

In The Silence of the Night

by Carine Cattellion

(Season Three Introduction, Vincent soliloquy)

There was a moment, when the way was still new and I was afraid to hope. You put your hand on mine and nothing had ever felt like that to me .. like your touch. I wanted to weep.

You turned and looked at me, your eyes filled with dancing light, and I was bathed in your warmth. And I believed in that moment, that even for me, all things were possible. In that warmth, in your light, I felt what it is to be beautiful.

How many lives were touched by you? How many lives were transformed by your courage to give and to love? How many became beautiful in your light?

We promised always to share the truth, always ... But Catherine, there was a truth beyond anything, beyond everything I had ever known, ever dreamed. It was the truth of all you gave, of all you sacrificed for me. The truth of your love humbled me, silenced me, and the truth I could never share with you was the truth of how deeply I loved you.

I will remember ... I will remember every moment; every word, every look, every touch.

Our love lives, it will live forever. Nothing will destroy us. Love does not die.

You're safe. You're safe now. Sleep, my love ...

Vincent

Or I shall live your epitaph to make,
Or you survive when I in earth am rotten;
From hence your memory death cannot take,
Although in me each part will be forgotten.
Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die:
The earth can yield me but a common grave,
When you entomb'd in men's eyes shall lie.
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read;
And tongues to be your being shall rehearse,
When all the breathers of this world are dead;
You still shall live,- such virtue hath my pen,
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.

- William Shakespeare. Sonnet LXXXI (81)

It was the darkest and quietest hour of the night. Alone and aimless she wandered through the maze of sparsely lit underground tunnels with only the silence as her faithful companion.

Again sleep had deserted her, like so often lately, and she had sought refuge in a ramble through these strange surroundings. Surroundings which were her home now, but which gave no answers to her unspoken questions. She felt herself as a stranger, not only here but even in her own body.

Who was she? Where did she come from? What had happened? So many questions, never asked, never answered ...

She stopped, she could have known it. Once again she stood in the entrance to this chamber, hidden in the shadows, not visible but able to survey the place. A single candle on the table was trying to force away the darkness, the faint glow of stained glass threw enigmatic shadows on the carpet covered floor, the shelves filled with books and the large bed. A scream rose in her throat and only with great effort she recovered from her first fright.

She wondered who lived in this chamber because she had always found it deserted. It was a place where peace and quiet ruled.

Obviously the chamber of a man who had lived here his whole life, judging by the collection of memories. A man also with an unquenchable hunger for literature and a man who was carrying an enormous grief with him. One night she had found a journal on the table and an irresistible curiosity as to the ever absent inhabitant of this chamber made her take the step.

In regular smooth handwriting she had read the words, words which made her heart cry out for their writer, without recognizing the truth.

"For so long she is here in the Tunnels, for so long I have her near, she is safe, but she doesn't know anything ... she didn't even recognize Jacob ... I had thought, hoped, but in vain. For her, he is a child like all other children. In her eyes I can read fear when she sees me ... a fear that I recognize all too well, I can see it, time and time again, in the eyes of a stranger, a newcomer here Below ... but to see it in her eyes ... the eyes of the one that I love beyond everything ... it hurts. It is becoming unbearable. Father understands but he can't help, .. It's eating me, I can feel that dark tumult rising in me; violent, insolent. It is haunting me, day and night, in my dreams ... always ... and this time it will destroy me ."

It had made her inquisitive. Who of all people in this protected, hidden world was bearing such grief?

Now she knew and she couldn't understand. Those words written by a man who had lost, in some way, his love she was still down here. There was a baby, Jacob. She remembered the little boy vaguely, a beautiful child.

Yet, it made no sense ... the writer of those desperate words, the man who called this chamber his own, was ... he ... that strange creature. She couldn't describe him differently. Tall, broad shouldered, a figure that you had to look at and yet he moved with a certain grace, like a wild animal ... and when you looked at his face it couldn't be otherwise. He looked like ... like a lion, long golden mane, broad nose, a split upper lip, she knew that he had sharp fangs and ... claws ... His roarings had startled her more than once at night. Only his eyes, they were a total mystery to her, sapphire blue, sad, so much human ... yet she was afraid of

him and even his soft, somewhat husky voice couldn't reassure her, and now she found him here ...

He lay, diagonal, on his bed, restless tossing about in what was clearly a terrifying dream, until suddenly he woke with a scream, turned around, hid his face in the cushions and surrendered himself to an uncontrollable grief. His body shook with wild sobs and she saw how strong claws were grabbing the blankets.

On first impulse she went to him, and placed her hand on his shoulder,

"Vincent ... "

At once she felt him stiffen under her touch. Slowly he turned around and looked at her, tears in those strange blue eyes.

"Catherine ... " and she noticed a faint lisp.

"What are you doing here? ..

You should be asleep."

He continued, suddenly totally in control. With every word she caught a glimpse of those dreadful fangs and despite his former emotions her fear of him returned. Startled she rose to enlarge the distance between them.

"You ... you had a dream ... I wanted to help you ... " the words came out hesitatingly, she didn't know what to say, she never did when he was near.

"To help me ... "

He stood up and frightened she backed away even more. There came a tortured look in those, already, sad eyes.

"You are afraid of me."

It was a statement, one he had probably made all his life but she couldn't help it and she nodded wordlessly.

Motionless he looked at her and his words were spoken very softly.

"Leave me alone ... "

Eagerly she granted this request, not knowing that she tore his already wounded heart to pieces.

When she had nearly reached her chamber she heard his scream, a sound that was so immensely painful, so inhumanly raw that she shivered and almost immediately she heard the footsteps of

The Patriarch of the Tunnels, the elderly, somewhat greying, bearded man called Father. With a relieved sigh she crawled between the cold sheets of her bed. There would be a veil drawn over this episode, of that she was certain.

"Vincent?"

Concerned, Father stood in the entrance of Vincent's chamber and watched his son with a feeling of impending disaster.

Vincent stood, legs apart, in the middle of the chamber with a heavy candlestick in his hands, ready to smash it somewhere, in burning rage and God only knew what could have caused this.

"Vincent!!"

Only now he realised that he was no longer alone, the red mist before his eyes vanished and he saw his Father. Slowly, almost as if he didn't want it, he put the candlestick back on the table and lowered himself, unceremoniously, down in his seat.

"Father ... " and in his voice resounded a suppressed growl, the evidence that he still wasn't in control.

Only when they sat opposite each other the older man asked, "What has happened?"

Even before the sound of those words had died away, Vincent jumped to his feet to pace restlessly up and down.

Patently Father waited for an explanation, and when it came he had to admit to himself that it came as no surprise, he had always known that it would happen and now it had.

"I can't manage it anymore ... it is destroying me ... " And Father needed no further explanation.

"You mean, Catherine."

Vincent stopped his pacing and without looking at the other he continued, "She was here tonight ... she witnessed my ... my dream ... she wanted to help but .. Father, she ... " he hesitated, the words wouldn't come but yet he had to get rid of that suffocating reality.

Father knew it and insisted, "But what Vincent?"

"She is afraid of me ... Father ... the woman I love ... the woman who loved me ... once ... is afraid of me ... "

Sighing Father looked at his son and he knew that his words were going to hurt him.

"I know Vincent ... it was bound to happen."

His reaction was immediate. In one furious movement Vincent turned around and snarled, "No!!"

"Still ... Vincent, she knows nothing of her past, she doesn't even know herself, who she really is, then how can she possibly recognize you? You are a stranger to her ... and yes ... she is afraid ... " . .

"In the eyes of strangers I can read their fear . . . their lack of understanding ... "

Sadly, Vincent shook his head and went on softly, "It hurts, time and time again, but that was nothing ... compared to the pain that I am feeling now ... "

Father could give no answer to this, he could only suspect what his son was going through, but knowing it? .. No, how could he ... yet a solution had to be found, it couldn't go on like this and he decided to give it a try.

"Vincent ... maybe ... maybe it is time to talk with her, to tell her the truth."

There was no reply and in that heavy silence Vincent was considering very carefully, Father's words before he looked up.

"Maybe ... " and again a silence fell, but Father remained quiet.

He knew Vincent needed time, which he gave him willingly, preparing himself for what was to come.

"Father ... "

It was softly spoken and the elderly man answered, tensely, "Yes?"

"Father ... do you want to talk to her?" and even before the sound of those words had died away Vincent had turned himself away.

With furrowed brows Father studied his son. Despite the fact that he wasn't able to see his face anymore it was obvious that there was a well-founded reason hidden behind that question.

Although he couldn't see any expression he did see the bowed shoulders, the once so proud figure that, now, seemed somewhat collapsed, an undeniable sign that Vincent could not sustain the situation much longer. But, maybe a conversation could give some results. There only remained the question why he should do it, why Vincent himself didn't want to talk to her after all, he wasn't exactly incapable himself.

So, hesitating Father asked, "Talk to her? .. Yes ... but, why me?"

It took a while before there came an answer, a shy glance from sad blue eyes and then he spoke, so softly that it was nearly inaudible.

"Because I ... I am too afraid."

Father had to swallow hard before he could speak normally again,

"You? .. Afraid ... of Catherine?"

It sounded incredible to his ears, but a short nod confirmed the truth.

"I will do it, if you wish."

A whispered, "Thank you ... " brought an end to this more than painful conversation.

With a weary movement Father rose and walked towards the entrance to Vincent's chamber. He turned once more and allowed his eyes to wander over the desolate figure of his son.

"Vincent ... "

And those blue eyes looked at him, briefly.

"I wish I could give you some more hope."

Once again Vincent concealed himself behind the protection of long golden mane.

"I know ... "

With a heavy heart Father left his son alone in the silence.

And Father kept his promise. That very same day he rid himself of this most unpleasant task. He was aware of the necessity for this conversation. Catherine's condition was due to her kidnapping and the events that had taken place. The frequent morphine injections and the traumatic birth of her son had armed her body against more violence, even so far that Vincent ... and not she was dead.

