could you do this operation?"

"Well, you'll have to fast for several hours. When did you last eat?"

"Breakfast," Vincent replied. "I couldn't eat lunch."

"Well then, I think we can do this quite quickly, but I have to confer with Father about the dosage of anaesthetic to give you. Fortunately, this new apparatus is working and will make our monitoring of your heart and breathing much easier. Father can give me a hand and Catherine could assist as well, by keeping an eye on the monitors."

A few hours later, the surgical team was in place and Vincent was laid out on his stomach in the small clinic. He sincerely believed there could be no more embarrassing operation. He felt himself warm as his rear end was shaved and cleaned.

Peter and Father had conferred and decided to use a combination of medications via intravenous injection. They had hooked him up to a heart monitor and determined his normal rate. They were going to take it cautiously, uncertain how he would respond – or how long it would take for him to go under.

Catherine watched the preparations with some concern, but was sure Vincent was in no danger. She was scrubbed and ready to assist wherever needed.

Peter injected the IV tube and told Vincent to count to 20. He began and reached 12 before his voice sank to a whisper and stopped. Catherine looked her amazement. She had never made it past 3. Peter looked a bit grim, but was obviously relieved. The monitors showed Vincent's heartbeat was strong and he was breathing normally. Peter bent over and went to work, Father assisting.

Vincent's last thought was that a tail would have been preferable to this complication in his life.

Vincent woke up in a bed he didn't recognize, in a rock-walled room, presumably somewhere Below. The room was unlit and without furnishings. The bed seemed to be a collection of mattresses, which smelled a little musty. He looked around, puzzled. He had fallen and had been in some pain, he remembered. He felt fine now, so that was over – except that he had no idea where he was.

He moved to get off the bed and something felt peculiar. He reached behind and found himself drawing his hand along a softly-furred tail, knew with a shock that it was his as it wrapped itself around his arm. It was dim in the chamber but he saw that the tail ended in a dense club of longer hair. It puzzled him, until he realized it resembled the tail of a lion. He groaned.

He then realized that he was naked, but that his body hair was very thick. He didn't feel the obvious chill in the chamber at all. What had happened to him?

Automatically, he reached along the bond for Catherine and whispered her name. He felt her presence and moments later she came into the chamber and into his arms. He nuzzled her with delight.

Then he realized she was naked as well, but that her hair was very long and reached almost to her knees. He felt her smooth body beneath the hair and his manhood was suddenly insistent.

He lifted her onto the mattresses and took her then, without ceremony. She moaned her arousal and clutched his chest hair in her hands, further inflaming him. Their climax was hot and short. His tail was now wrapped around them both and she stroked it lovingly. He found himself purring and hugged her to him.

Catherine opened her eyes to look at him and then pulled herself up so she could plant a kiss on his lips.

“Ah Vincent, my love, you are such a wonderful beast. I’d like to do it again, but we have to get to the meeting. There’s a foraging party going out and you’ll be needed, my hunter.”

They moved to get off the bed, Vincent still a bit wary of his tail. He tried to sit on the edge of it, but immediately discovered the disadvantage of the appendage. How did animals sit down, he wondered, then rationalized that they didn’t sit that way, couldn’t in fact.

He quickly stood up and his tail dropped behind him at a thought. He twitched it experimentally, enjoying the sense of motion and control, even though he couldn’t see it. He liked the feel of it rubbing against his legs.

He and Catherine padded down the tunnels to a large chamber. He didn’t want to admit he didn’t know the way, so had let her lead. The tunnel was narrow enough to make this necessary. He gave up trying to understand where he was. As long as Catherine was here, it didn’t matter.

When they arrived, he saw that a lot of naked tunnel folk were already there and were hardly less hairy than himself. He recognized Cullen, Kanin and Winslow. They were all carrying spears. Vincent glanced at his hands and decided he didn’t need any weapons. His nails seemed unusually long and dangerous-looking.

Father stood on a slight rise in the rock floor and addressed the assembly.

“Friends, we have to forage today. The hunters will try and find some live meat, while the rest of you will forage above for fruit, vegetables and such. William has found some flour, so is making a batch of waybread to last us for a few days, but more would be appreciated. Bring whatever you find back here. But be careful Above. It’s night but you will still need to wear clothes. There’s a pile over by the back entrance.”

Vincent went to join the three hunters and they moved along long rough tunnels for some time before reaching an area where they were even rougher and more narrow. Vincent could smell vermin and made hand signals to Kanin, Cullen and Winslow. They obediently left him to his hunt and moved down the other tunnels looking for larger game.

He went down on all fours and followed the scent of rats, moving silently. He twitched his tail over his back so it wouldn’t drag. It was very dim in the tunnel, but his sense of smell was all he needed and he soon found a niche where they had been nesting. It was empty, so he continued.

Shortly afterward, he rounded a curve and the scent became much stronger. He moved very cautiously then suddenly found himself at the entrance to a large cavern, lit by columns of light from above. In the centre, a large group of rats was gnawing away at something. It was a large dog.

Giving his trademark roar, Vincent pounced on the group of rats, managing to dispatch a number of them before they realized his presence. A few of the survivors scattered into the darkness, but one crept behind him and sank its teeth into his tail.

Vincent yelled in pain and dispatched the rat with a swipe. The pain was incredible! He roared his anger.

He awakened to see a bright light and the faces of Peter and Father gazing at him in concern. He groaned and Peter spoke.

“I know it’s painful, Vincent. I put some painkiller into the IV before I disconnected it, but it won’t help much. I’ll give you some pills to take. Turn over onto your side first, and then let your legs fall over the side of the bed until you can slide off. I’m afraid you won’t be able to sit down easily for a few days, but there is help for that.”