It had been too much. Her mind had survived by secluding it completely.

He was convinced that what happened afterwards was a mystery. Somewhere there had to be an insider who had been messing around, because a few months ago a Helper had spotted Catherine. She was with a crowd of homeless people, roaming here and there through the streets of New York, and was apparently suffering from severe amnesia.

Yet, they had performed an autopsy at the time and Father had, together with many of the Tunnel inhabitants attended her funeral. So, there had to be someone who knew more about it, but who? .. Frankly, Father didn't care, but yet ...

He had not been able to tell Vincent more when he asked what could be the possible cause of Catherine's memory loss. It was understandable that it had happened and now only the question of how she could recover remained. At the moment Catherine was much calmer than her first days in the Tunnels, she cried less but there was not the slightest noticeable improvement. She recognized no one, and worse, she feared Vincent, and he knew it all too well.

Father was of the opinion that only a severe mental shock could bring her back to her old self, yet, wisely, he kept this opinion to himself. But day by day it became clearer that Catherine's condition wouldn't alter unless there were some radical changes. And maybe now was the time ...

He remembered clearly Vincent's disillusionment when it appeared that for Catherine, Jacob was a baby like all others, not her own flesh and blood. Days after day Vincent had cherished hope but that hope was destroyed in mere minutes and had shocked him so deeply that he came dangerously close to the verge of a break down, and that was something that Father wanted to avoid at all cost.

A new crisis would undoubtedly be the end for Vincent and that was why the elderly man walked resolutely towards the Guest Chamber. For the sake of his son he had to do this ...

He found Catherine reading, she sat cross legged in the middle of the huge bed and was completely absorbed by the book in her hands.

He stood watching her, for a moment. She didn't look well, her brown hair hung dull and lifeless over her shoulders, without a trace of it's former silken splendour. She was unnaturally pale with huge dark shadows under her eyes, her skin lay tight over her cheekbones and emphasised even more how much weight she had lost, and when she turned a page, Father noticed that her hand was trembling.

He coughed and asked, somewhat uncertainly, "Catherine, ... may I come in please?"

Her expressionless eyes focused on him and she nodded. She didn't speak, didn't move and watched until he was seated in the only vacant chair in the chamber.

It never occurred to her that she was rather untidy.

"Catherine ... we have to talk ..., " began Father, his heart pounding in his throat because he had not the slightest idea what her reaction would be - he didn't know her anymore.

Again she nodded and said, "Yes ... I've been expecting you."

Astonished Father's brows shot up. "You have?"

She avoided his inquiring gaze and started to pluck at the sleeve of her sweater.

"Well ... after what happened tonight ... I'm sure he has told you everything ... "

He, there it was again, Father had noticed before that she never used Vincent's name, unless there was no other way, it was always he or him.

"My dear child ... Yes, Vincent has told me what happened, and the reason that I want to talk to you has something to do with it, but there are so many things I have to tell you."

Only now she looked up and for a brief moment he caught a glimpse of interest but it was gone in an instant and he cursed the men who had this on their conscience.

"You never ask questions about your past? .. Who you are? .. Where you came from? .. "

Waiting, he observed her, and when she answered, the kind of answer that a lost child would give, his heart constricted painfully, for her lack of interest.

"I am Catherine ... I come from Above ... "

He nodded and very patiently he began to explain, "Yes, you are Catherine and you came from Above but there is so much more that you have to know."

"There is ...?"

Father settled himself more comfortably and told her everything.

"Your full name is Catherine Chandler and you are a lawyer ... "

Slowly he unfolded the story of her life, where she had worked, the death of her father, her assault in the park, her work with the D. A.'s office, how she had reacted when she first saw Vincent, their further relationship, everything until her return to the Tunnels. He told her the hard reality of all that had happened to her in the last months, and he never minced matters.

At first she was astonished and with eagerness she accepted it all, until Vincent came up. She was shocked and when he told her that Jacob was her son, hers and Vincent's, she reacted with something of abhorration in her voice.

"No ... no, impossible ... "

And Father was relieved that Vincent hadn't to go through this, it would have been devastating for him.

But, neither of them was aware of the silent listener who sat against the rocks, near the chamber entrance. In the silence of that corridor Vincent listened to the conversation between Father and Catherine. He realized that it would have been better to stay away, but in the privacy of his own chamber, even in those widespread tunnels he couldn't handle the tension. There was only one place where he could calm his nerves, and that was here, close to her, in spite of the fact that, unintentionally, she shattered his heart.

Alone, with bowed head, the victim of despair, he listened to those painful words and alone he wept for what he had lost.

The sound of hurried footsteps on the metal stairs disturbed the silence in a rough way and made Father look up, startled.

In the silence and the privacy of his own chamber he wished to ponder over the past conversation before he talked to Vincent. And somehow he had expected his son to be in his study when he returned, or at least that he would come to see him now, but the person who stood breathlessly in front of him was Pascal and when he told that one of the children had found Vincent in the corridor of the Guest Chamber Father knew that he couldn't wait any

longer, now there was nothing more to think over, it wouldn't be easy but he had no other choice now, his place was at Vincent's side.

It was alarmingly quiet in his son's chamber and with bated breath Father walked inside, asking himself how he would find him.

He sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, and his hands pressed against his forehead, not moving ...

"Vincent ... "

The sound of his own name startled him, he wasn't aware of Father's presence.

"Father ... I. .. I didn't hear you ... " and no matter how hard he tried, he wasn't able to hide the tremble in his voice.

Father sighed inwardly, this promised to be even more difficult than he had expected, and hesitatingly he asked, "Vincent ... you were near the Guest Chamber? .. "

"Yes."

This flat answer nearly took away his courage to continue, but with determination he went on. To give up was failure and failure wasn't allowed, not now, not for Vincent, not for Catherine, not for himself.

"You heard my conversation with Catherine?"

"Yes ... "

Again that same discouraging tone and without a word Father took a seat next to his son. He knew Vincent would need time to continue and he offered him that time willingly, but when Vincent remained silent, he tried again,

"Vincent ... "

And then he couldn't continue because Vincent jumped to his feet, leaned his full weight on the table,

"Everything Father ... I heard everything ... "

Father nodded. "I know, Pascal came to tell me that one of the children had seen you ... Vincent, I'm sorry that you had to hear it this way ... I wanted it to tell you myself, ... why ... "

"Father!" interrupted Vincent harshly. "It doesn't matter how I heard it, the fact is that I know!!"

In the heavy silence following those angry words Vincent started an agitated pacing, only to grab, with both hands, the iron pillar in his chamber. For a moment it seemed that he would give rein to his rage on this chilly metal, but then reason won and when he spoke his tone was bitter.

"I knew that she was afraid of me ... and now I know that she ... she detests me ... "

Slowly he turned his head aside to look at Father, and continued even more bitterly, if possible, "And I can't live with that ... Father ... I love her, she means everything to me ... I ... "

He shook his head in a gesture of despair and fell silent.

Bewildered Father had listened to his sons outburst and carefully he suggested, "Vincent ... maybe it is time to invoke the help of someone else."

Little by little Vincent relaxed the grip of his hands and gazed at Father, one eyebrow lifted, in surprise, above sapphire blue eyes showing a confused mixture of feelings.

"And how do you want to accomplish that?" Without being fully aware of it a hint of sarcasm had crept into his voice.

"I think we have to look for professional help Above."

Now, two golden brows were lifted in surprise. "You can't mean that!"

Father had expected this, how could it be different? It had not been very likely that Vincent would accept, without any argument, that help had to come from Above. Not now that Catherine, at last, after months of grief and despair, had returned into his life, even if it was in a terrible way.

Patiently he tried to explain what they had to do.

"Vincent ... I do understand your reaction completely ... "

"Well then!" retorted Vincent, even before Father had finished his sentence. What he suggested now was, according to him, near complete madness. The man who had always been very reserved about the world Above, was willing to expose a defenceless Catherine to that heartless world.

"Vincent, please! Do you want to listen to me!"

It was seldom that Father raised his voice, even to Vincent, but now there was such a compelling tone in those words that they called Vincent back to order. He nodded, silent, walked towards his chair and threw himself in it, so that the wood protested loudly cracking at the brutal treatment.

"I'm listening," he said unwillingly and studied his hands as if they belonged to a stranger.

"Vincent, Catherine needs help, help that we are not able to give her. She has been Below long enough to know that her condition will remain unchanged unless we intervene. We can only give her love, security and safety, but that is not enough ... not anymore."

Without raising his eyes Vincent asked, "What do you suggest?"

"Catherine needs psychiatric treatment Vincent, I will ... "

"Wait a minute ... " and with a short hand movement Vincent interrupted Father again.

"You mean ... a mental ward??" It sounded like a question but actually it was more the establishment of something that seemed quite incomprehensible.

"Yes, that is the obvious thing, in view of her condition ... "

Once again a silence fell in which only the distant rumble of the subway and Vincent's nervous breathing could be heard. Time passed, until, suddenly, short and firm the answer came, an answer that was totally unexpected.

"No!!!"

Aghast Father stared at Vincent, this couldn't be possible, Vincent refusing help for Catherine?? ..

"Vincent! Be reasonable. You can't deprive her of her opportunity to recover! You can't do that ... "

Defeated Vincent answered, "I know Father ... I want her back like she was, but ... I ... I'm afraid to lose her completely when she is Above ... I'm not able to protect her then, and anything is better than that."

"I understand Vincent, but ... you also said that you couldn't live with the knowledge that she detests you."

Father knew that these words would hurt Vincent but he had, one way or the other, to let him face the truth.

His son jumped up. "Father!" a barely suppressed growling sounded through the words and blue eyes glared in his direction.

Stiffly Father stood up because he had been sitting on the bed the whole time, and in a plain tone he declared, "These are your own words Vincent."

with a furious gesture Vincent produced his long cloak from behind him and strode towards the entrance of his chamber, and without a single backward glance or another word he disappeared into the dark tunnel beyond.

He had not the faintest notion of time anymore when, at last, he fled from the safe protection of the Tunnels. The darkness had barely fallen but yet he sought refuge in that, for him so hostile, world Above.

A world which had no place for him, but which Catherine had opened for him, a world which was not gentle for his inhabitants, a world too which had been nearly fatal for her and from whose claws she barely had escaped, a world to which he had to entrust her again, a world that filled him with fear, not fear for himself, but for her ... Catherine.

"Catherine ... "

And in the silence of the park it seemed as if every tree, every branch and every leaf was repeating her name. For hours on end he roamed about, fighting with this almost unsolvable dilemma. He realized that Father was right, Catherine needed help, help that no one in the world Below could give her, his common sense told him that he could not, should not, refuse, but he kept fighting against the fact that she would disappear from his life, again, only the gods knew for how long, and not even Father could guarantee that she would be cured. He wouldn't be able to protect her, he wouldn't even know if she was safe. What dangers would be lying in wait for her? He didn't know, he didn't even want to know, all what he wanted was her safety, that he wouldn't lose her again, that he couldn't endure once more. And he had to reason with himself.

Did he have her back now? .. No ... she was afraid of him, didn't know him, he disgusted her ... it brought him heartache..

Yet, there was a possibility that would end this nightmare, and he decided that he had to grab this chance with both hands ... the last straw ... as well for her as for him ... and for Jacob, could he deny the child the help for his mother?? .

With a shock he realized that he was in a far away corner of the park and his instinct told him that dawn was nearing. A distant memory of yet another morning in the park returned and just like then the first mounted policeman had started patrolling the area, and the sounds surrounding him made it clear that the city was waking up, and for him it meant a danger larger than life. As soon as horse and man were at a safe distance he started to run, breathless, without thinking, purely by feelings and after, what seemed an endless distance, the familiar tunnel entrance loomed up in front of him. without

slowing down he crossed the open space to disappear immediately in the safety of the tunnel, but only when the Main Gate closed behind his back, with a dull rumble, he halted his wild run to drop himself, backwards, panting for breath, against the rock wall, and slowly he slid down, he was safe ...

Father's nearing irregular footsteps made him look up but he lowered his eyes at once.

"Vincent? .. " the voice of the elderly man was hoarse.

"I'm sorry Father." he answered, knowing that his father must have had a terrible night.

"I was worried."

"I know ... it was not necessary."

"Not necessary!" and now Father's voice was raised. "Vincent look at me!" .

Only very slowly Vincent obeyed this request and both men knew what they would see. Worried grey eyes looking for the truth in sad blue eyes, and the grey as well as the blue were full of unshed tears.

Father tried, in vain, to swallow the lump in his throat but he didn't succeed and when he spoke again his voice sounded a little shaky,

"How can I not worry? .. The habit of a lifetime ... and now, more than ever."

Slowly and with stiff movements Vincent rose and walked a little further into the tunnel.

"I needed space to think ... I had ... "

"Space?" echoed Father incredulous, "Isn't there enough space here?" and with a wave of his arm he pointed at the entire world Below.

Silent Vincent shook his head and added softly, "The walls were closing in on me ... I was choking down here ... "

In a few steps Father came to stand next to him and grabbed his arm in an almost desperate gesture.

"Vincent ... this IS your home ... "

Vincent nodded sadly, "Yes ... the only place where I can survive, there is nothing else for me ... There was a time when I accepted it, that I was grateful for it, but now ... no Father, not my home ... but my

tomb ... "

Without waiting for an answer he disappeared, leaving Father all alone. For the second time his son had told him that these familiar and safe tunnels, his only refuge, were like a tomb to him. As before these words hurt, they cut like a knife through Father's heart, only now he truly understood the full meaning of them.

Vincent was scared to death that Catherine would return to the world Above, a world that would mean his end should he be seen. He was terrified he would lose her again and, once more, became lost in the emotional abyss of despair and grief. He couldn't cope with this on his own and resolutely Father directed his steps towards Vincent's chamber, knowing only too well that it wouldn't be easy to break through the wall of silence that his son had thrown up around him.

When he entered Vincent's chamber he saw him, sitting in his chair, head bowed and his face carefully hidden behind the long golden mane and once more Father cursed what was, for Vincent, so natural a protection.

"Vincent ... may I come in, please? .. "

Actually the question was unnecessary, because Vincent had never denied access to him, nor did he now.

With a vague hand movement he indicated that Father could come inside, and as he did, he sat in the chair opposite his son.

For a considerable time he studied the silent, motionless figure in front of him, and he mourned for the once so courageous spirit which now seemed to be totally broken. Not only Catherine was the victim of her tormentors, so was Vincent.

First there had been grief - a deep sorrow that couldn't heal, then the hatred kindled - hate that awoke a murdering rage, one that only could be stilled in blood. The blood of criminals, yes, but nevertheless human blood, staining his hands, making him that what he loathed the most in himself, a beastly killer, and he alone was paying the price for this, a price which was much too heavy ...

With determination Father tried to get Vincent out of his isolation.

"Vincent ... "

Like so often these days he received no reaction and he insisted, "Vincent, we aren't finished yet ... "

In expectation of what was to come he looked at his son and finally Vincent turned his attention to his father, and the latter had expected the rejecting answer.

"Father please, ... not now."

"No Vincent, this time we will talk, we need to, there is too much at stake here. I'm here to help you, please, give me the opportunity to do so."

Slowly Vincent shook his head, "Father, it is Catherine who needs help, not I."

"You too Vincent, you too. Once Catherine said about you, 'he gives so much and asks so little'. Dare to ask what you need, Vincent, have the courage to do so ... "

Father had spoken with urgency, hoping that his words would have the desired effect, because if Vincent refused help he was powerless to do anything.

And at last it seemed as if all resistance was ebbing away from Vincent. With closed eyes he was leaning backwards in his chair, frustration showing on his face.

"I know Father ... "

Father's heart made a painful jump when he heard that faint lisp, the obvious proof that Vincent was, emotionally drained and he had to swallow hard before he was able to speak again.

"I'm here Vincent .. "

Vincent nodded and then opened his eyes, their expression causing Father to take a deep breath. The raw unconcealed pain, that had slumbered for months, was flaring up, in all its violence, together with a deeply rooted fear.

His voice sounded hoarse when he said, "Father, I know that Catherine needs help and I also realize that we are not able to give her that ... My mind tells me that I can't refuse her this ... but, my heart ... " For a brief moment, he fell silent, then he sadly shook his head and continued, "I've always told her that she had to follow her heart ... it was a rule which I believed strongly, but now ... if I have to follow my heart then I would never leave her alone, never again ... I would always want her near me ... only then I can be sure of her safety, but Father ... I can't have her at my side, I can barely come into her sight ... She is afraid of me ... I disgust her and I ... I don't know what to do anymore ... "

In an attempt to offer Vincent some strength Father took his hands in his and said hoarsely, "Try to have some faith Vincent ... it is the only chance she has."

With piercing fierceness a couple of sapphire blue eyes were fixed upon him and firmly Vincent asked,

"Father, tell me ... how shall she return? .. If she ever does ... Are you sure that she will recover?"

Disheartened Father leaned backwards, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes which burned from exhaustion.

"I don't know Vincent ... I have confidence in the doctors Above, and furthermore ... " powerless he shrugged his shoulders, unable to give his son a satisfying answer.

"You don't know ... " and it sounded ominous.

"No Vincent ... But then, ... that is something I have never withheld from you ... "

For a moment Father feared that all had been in vain and that Vincent never would agree to the proposal for Catherine's treatment Above, but then, totally unexpected and almost inaudible came the answer.

"All right ... so, what do you suggest?"

With a sigh of relief Father straightened himself.

"I will be in touch with Peter Alcott and ask him to arrange everything the best he can, he will be our contact."

Vincent nodded his approval, the name of Peter Alcott sounded a little reassuring to his ears, the tall slim doctor was someone he could trust and, what was even more important, someone who would protect Catherine, even if it was the last thing he did. He had to accept it, there was no other choice, and now, once the decision had been taken, he felt empty and exhausted. He glanced up to see Father studying him with a worried look.

"Vincent, believe me .. it is the right decision ... "

"I hope so Father but ... I'm afraid •.. too afraid to think about it."

Silently and with head bent he sat in his seat and in that silence he wished that someone could give him certainty.

Moved by his son's words Father pulled him in a fatherly embrace to give him the much needed comfort and support.

She had cried, again, and to her it seemed that she did nothing else these days. still sobbing she sat down on the edge of the huge bed.

She wouldn't be here much longer, the old man, Father, had come to tell her that, very soon, they would take her to a hospital, for proper treatment and to find her true self. That implied that she had to leave this place and it struck her with terror. Just now when, despite everything, she felt herself safe and protected down here, sometimes she had the feeling that she had been here before ... some sort of déjà vu ...

With a quick shrug of her shoulders she chased away the thought. Well what of it, she didn't believe in that nonsense and so she turned to what lay ahead. There were doctors who were able to help her, to become again who she once was, and, who the hell was she really? .. For her an unanswered question.

Here she was Catherine, and she was asking herself if she really was Catherine Chandler, the successful lawyer who, after a brutal assault, had left her father's firm to work for the D.A .. with her head slightly tilted to one side, it was a gesture so reminiscent of Vincent, yet it eluded her completely.

It didn't seem impossible to her, but if it was indeed so, then that coin had a flip side. And that flip side was Jacob ... she could accept the fact of having a child, but that he ... Vincent ... was the father filled her with horror. Time and time again when she had reached that point her mind froze and she couldn't think clearly anymore.