He displayed an inflated rubber circle.

“It’s called an invalid ring, and it will take the pressure off your tailbone when you sit.”

If Vincent had had any modesty left, that would have ended it. He grimaced and slowly got off the operating table.

Catherine and Father were immediately there to help and Peter held him up from behind.

“I don’t need three of you to stand up,” Vincent murmured petulantly. But he did. His legs almost gave out under him with the pain from his backside. He grunted, then let out a roar that made his helpers cringe.

He felt a lot better after that, although the pain did not diminish. He grinned apologetically at his surgical team, who rolled their eyes and helped him put on a dressing gown. He was now able to stand unaided, so Peter and Jacob announced they were going for a well-earned coffee and meal in the kitchen.

When they were alone, Catherine took Vincent’ arm.

“Vincent, we’ve decided you’d better stay here in the hospital room for a day or so, until you can move around more easily. Peter wants to be able to check you over. We know you heal quickly, but he has to be sure.”

Vincent felt as if a hot poker had been jabbed into his nether region. He was barely able to prevent himself from yelling imprecations. He clasped her shoulder as a new stab of pain made him grunt.

“I agree, Catherine,” he rasped. “I cannot conceive of going anywhere like this.”

They moved slowly out of the clinic and into the next door hospital room. It was pretty stark, having not been decorated yet. But the bed was new and the linen clean. Catherine helped Vincent lay down on his stomach. She gave him a kiss and whispered that she was going to get some soft food. She left him and he watched her rump leave, amazed that it too had once had this operation. The pain was excruciating!

When she returned, it was with two metal bottles which had a kind of flattened nipple attachment. She helped him roll onto his side. He sucked on one bottle. Even this was difficult laying on his side, but he managed to keep the liquid in his mouth and off the sheets. The delightful taste of green pea soup greeted him and he sighed. He finished the soup and handed the bottle back to Catherine, who handed him the other with a couple of pills. He swallowed them and found the bottle was filled with honey tea. It was the best thing he had ever tasted. When he was finished she kissed him and sat down in a chair beside him. He was about to say something, when he fell asleep.

Catherine felt Vincent slide into sleep and realized Peter had given him more than a painkiller. It was for the best. He would feel a bit better when he awakened. She regarded him with a little concern. He was not used to being in such prolonged pain. She remembered her own experience. She hoped the painkillers were better these days. They had not helped her at all, she remembered. He would need something to distract his attention from the pain.

She went to the den, where some of their books were gradually being unpacked onto shelves, and found a volume of Tennyson. That would keep him occupied, she thought. She placed it on the night table and left him to talk to Peter and Jacob.

“Well?” she asked Peter as she sat down at the kitchen table. “What’s his prognosis?”

Peter laughed. “He’ll be just fine, Catherine. But don’t tell him we found a tiny vestigial tail down there, so had to do a little more work than we expected. It’s not unusual, actually, but why embarrass him. He just needs rest now. That area heals very quickly. I’ll bet he’s up and about in two or three days. However, the swelling on his tailbone will take a few days to disappear and he’ll ache for a few more. He’ll have to be patient.”

When Vincent awoke again, it was dark. He felt fine until he tried to move. He groaned and managed to slide off the bed to use the bathroom. Then he decided to try out the invalid ring on the chair. He’d had enough of beds. He put on a housecoat and sat on the ring on the chair, gingerly. It worked! He hardly felt the pain. He sighed in relief.

He turned on the light and picked up a book he found on the bedside table. Tennyson! No doubt it had been left by Catherine, who knew well his penchant for the Victorian poem laureate – one she shared.

He opened the ancient volume at random and began reading passages from *Maud: A Monodrama*. He had always found it a bit peculiar, but this time some passages resonated. He wondered why. An odd dream came back to him. Something about himself with a tail like a lion in a tunnel full of naked hunters and rats. He began to read.

*And it was a dream, yet it yielded a dear delight.*

His dream! Yes. He remembered Catherine dressed only in long hair, like Lady Godiva.

*To have look'd, tho' but in a dream, upon eyes so fair  
That had been in a weary world my one thing bright  
And tho it was but a dream, yet it lightened my despair*

Yes, he remembered now. He had made love to Catherine and his tail had wrapped around them both. Even in his dreams, Catherine was the bright light in his life.

Where was she? He felt along the bond, felt her suddenly realize he was awake. He heard her run down the stairs and a moment later she was in his arms, not naked, but in a soft nightgown that made him want to hug her even closer. He did so, managing to spread his legs without too much pain, mumbling into her hair.

"Oh Catherine. I'm afraid I'm going to be out of action for a few days."

"Never mind," she whispered in an ear. "I have to disagree with Tennyson. It *is* possible,

*To find the arms of my true love  
Around me once again"*

Vincent replied,

*"We stood tranced in long embraces  
Mixt with kisses sweeter sweeter  
Than anything on earth."*

They kissed passionately, as if they had been separated for days. Catherine ran her lips over his face and sighed into his hair. Then she made a suggestion into one delightfully soft ear.

*"Take me my sweet  
To the regions of thy rest"*

He needed no further invitation. She helped him get back into bed and lie on his side, far enough over to give her room. Then she slid out of her nightgown and spooned her back along his front. He put his arms across her and his warm furry chest rubbed against her back. She felt his soft hairy legs along the backs of her own and his manhood pushed against her bottom. It was heaven. She sighed happily.

He was the stuff of dreams and poets, she thought, as their love sang along their bond. Not even Tennyson's imagination could have dreamed them - but he had known the right words.

"*Life of my life,*" she mumbled.

Vincent kissed her neck and held her close.

"*My evermore delight,*" he whispered back. He felt a lot better now.

END