Now was no different. Nervously she rose, only to sit down again immediately and finally to curl herself up in the middle of the bed, like a small frightened child. The horror that she felt towards him was unjust and actually very senseless. She realized that, but it was "Stronger than herself. He had always treated her with respect and understanding and despite his fearful appearance he was gentleness itself. Besides, he seemed to be a very much loved person, yet, she couldn't change her feelings for him she had only fear and loathing. Only with great effort could she control herself a little and then her first panic-stricken thought was ... Dear God, they are trying to force me into the wrong identity, they need a mother for that child ...

Fear gave her feet and she fled the chamber where she had found shelter all that time. She left everything behind, only one thing in her mind, she had to leave, leave before she was completely in their power ...

Suddenly she hesitated, she had something to do first, and she went to the chamber where Mary took care of the smallest children, the babies, and among them sometimes Jacob ...

Mary looked up when Catherine entered but when she saw her red tear-stained eyes and the somewhat panicky expression on her face, she blamed her nearing departure from the tunnels for it and she said nothing, something she would regret later.

When Catherine saw that Jacob was lying in his cradle she went to him, he was wide awake and stared at her with big blue eyes. Carefully she lifted him out of the cradle and thought that he had his father's eyes and once again she was amazed that all resemblance ended here. Jacob was a perfectly beautiful baby and she felt almost sorry that she wasn't his mother.

She kissed him on his chubby baby cheeks, put him back into his cradle and whispered, "I'm sorry little fellow ... I'm really sorry ... "

Quickly she turned around and left the chamber leaving a stunned looking Mary and suddenly a crying baby behind her.

Without looking back she walked through the tunnels, she succeeded in avoiding the sentries and found an entrance which brought her into an eerie desolate part of the city. She took a

deep breath and looked around, she was free ... And without knowing where she was, or, where she was going she left the safety of the Tunnels behind her.

Father's chamber was crowded. Every member of the community was present because they all had heard the signal on the pipes, an emergency signal, because one of the lesser used entrances at the Lower East Side had been broken through.

Everyone knew what that meant and with the happenings of the last months still on their minds nobody believed in coincidence or reckless behaviour, so they prepared themselves for the worst.

Father stood behind his desk, the map of the concerning area spread out in front of him. He had his doubts. This situation didn't promise anything good because it involved a very dangerous neighbourhood. His glance sought Vincent, to hear his opinion, but when he saw him nowhere, his uneasiness increased.

"Has anyone seen Vincent?"

He asked it more to reassure himself, but the negative shake of heads he received as an answer was not what he wanted. Nobody knew where his son was, even Mouse, who he gave an inquiring look, shrugged his shoulders and wasn't able to tell him more.

His uncertainty didn't last long because from the metal stairs at the entrance of his chamber sounded, suddenly, Vincent's voice, low, threatening, almost growling, "She is gone! ... "

Father turned around and the question he wanted to ask died on his lips. The sight of his son told him enough, legs spread, clenched fists, trembling upper lip and an unknown fire glowing in his eyes.

With a simple motion of his hand he made them understand that he wished to be left alone with his son. They complied eagerly, because no matter how they worshipped Vincent, a Vincent who changed before their eyes into a figure of raging madness was something that they rather didn't wish to witness. The message was clear enough to everyone, there was something wrong with Catherine.

Even before they were on their own Vincent moved with large steps to stand in front of Father's desk, leaning with his full weight on it, as if Father would understand the words better by this sudden closeness. And slowly he repeated them, in the same ominous tone as a few minutes before,

"Father ... she is gone."

Thoughtfully Father studied his untidy, overloaded, desk as if he saw every item on it for the first time and wondered how on earth it had gotten there. He saw a huge stack of papers, books, pencils, his glasses and the old map, which he had studied so closely just a moment ago, but which now seemed to be of no importance, and his eyes rested upon the hands which had sought support between all this. Big powerful hands with long strong fingers, armed with deadly sharp nails, which gleamed dangerously in - the candlelight. He knew what those hands could do, he had seen it, more than once, and he feared that it wouldn't take long before these deadly claws would strike out again, judging by the anger in Vincent's voice.

It was a reasonable anger, which was founded on the fact that he didn't know whether Catherine was safe or not, and Father realized by this that his son's safety was also in jeopardy.

He looked up and gazed right into icy blue eyes that told him his fear wasn't unfounded. The silence between them both was very uncomfortable and when he started to speak it seemed as if something snapped in the atmosphere around them.

"Vincent, how can you be so sure? She ... "

He couldn't speak further because Vincent interrupted him, with a furious movement he straightened and turned around.

"I know it Father, and that is enough."

It sounded harsh and, shaking his head, Father tried to break through Vincent's adamant behaviour.

"Vincent, she could be anywhere ... there are so many possibilities. We will start a search for her, but you shouldn't worry so ... "

These were idle words, and he knew it.

Like a whirlwind Vincent turned around to face his father, his patience was severely tried. Was what he had said beyond belief?!

"I am more than worried Father. She is not in the Tunnels, not anymore, I know ... Why won't you believe me?"

With a sigh Father dropped himself in his chair, it was useless trying to persuade Vincent of other thoughts, so it was better to listen to what he had to say and, then, maybe, he could refute his arguments, although he had his doubts.

"Tell me, what makes you so sure?"

Somewhat calmer, because Father seemed more convinced Vincent started to voice his worst suspicions.

"When I heard the emergency call I went immediately to Catherine's chamber .. she wasn't there, but then I didn't worry, like you said, there are many possibilities down here, so I started to search ... everywhere she could be ... in vain .. She was nowhere and no one has seen her, except Mary ... "

"Mary? ... " Father asked surprised, that meant Catherine had been in the Nursery, a place where she barely went, and he started to feel very uncomfortable.

Vincent nodded and continued, "Yes, she was in the Nursery, with Jacob, she even took him out of his cradle, and then she left ... without a single word to Mary."

Father frowned his eyebrows, the alarming truth began to sink in.

"My God, Vincent, she ... "

"Yes, she bid farewell to him ... Father, do you believe me now? Catherine is gone, nobody, except for Mary, has seen her, there is an entrance broken which has not been used for so long, the entrance to Broome Street."

Father nodded thoughtfully, the puzzle matched perfectly well, later he would have a word with Mary about this event, because it seemed highly unusual that she would have said nothing, and he aired his thought,

"Why hasn't Mary said anything?"

"Catherine looked so shocked and sad that Mary thought it had something to do with what you had told her and she didn't want to say something wrong ... much to her regret."

Absentmindedly Father stroked his short greying beard, grumbling something unintelligible. Then he brought himself back to reality and looked at Vincent.

"I'm sorry Vincent, I'm sorry that I doubted your judgement."

A sad smile played briefly around the corners of Vincent's mouth.

"You were worried and after all what happened these last months I think it was more than understandable that you have reacted like this."

"Thank you for your understanding Vincent, but I ... I have hurt you by not believing you ... "

Vincent shook his head, reached across the table for his father's hand and said,

"I call it paternal love."

Briefly their eyes met, a moment of a deep mutual affection, it gave them both the strength to face the obvious difficulties lying ahead.

It was Father who spoke first,

"So ... what are you going to do?"

Vincent had taken place in the nearest chair and answered, "Search for her ... "

"How? You can't comb the entire city."

"No ... I know."

"I shall warn our Helpers and start a search."

Absentmindedly Vincent played with a candlestick on the table, his thoughts were racing and again the restlessness was taking over.

"No Father, that is not enough, I will go myself ... "

Aghast Father looked at his son.

"You can't be serious! ... Vincent, don't you trust them?"

Sighing Vincent closed his eyes briefly.

"Father ... that is not the point. You can't expect that I just sit here and do nothing ... "

Father nodded understandingly and added warningly, "But the danger ... the risk ... "

"The risk is mine, but ... if we do not succeed ... I would never forgive myself if I had done nothing."

Vincent rose abruptly, a sign that, as far as he was concerned, the conversation was over and Father knew that he had to accept this, all he could say was, "Take care Vincent ... "

And before he left the chamber Vincent embraced, once more, the man who was always there for him and this knowledge helped to fortify him.

After a long confusing journey through strange tunnels which had been her home for so long, she stood now in a sombre, grey, deserted part of the city. With deep breaths she took in the not so clear, city air and it was good to feel and to breathe the outside air after all these weeks

of living underground, in surroundings where the air was always humid and carried the odour of candles, wood and dust.

Determined she set out, she had had enough time to plan somehow what she was going to do. Since her memory still failed her she had only Father's story to trace her past and her real identity, and that was exactly what she had in mind ... To find out if she really was the person he had told her she was, whatever the consequences.

After several streets it became obvious to her that it wouldn't be easy, and hours later she had to admit to herself that she had made a mistake. She had not the faintest idea of where she was. Together with her failing memory her sense of orientation had left her. She had the feeling that she had walked -in circles, but she wasn't sure. It was late and she realized that she couldn't stay on the streets all night, so her first concern was to find a refuge for the night. Return to the Tunnels was not possible because she wasn't able to find her way back and all that was left to her was her experience from the time before they had brought her to those tunnels. Then she had also roamed the streets and she knew that there were shelters and eating-houses, so she could somehow take care of herself and she didn't doubt that there was something like that in this neighbourhood. The only question was, where?

It was clear that it was not wise to speak to any of the few passers-by, it would only make her more vulnerable and would draw attention. She remembered that one should never attract attention, always stay in the background. Luck was at her side when, suddenly, she stood in front of a women's

shelter.

At her knock the door was opened by a tall, weighty middle-aged woman with kindness depicted on her face. She was dressed tidily but simply and with a smiling gesture she invited Catherine inside.

"Come in child, come in." and her warm voice made this refuge for desperate souls homely.

She didn't ask many questions but chatted unconcerned about everything that came into her mind, and meanwhile served Catherine a plain, yet substantial meal.

"Here child, eat. You can use it I think."

Catherine could only nod and, famished, she ate the food. It tasted excellent and she replied, "Thank you, it was delicious."

The woman swept away the compliment as well as the expression of thanks with a single gesture of her hand and answered, "Oh, we only have limited means ... we do what we can."

Catherine smiled, "Your modesty suits you."

The woman didn't answer but showed her a place where she could sleep, among several other women who had found a temporary home here. She left her and thought that this time she had a very remarkable guest. Evidently, this young woman had seen better days, her very language alone proved that she came from a good family, and she was beautiful. Someone to keep an eye on in this dangerous area.

When Catherine laid herself on the small wooden bunk bed under the rough blankets, she realized how tired she was and soon she was sound asleep. Her first night outside the Tunnels but her dreams were taking her back Below. Dominating her dream was a tall, well-built man with long golden blond hair and the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen, but his face was that of ... a lion.

And in her sleep she smiled.

Darkness had fallen over the city and Vincent watched the surroundings closely from the protection of a porch. Rain was falling but his long cloak gave him enough protection. He pulled the hood further over his head and stepped out in the street.

Tonight he had set out early and taken the route that Catherine must have followed, but only after a long journey did he reach the entrance to Broome street. And one thing was obvious to him - Catherine had, somehow, been walking around and must have found the entrance by pure chance. It was more than clear that Catherine had not been heading in any particular direction, and Vincent's concern grew stronger. If she had gone into the city in this condition she was in great danger and the need to find her became more urgent than ever.

Almost soundlessly he walked through deserted streets. In this part of the city it was not advisable to venture outside at night, crime was thriving here and he dared not to think about what could happen to Catherine. He combed the area, with great accuracy, but his search resulted in nothing but disappointment.

He cursed the day that he had lost their unique bond and cursed himself because he still blamed himself for what had happened then, now more than a year ago.

It soon became time for him to return to the Tunnels. The grey morning dusk told him that shortly the city would be awake and that these streets would be no longer safe for him. Once more he took in the surroundings and for a moment his eyes lingered on a big brownstone house, where at that moment the lights went on, it gave him a warm feeling. The house was one of the few good shelters for women. The landlady seemed to be a loving and caring woman who, in a very maternal way, took pity on her guests. The wife of one of the Helpers had once found refuge there and had nothing but praise for this place. Good that there were such places thought Vincent while he turned around and went to the nearest Tunnel entrance. Not for a moment did he think that Catherine could be there.

Father was waiting for him in his chamber, looking very worried.

"Vincent? .. "

With a tired gesture Vincent took off his heavy cloak and draped it carefully over the back of a chair; It gave him some time before he had to speak. Then he lowered himself onto his bed, burying his face in his hands, exhausted.

Patently Father waited until his son would speak. He knew that he needed time and despite his own curiosity he willingly gave him all the time he needed. Forcing Vincent to speak would be, useless.

And finally Vincent's hoarse voice broke through the silence.

"Nothing Father, nothing ... "

"It was to be expected Vincent, did you really think that you would find her straight away?" He knew that his words would sound harsh and it would have been better if he had said them before Vincent left, to spare him from disappointment. But then he hadn't been receptive to anything and now he had returned, alone ...

Vincent shook his head, "No Father, I didn't think I · would ... but ... I hoped ... "

Thoughtfully Father looked at his son and decided that he had better ~to tell him about all the messages he had received during the night, which brought no news either.

Nobody has seen her, not the helpers, not our own people, nobody ... "

Vincent looked up, unconcealed pain in his blue eyes, "Catherine is in great danger Father, we must find her, as soon as possible."

Startled Father looked at Vincent and asked,

"Great danger? .. Do you mean that you are feeling that danger?"

"No, I don't feel it, I wished I could, but ... I know it ... "

Father frowned his brow, "I don't understand ... "

Vincent rose and started to pace up and down in his chamber, searching for the words to explain to his father how he knew, with an alarming certainty, that Catherine was in danger.

"I took the route she must have followed ... there is no direction in it, ... no logic .. Father, she must have walked around and only by pure chance have found the entrance ... "

"Are you sure that she took that route, after all, it is a real maze down there."

Vincent nodded. "I am sure, to get there without being seen by the sentries ... there is no other way ... She was lucky, the Tunnels can be deadly for someone who is not acquainted with their secrets."

Father was still not convinced. "Yet, there is another possibility ... what if Catherine is still wandering around here Below, and that there are intruders ... you could have made a mistake ... "

"No!!"

Snarled Vincent, and let his left hand come down on the table with a rumbling blow, a candlestick turned over and with a furious gesture he swiped it to the floor.

"I haven't made a mistake! ... Father, why can't you believe me?!"

Slowly Father raised his eyes and looked at his son who, little by little, calmed down. It happened more and more lately that Vincent lost his former almost unshakable calmness and Father prayed in silence that his son would be capable of maintaining the fragile balance that made him what he was. In view of the circumstances it would require a will of iron and he doubts, certainly at moments like this. Although, it was not surprising that Vincent had his calm now and therefore he quickly said, "I want nothing more than to believe you Vincent ... "

"Then believe it!" interrupted Vincent sharply.

And Father continued imperturbable, "But I need certainty. I know you will understand this, but I do have to think about the safety of the entire community. There is on the one hand Catherine, who has disappeared, but on the other hand, there is a broken entrance ... it can be a coincidence ... or maybe not, ... we must check out everything. One mistake can be fatal, and that is something that we can't afford. I am sorry Vincent but all that counts is certainty, and as long as we don't have that, we don't know if our world is still safe."

"I do understand your reasoning, and I respect it ... "

Vincent had straightened himself, full length, and looked completely in control, at least on the outside. Because Father realized all too well that beneath his calm appearance Vincent was in great turmoil.

"But I ask you to understand mine ... I know that Catherine is somewhere Above and that she is in danger. I can't give you certainty, but you should know that I would never endanger our world ...," continued Vincent while he lowered himself into his chair, and now there was an urgent tone in his voice which didn't go unnoticed by Father.

Shaking his head the latter answered, "Vincent ... I do understand you ... I respect your opinion, believe me, but ... I have to lay this before the Council. I have no other choice."

Quietly but no less urgently Vincent replied, "Certainly you must have."

Defeated Father stood up, Vincent's stubbornness was almost legendary and had caused, on many occasions, more than unpleasant situations and conflicts. But now the responsibility for the entire community was weighing heavily. Even if it hurt his son to the depths of his soul, the possibility of intruders had to be considered, better a false alarm than that it came too late, which had happened in the past.

"I am not so sure of that Vincent." he said and he made a movement to leave the chamber.

Vincent sat motionless in his chair and tried, in vain, to stop the helpless shaking of his hands. This couldn't be, he realized all too clearly what was at stake now and he also knew why Father took a certainty for an uncertainty, after all, the past was still haunting him, day and night. But now he needed his father's support, it was for Catherine's sake. He couldn't lose her again; it would mean his destruction ...

"Father ... " and there was such a desperate tone in his voice that the elderly man stopped in his tracks immediately and already he regretted his decision.

"Yes?" he asked hesitatingly.

A hand closed around his arm in an iron grip.

"Father, please ... why won't you believe me? .. " Vincent repeated his question.

"Vincent ... it is not that I don't believe you ... but I need certainty, and you know why."

He had expected that his son would get angry again but nothing was less true. It seemed as if suddenly all energy had drained from him, he sat in his chair again, staring at his hands with eyes that saw nothing.

There seemed to be no end to the silence and when, at last, Vincent began to speak Father was startled. The sentences came out in a jerky way, as if he had to search for the words to say what he was feeling.

"Father, don't let me down now ... I need your support ... I know that Catherine is in danger ... and on my own I am ... powerless, I can't find her, I need help ... help that only you can give me ... it is the only chance that I have ... don't take it away from me ... "

Father had also taken place in a chair and was listening, silently, to what he was saying. His heart constricted painfully in his chest when he heard this cry for help. He couldn't ignore his son, he realized that if he had the Tunnels searched in the attempt to find possible intruders he would need every man available and that, indeed, Vincent would be on his own. A situation that was completely unthinkable.

He had to compromise. He couldn't abandon his son to his fate, he couldn't let him down. Thoughtfully he reached across the table and took Vincent's hand in his, he felt the tremble ...

"I won't let you down Vincent ... I'm sorry that I made you think such ... "

He fell silent for a brief moment though his thoughts were working full speed, at moments like this his responsibility was a burden. And again Vincent appealed to his fatherly heart and this time he, finally, gave in. Could anyone ever blame him if his only weak spot was his son?

"Father ... whatever you decide, don't try to stop me ... I know that I'm making the right decision."

Father looked up, saw the determination in Vincent's eyes, nodded and said,

"All right Vincent ... you have convinced me. I will double the sentries, to ensure our safety. You understand that I can't ignore what has happened, but there will be still enough manpower left to search for Catherine."

With a sigh Vincent leaned backwards, too relieved to say anything, but nevertheless strongly aware of the sacrifice that his father had made. Softly he asked, "And the Council Father ... will they find peace with this?"

Father stood up, a tired old man, walked towards the entrance of the chamber and answered, "They will have to."

For a moment there was silence and before he realized what was happening, he felt Vincent's arms around him and his muffled, "Thank you Father ... " brought a lump to his throat.

Slowly the days passed and, for Vincent, it seemed that every hour counted twice. During the day he conscientiously fulfilled his duties and insisted he take his part in patrolling as well. Father objected vehemently against it, convinced that Vincent would bite off more than he could chew. Vincent on the other hand refuted this argument by pointing out the fact that the Council had, without any opposition, accepted Father's decision and that he owed them. At last Father had relented and so Vincent began a battle against exhaustion. He did not allow himself time to recover from his daily exertion because during the night the city streets belonged to him.

He had never fully recovered from his confrontation with Paracelsus. Once he was as strong as iron, with inexhaustible stamina, but now a beaten, exhausted man.

Defeated ... the thought of doom, these last days.

Alone he stood on the old mouldered bridge above the Whispering Gallery. The noises of the city were hushed and only the menacing creaking of the wood disturbed the silence. With raised head and closed eyes he stood in the middle of the bridge, his arms powerless at his sides, almost as a statue, a rare gush of wind played with his long hair, the only thing about him that moved. And he listened, he listened intently to the silence. How often had he stood here, with Catherine, listening to the noise of the seething city above them. Sounds that now had died away ...

And the sudden thought brought her name on his lips.

"Catherine ... " It sounded like a sob.

And then, as if by miracle the sounds came back to life. It was so overwhelming that, unconsciously, he shrank back, but then he concentrated on the voices which sounded through the noise, and they all seemed to be women's voices. He was taken by surprise ... but as suddenly as they had started the voices fell silent again and the only sound he could hear was from the traffic and the rumble of the subway trains. The illusion, or, whatever it had

been, was gone but it left him no peace. What was the meaning of these women's voices? Why now and why so clear?

Questions, nothing but questions and they all remained unanswered.

He turned around and walked the long way back to the inhabited part of the Tunnels. Before he reached his own chamber he passed by the chamber of his father and on impulse he entered. Although Father's reaction would be predictable, he had to talk about it before it drove him too far.

Father sat at his huge desk, reading, the scarce lamplight barely enough to light the voluminous work in front of him, but he was so used to reading this way that it still hadn't occurred to him that, lately, he had to strain more and more. Only when he realized that someone stood before him did he look up and much to his surprise he saw his son standing there. He made an inviting gesture towards a chair.

"Vincent ... "

Vincent came further into the chamber and took place in the only free seat in front of Father's desk. The question he wanted to ask was burning on his lips but he knew Father's opinion about this matter and besides, he even didn't know how to begin. Hesitatingly he started, "Father, there is something that I want to ask you ... "

Astonished Father stared at his son. "You know you can ask me anything."

Vincent nodded, slowly he raised his eyes and said, "I was in the Whispering Gallery ... "

"Yes ... and ... "

"I heard voices ... women's voices ... "

Immediately Father's down-to-earth scientific instinct came to the surface, he took off his glasses and said, while shaking his head,

"Really Vincent, this goes too far ... "

"I had expected that you would say that, I know how you think about such things but you have to admit that it is not always wrong to believe in something that is not possible."

With furrowed brows Father looked at Vincent and asked himself whether it was the exhaustion that was playing tricks on him, or something else.

"Vincent, there are always voices to hear in that place, surely you know that. It was one of your favourite places as a child."

For a brief moment he remained quiet and then came the answer, so soft that Father almost couldn't hear it, "Catherine also loved that place."

Questioningly Father frowned again. "What are you trying to tell me Vincent?"

A silence fell and then finally, very hesitatingly, came the question which he almost didn't dare to ask,

"Father ... what can be the meaning of those women's voices?"

Father sighed, near despair, "Vincent, really ... this ... "

"Father, please! ... Try to understand, there has to be an explanation ... there has to!"

"Why? Can't you believe in coincidence?"

Furious Vincent shook his head.

"No!" he snarled, but his anger vanished as quick as snow under the sun, and he added softly,

"There is nothing else left for me ... Father, I just can't believe in coincidence now ... I just can't."

The elderly man let the words of his son slowly sink in. He knew that Vincent was extremely sensitive where Catherine was concerned. Their connection, now lost, was a conclusive argument for that. Why shouldn't there be something now that directed towards Catherine ... His instinct argued against it, but, for Vincent's sake he was willing to suspend his logic and believe in the impossible.

"I do understand Vincent, I know your grief but you have to realize that grief is not a good adviser."

Vincent nodded. "I know Father ... but ... "

A faint smile crept across the bearded face of the tunnel patriarch. "Yes ... and I suppose that there will always be a but ... Women's voices you said?"

Vincent nodded again, relieved that, finally, he found a listening ear with the only person he could trust his deepest feelings to.

"Yes ... only women's voices." ·

Thoughtfully Father stroked his beard and asked, "And Catherine's voice?"

He received a negative reply, "No ... "

Pensively Father looked at Vincent and aired the first idea that came to his mind.

"I don't know Vincent. It is only a guess, but ... could it be an indication of her whereabouts?"

Briefly a glimpse of hope flared up in Vincent's sad blue eyes, but that hope was gone in an instant. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Wouldn't that be too much? .. "

Father took off his glasses and studied the frame as if he had never seen them before.

"Vincent, you know my opinion about such things ... I don't know, it was just an idea ... " and his voice sounded thoughtful.

"But ... if ... if it is really an indication ... "

Shocked Father looked at his son, disbelief in his eyes. "Vincent! I warn you, don't jump to rash conclusions."

But Vincent seemed not to hear him and whispered to himself, as if he was in trance, the look in his eyes blank.

"Catherine's whereabouts ... women's voices ... a place where only women are ... only women ... "

Suddenly, he stood up, with such force, that his chair fell backwards, and heavily he leaned on Father's desk.

"A women's shelter! ... Father, a women's shelter."

"Vincent!" and now there was a sharp warning tone in his voice, but Vincent ignored it entirely and shook his head.

"No Father, where else can a woman in her situation go to?"

Father nodded. "Yes ... it could be a possibility ... unless ... "

"A possibility!" reacted Vincent fiercely, "It has to be!" he added and for a moment he lapsed into

silence, to continue afterwards.

"Father, don't take my hope away ... " all fierceness was gone, his voice sounded soft but the sadness in his eyes was terrible to see, and Father swallowed his objections.

"Good ... You can count on me, I will do what is necessary."

Relieved Vincent briefly closed his eyes, "Thank you Father."

Then he rose, ready to leave the chamber.

The older man only nodded, the words stuck in his throat by the emotion of the moment.

He understood Vincent's reaction but his doubts were accompanied by an almost innate fear for this unique man. He watched the disappearing figure and even before he could have set a foot on the lowest step of the stair he called his name, "Vincent!"

Immediately he turned around, he didn't speak but the question in his eyes was obvious and, unaware of it, a brief smile crept around Father's lips, he was an open book to his son.

"Be careful."

Vincent nodded and said, reassuringly, "Always, Father."

For a moment his eyes rested upon his father and then he disappeared in the dimly lit tunnel. In silence he thanked him for his concern and his trust, but most of all for his support which he needed so desperately.

That same evening the search for Catherine became intensified with the tracking down of women's shelters.

At Father's request Peter Alcott had come to the Tunnels with a list of all the women's shelters in New York.

The slender greying doctor entered Father's chamber and he got straight to the point the moment he came in.

"Jacob, for God's sake, what do you have in mind with this?" He threw a big manila envelope on Father's desk and looked at his old college friend, waiting. He had, without asking questions, satisfied this very unusual request, but now that they were in private he wanted an explanation. He didn't get an answer at once because Father took the envelope, tore it open and took out the contents. He held several sheets of paper in his hand, all filled with addresses.

"Those many?" he asked astonished.

His friend nodded, "New York is a big city."

Father eyed the list silently until Peter interrupted him, "Jacob, what is the meaning of this?"

Now he couldn't avoid it anymore, he had to come up with an explanation, Peter Alcott had proved himself a faithful and loyal friend, always ready when help was needed, in spite of all

the risks. He couldn't put him off this time, so, sighing he took off his glasses and looked at him.

"It's for Vincent."

"For Vincent?" repeated Peter surprised and settled himself in a chair, this seemed completely senseless, and he added, "What, in Heaven's name, is he going to do with that list?"

and he made a gesture, with his head, towards the papers in Father's hand.

"As you know, there is still no trace of Catherine ... "

"You don't have to remind me," interrupted Peter him with a tortured expression on his face.

"Nobody knows where she is, nobody has seen her, all our efforts have been fruitless so far ... And you know how limited we are, we aren't able to call upon official help because nobody knows that she is still alive, except for the one who kept his silence at the time and we don't know who that is ...

Peter, we are on our own in this and we are looking for ... a dead woman."

"I know all too well how bad the situation is, it is like searching for a needle in a haystack."

Father nodded in agreement. "Yes, and like you said, New York is a big city."

"But that still doesn't explain why you, or rather, why Vincent needs that list."

"Vincent is at the end of his tether and can't take much more. This morning heard voices ... women's. He went to the Whispering Gallery, he thought it could be an indication ... "

"Jacob! Surely you don't believe that!" shouted Peter aghast. He almost jumped out of his seat but controlled himself just in time, knowing that his anger would make it even more difficult

for Father.

The latter shrugged his shoulders, beaten. "I don't really believe it, but like I said to Vincent ... it

could be a possibility."

"Jacob please! Where is your common sense? .. Maybe she is just roaming the streets ... after all, she has done it before."

Peter's voice began to sound desperate and Father sympathized with him, yet he defended himself with a gentle apology,

"I know it Peter, believe me, I know it but ... " and sadly he shook his head before he spoke further,

"You should have seen him ... "

Peter needed no further explanation. "That bad? "

Father nodded,

"That bad ... Peter I can't deprive him of that hope, it's all he has, all that keeps him on his feet."

The slender doctor looked up, worried, and asked, "But, what if ... "

Father warded him off with a hand movement.

"Peter please, don't let me think about it ... a fresh disappointment could be ... fatal ... And if you will excuse me now, I must ... " and he waved the papers briefly which he still held in his hand,

"Take a close look at these and see how we have to work it out."

Peter nodded and rose from his chair, he clasped Father's hand and said, "I wish you good luck Jacob."

Thank you Peter. I will keep you informed."

After one last look of mutual understanding Peter turned around, but after a few paces he slowed down.

"Jacob, just some good advise, be careful what you do. You know how those shelters are. Once they think that there is something wrong they call the police."

After these words he walked from the chamber, leaving Father behind with what, seemed to him, a nearly impossible task. With a worried frown on his forehead he put on his glasses and started to read and plan.

And so, that same night, the first shelters were visited and asked for their co-operation if somehow Catherine turned up. And the hope lived ...

The days came and went ... The nights came and went ... The search was fruitless and slowly the hope died ...

Vincent roamed the deserted city streets, in search of any sign of life from Catherine, and each time he returned only at dawn to the Tunnels, in the hope that maybe someone would have discovered something. Each time again disappointment awaited him, nor did the search in the shelters present anything, and he felt utterly powerless. Only the streets were his domain. He knew he couldn't knock at a shelter's door to enquire about Catherine and compelled by necessity had to stand by and watch how others performed what he saw as his duty.

On a chilly rainy night he was on his way again and in the pale light of a street lamp he noticed a huge brick house, he recognized it. The day that Catherine had disappeared, he had stood here too, it was a women's shelter and now it had an unusual attraction for him. He knew that it still wasn't checked, one off these days that would happen, he should have more patience ... Yet, he couldn't break away from the building and he remained where he was, maybe ... and anew the flame of hope burned brightly ...

Shivering he pulled his long cloak closer around himself, sought refuge in a dim porch and became one with the shadows of his environment.

Time passed slowly and he waited, hopeful, but at the same time painfully aware that what he was waiting for wouldn't come. until suddenly ...

Tensely listening he lifted his head when swift footsteps resounded in the nightly silence, footsteps he would recognize from out of thousands ...

A few minutes later a hurrying figure became visible in the glow of the streetlights and his heart constricted painfully ... for all that ... his presentiments hadn't deceived him, and in his despair he abandoned all caution.

"Catherine!"

She uttered a strangled scream and for a brief moment she slowed down her quick pace, only to turn around in an attempt to look at the person who had spoken in the darkness, and when she saw him standing there she shrank back with a terrified shriek.

"No! ... Not you!"

Her voice sounded unnaturally shrill and he realized, too late, that he had made a mistake.

"Catherine, I ... I'm sorry ... I didn't mean to frighten you."

Without speaking she stared at him and even now he could see the unconcealed abhorrence for him in her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she asked coldly.

He noticed that in that short period of time she had regained an enormous amount of self-control and despite everything it reminded him of the old Catherine, yet her coldness was hurting him deeply. He answered softly, "I want to help you Catherine."

"Help me? with what? .. With finding myself? No, thank you ... "

Later, Vincent reported all this to Father. But there was something else.

"You said that Catherine hadn't come home?"

"She didn't come to the shelter," corrected Vincent, he refused to call any other place than the Tunnels her home, and he started a restless pacing through Father's chamber.

"Very well ... the shelter, fact is that she didn't return."

"Yes."

Father put on his spectacles, grabbed his pen and said, while he searched, frantically, for a piece of paper on his overloaded desk,

"I will send a message to Peter ... he must know what has happened."

"Yes ... Peter ... " said Vincent, but there was such a cool undertone in his voice that Father looked up, surprised.

"What is it Vincent? .. Don't you trust him anymore? He is one of our eldest Helpers, you know that ... "

"That's not it Father." interrupted Vincent irritated and continued then, somewhat calmed down, "But he does what I should be doing ... "

"Yes, but Vincent, he ... " Father tried to defend his old college friend, but he didn't succeed because he was interrupted by Vincent, and this time in a very disturbing way.

"And that, Father, is so damn frustrating!!" and as if to give his words more power he struck his flat hand on the desk before him.

Aghast Father jumped out of his chair, shocked by what he had heard, and angry, because a man's character, who he knew through and through, was now questioned. And, for the first time in his life, Vincent had cursed ...

"Vincent!" It was said before he knew it. It sounded like a reprimand, and it was enough.

With both hands Vincent sought support on the wooden surface on which he had just vented his anger, that anger was gone now, all that remained was a feeling of shame for his outburst. Head bowed he whispered, "I'm sorry Father."

The latter never doubted the sincerity of those words. This was not like Vincent, they had had arguments before, some more severe than others, but never, never before had Vincent cursed, until now ... And always he was searching for something good in each and everyone. He was always grateful for help, until now ... it was more than obvious that this went much deeper than anyone could suspect, and in a comforting gesture Father laid his hands over Vincent's.

"Tell me," he encouraged him.

With a sigh Vincent pushed himself upright and he resumed his restless pacing again, only to start speaking after a long silence. When the words came they were spoken in a jerky hesitating manner, their message no less painful.

"Father ... there was a time when I knew if Catherine needed me ... I could feel it ... but now ... each time that she is in danger, I fail ... I ... I let her down ... During the months of her imprisonment ... with Jacob's birth ... each time I came too late ... because of who I am ... I am the one to blame and I let her down ... "

"Vincent I you can't reproach yourself for anything, you were ... ill." Father said defensively. He knew that Vincent was still harbouring feelings of guilt for what had happened then, and now, he feared the worse.

With a shrug of his shoulders Vincent answered, "That was then ... And now? .. Father, I know that this isn't an excuse, but I ... I feel so powerless ... I can do so little for her ... I, the man who once promised her father to protect her till my last breath, has to stand by and watch how others are doing it for me ... It is my duty and I can't fulfill it ... but Peter does so, the Helpers, our people I everybody... except me ... "

"Vincent, without their help we would get nowhere, you cannot ... " Father hesitated, he was on dangerous ground and desperately searched for the right words, but Vincent was quicker. He dropped himself unceremoniously into a chair and looked at Father. And the latter was shocked by the fierceness in those steel blue eyes.

"Father ... I know my own limitations, you really don't have to remind me ... I have lived my entire life with them ... "

And Father wisely decided that it was better to remain silent, Vincent wasn't exactly in the mood to be reasonable and silence had proved, more than once, to be the only remedy.

Vincent had withdrawn himself completely, he sat almost motionless in his chair, head bowed, and only his fingers were playing absentmindedly with the leather pouch that, recently he had started to wear around his neck again, and in which, Father knew, he kept his most valuable possessions. Catherine's crystal and his ivory rose. The very symbols of their love, once carefully put away when he thought that Catherine was dead, now he wore them again, as a sign of hope.

Finally, his fingers closed convulsively around the soft leather and he could feel clearly the shapes of the crystal and the rose.

How could he ... how could he be so ungrateful ... he was startled by his own reaction. Peter ... he pictured the slender grey-haired doctor, a man who had known Catherine since

birth. What was more, had helped her into this very world. A man too, who knew him since his first days in the Tunnels, fate had brought them together, and now he blamed that same man for taking away his duty ... it couldn't go on like this ...

After all, it was thanks to Peter that they were informed about Catherine's condition, a condition for which he still felt himself responsible. Once they had known where Catherine was living it had been Peter who had talked to the proper authorities and who succeeded in receiving the assignment for

the shelter, to perform the duties of a confidential doctor.

It had also been Peter who had found out that Catherine had accepted a job as a waitress in a hamburger restaurant a few blocks away. It had been Peter who had given him her schedule so that he was able to see her. And it had been Peter who had talked to her ... indeed ... always Peter ... his help was indispensable.

Softly he said, "Father ... I am sorry ... You were right ... "

A faint-smile crept along Father's bearded face and he nodded.

For a while the only sound that interrupted the silence was the scraping sound of his pen on a piece of paper. Silently he rose and left his chamber to ask one of the older boys to deliver his message. His choice fell upon Zach and he told the half-grown youth that it was important. His eyes followed the running figure and only when he was totally out of view he went back.

When he entered his chamber again Vincent looked up and Father noticed that the calmness in him had returned.

Self-possessed and completely in control he sat in his chair and when he saw his father descending the stairs with difficulty he rose and accompanied him to his seat, so that the latter asked himself if it really was so obvious that his bad hip was bothering him again. Yet gratefully he accepted the strong arm which was offered him for support.

Not before they had both taken their places did Vincent speak, "Father ... once again ... I am sorry, I ... " he hesitated and lowered his eyes as if suddenly he didn't know anymore how to put it into words.

Gently Father asked,

"What is it Vincent? .. "

"I never intended to hurt you ... or anyone else ... least of all Peter, but I felt so powerless ... everything was taken out of my hands ... "

Father nodded. "I understand your reaction Vincent, but it was the only way ... "

"I know it ... " It sounded flat and with a graceful movement, Vincent stood up. He had to cope with this alone and with a short, "Good night Father," he made ready to leave, but his father stopped him.

"Vincent."

He turned around and looked at the older man with his eyes silently pleading to let him go.

Father saw it, he knew that Vincent needed that time alone, that isolation, he had to let him go and he restrained himself to a brief farewell, "Good night Vincent."

The way to his own chamber seemed endless. The encounter with Catherine and the conversation with Father hadn't done any good to his already shattered nerves. Deep inside him the restlessness was boiling, dark and threatening, but this time he had to keep himself in control. If he dived headfirst, in that fathomless abyss there would be no way back ...

When he had almost reached his chamber his heart suddenly skipped a beat. Jacob ... !!

The baby lay in his wooden cradle and was crying heartrendingly.

Dear God! He had completely forgotten to take the baby to Mary--when he had left earlier that evening, and he had to admit to himself that it wasn't the first time. Now, the little fellow was sobbing as if his very life depended on it, and who knows since when.

Vincent hurried into the chamber hoping that Mary hadn't heard a thing, although, she seemed to have some kind of a sixth sense where crying children were concerned, and especially if Jacob was involved, she loved him as if he was her own child.

He took up the screaming baby and placed him immediately against his shoulder. The crying ceased at once, to change into a vehement after-sobbing which shook his entire little body. Vincent looked down and saw tiny little tears trickling down chubby cheeks, but the baby knew that someone was watching him and he presented his father a broad toothless smile which lightened up his little face, his first laugh ... or not ... how many of them had he missed already by his long absences?

Vincent wondered about it, but that smile had touched him in his heart, very deeply, and, it was too much. In vain he tried to swallow his tears but it was a struggle that he lost and sobbing he bowed his head.

He felt the downy silken baby hairs, golden blonde, just like his own, against his rough bearded cheek and softly he whispered, "Catherine ... why ... why ... ?"

Then the baby felt his father's grief, moved restlessly and started to cry again. Now Vincent wasn't able to comfort him anymore and he was near despair when Mary entered.

She had heard the baby and had expected to find Jacob alone, like so often lately. Vincent simply forgot to bring his little son to her, not on purpose, she was sure of that. She knew that the grief for Catherine absorbed all his energy, but, shaking her head she made a promise to herself, she had to talk to Father, for the sake of the baby ...

Startled, she stood rooted to the spot, she had prepared herself for a crying baby, not for a father and son who, were obviously both upset.

"Vincent ... "

He rose his tear-stained face and willingly let Mary take the baby from his arms.

"Mary ... I ... I want to be ... alone ... " The words were wrenched from him.

Quietly, Mary left with Jacob in her arms and, strangely, the baby calmed down with the growing distance between him and his father.

Vincent heard it and he was well aware of the cause. He threw himself full length on his bed and let his bitter sorrow engulf him.

With leaden feet, Father directed his steps towards his son's chamber. He wanted to spare him. but Mary had informed him of what had happened and he couldn't ignore her request. It was necessary to deal with the matter urgently. So hesitatingly he entered.

"Vincent?"

Vincent was still lying on his bed and turned around to look silently at the older man. He expected the umpteenth remark that he had to talk about it, that he must not close himself off, that it was much better for him to share his grief, probably that had been what his father had wanted to tell him when he left him, but he couldn't. Yet, nothing was less true.

What Father told him now was beyond belief.

"Vincent, I'm sorry, but ... Mary wants Jacob in the nursery ... permanently."

"What!?" Vincent's voice rang out, he rose immediately and stood within two steps in front of Father who was still near the table.

"You can't be serious!!" The words were spoken short, clipped, and he felt an unreasonable rage burning inside him.

Father noticed it and tried to remain calm, heated discussions wouldn't serve a thing.

"Only for the welfare of the baby Vincent."

"And what do you mean by that?"

Father took a deep breath, what he was about to say would be hard and nervously he toyed with the knob of his cane. "I mean that ... that you are neglecting the boy."

With one furious movement Vincent swiped away a stack of books which lay on the table and they fell on the ground with a dull thud.

"Father! He is my son ... I love him! ... Mary has no right ... "

With a soothing gesture Father tried to reason with his son.

"Vincent, I have never doubted your love for your son, not ever ... I know that you love him, but honestly ... how often are you in your chamber lately? .. When did you last hold him in your arms, and I don't refer to what happened just now ... Tell me that Vincent!"

In these final words there was a harsh tone, but it was a harshness born out of concern and Vincent knew it.

Suddenly, all anger disappeared from him, and all that was left was a sharp seething pain because he realized that his father was right. Fresh tears were misting his eyes when he looked at him, and almost at once he felt a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"You are running away from something, Vincent ... what is it?"

It made no sense to deny it and there was a trace of relief now that his father had reached the truth, his voice was nearly inaudible when he revealed his bitter secret.

"He feels everything I feel ... "

And Father needed no further explanation, if it threatened to destroy his son then how would it be for an innocent baby? He had not the faintest notion of what Vincent was going through, only suspicions, and they spoke for themselves. He looked concerned for his son and saw how he slowly sank back in his chair, only to hide himself carefully, like so often, behind that wild abundance of his magnificent mane.

Softly he murmured, "And ... You want to protect him ... "

Vincent nodded and suddenly, totally unexpectedly, his eyes rose, thus committing himself to his father, startling the latter by revealing his raw unconcealed pain, a silent request for comfort.

"My God Vincent!"

He embraced his son with a warm paternal gesture and felt how convulsive sobs were racking his body. He had nothing else to comfort him with than his presence, words were meaningless now, but he knew, in that moment, it was enough for him.

Only when Vincent was completely under control, did Father raise the painful subject again.

"Vincent ... don't you think that it would be better if Jacob stayed with Mary? .. Only temporarily, until this is all behind us ... "

"Will it ever be behind us?" It was a desperate question and Father wished that he could give a better answer.

"Have faith Vincent ... according to Catherine everything was possible with love ... "

Vincent sighed and rose with difficulty. "I will tell Mary that Jacob is staying in the Nursery ... temporarily..."

Father nodded with approval. "Believe me Vincent ... it is best, for you as well as for Jacob."

"Maybe ... but Father, it is only temporary ... "

"No one will ever ask more from you Vincent ... Come to my chamber afterwards, I expect word from Peter."

With a quick nod Vincent gave him to understand that he had heard and he disappeared in the semi-darkness of the tunnel behind his chamber.

Father returned to his own chamber where he collapsed exhausted in his chair to wait as patiently as he could until the message from his friend arrived.

However, there was no message from Peter, instead he came himself. He looked tired when he descended the stairs into Father's chamber and when he studied his friend he noticed that he also had a wakeful night behind him.

Their greeting was brief and Father came right to the point. "Well Peter ... any news?"

Disheartened the latter shook his head. "It doesn't look good Jacob."

An unwelcome feeling preyed upon Father and he asked, "What do you mean?"

Peter cleared his throat and answered, avoiding, "Well. .. there still is no certainty ... only strong suspicions ... "

Suddenly Vincent's hoarse voice resounded from the entrance of Father's chamber.

"Peter, you are talking in riddles."

Both doctors looked at him and could see in Vincent's face that the past night had taken its toll.

"It isn't that simple Vincent," said Peter and he watched his friend's son closely as he came down the stairs and walked across the carpet towards them. The memory of that one night, now more than a year ago, when he had seen Vincent, lying on the floor of Catherine's apartment, trembling and raving from fever, was burned forever in his mind. Now, that same man stood right in front of him, fit and well, but something ominous surrounded him, something threatening and Peter hastened to explain himself,

"It's a long story ... " and even before he was finished he saw Father as well as Vincent nod, as a sign to continue, which he did.

"For a long time the neighbourhood where the shelter is has been unsafe because of a street gang, one of the worst kind. It goes from vandalism and intimidation to rape, abuse and holdups. It's raining complaints at the police station. A few women from the shelter have been molested already, one of them had to stay in the hospital for a couple of days, and each time they lodged a complaint ... but it's all useless ... the police do nothing, they are afraid, and now ... now they think that Catherine is in the hands of that gang."

Vincent uttered a muffled sound and instinctively clenched his fists but with such force that he injured himself with his claws.

Father sat in his chair, defeated, bewildered, and asked, "And why do they think that?"

Peter hesitated briefly and looked almost reluctantly at Vincent, something that didn't escape Father's notice, and then said softly,

"They have had her before, but she could escape ... apparently she hadn't forgotten her lessons in street fighting."

"But they have her now." stated Father and Peter nodded.

"In all probability they have."

An unnatural silence fell, until suddenly Vincent hammered his fist on the table.

"Where?" he snarled, and he made no effort to keep the awesome growling from his voice.

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "In their so called headquarters ... at least, that's what I think."

"Where is it?"

Startled Peter looked up. "Why? .. You can't ... "

He never got the chance to raise further objections, like Father, who had half risen from his chair, with an endless amount of arguments ready, but who sat back again and said nothing when Vincent began to pace nervously like a provoked tiger. This was a lost battle and he reconciled himself with what could not be avoided.

Suddenly Vincent turned towards them, a blatant anger flaring in his eyes, he spoke in short sentences and every single one contained a threat,

"I can't do what? .. Go and get her? .. I can!! Even if it is the last thing I do!! ... "

"Vincent, it is too dangerous!" tried Peter again, but Vincent shook his head furiously.

"I have to do it, who else is there? You Peter? Or Father? .. " He looked from one to the other and it was more than obvious to them there was no way that they could go and Vincent went on.

"No ... and to ask one of our own people or one of the Helpers to face the atrocities of such a gang is unthinkable. I wouldn't allow it ... Or do you have intentions of going to the police? To

track down someone who is dead? .. Maybe they can save her, but what of the consequences? Those who wanted her dead will know that she is still alive ... and everything will start all over again! No ... I have to go ..."

"And the risks Vincent?" warned Father.

"The risks are mine ... Father, remember what I promised ... until my last breath!!"

Father nodded, he had to resign himself to the inevitable, yet he could do nothing else but worry, Vincent had always been very close to his heart and now more than ever. Now when he was so vulnerable, but he knew that no words from him could stop his son, he had to let him go ...

It was Peter however who tried again to dissuade Vincent from his purpose.

"Vincent ... you are underestimating the danger. Remember the police are already involved ... "

Vincent nodded abruptly. "I know ... after all, I have seen them myself."

Father frowned and asked, "What do they know Peter?"

"Enough for it to be dangerous ... They know that a young woman from the shelter probably is in the hands of that gang, they know her name and by now they will know that Catherine Chandler isn't among the living anymore."

"My God ...," was all that Father could manage to say.

It also dawned on Peter that there was no other way, softly he said, "Vincent ... it should be a big deserted warehouse in Jackson Street ... almost near East River ... "

For Vincent it was very obvious that he couldn't waste any more time. He went to the stairs and turned around once more.

"I have to go Father, I must ... I will bring her to the only place where she belongs ... " He fell silent and added softly, "Or ... I won't come back "

His inward struggle resounded in his voice, on the one hand he wanted nothing more than bring Catherine back but on the other hand he was reluctant to leave the safety and security of these tunnels to throw himself in an uncertain struggle, a struggle which could mean his end.

"Father ..., " he said in a strangled voice.

Their eyes met and in two steps they were in each others arms, searching for support in an almost desperate embrace.

"Father ... wish me luck ... "

And in a voice, hoarse from restrained tears Father whispered, "Good luck, Vincent ... "

He freed himself from their embrace and with a trembling hand he gently stroked away a thick lock of golden mane to look one more time in those blue eyes.

"Return to me, safe and sound."

Vincent nodded briefly and then he was gone.

Father remained where he was, listening to the dying sound of his son's footsteps until Peter's voice dragged him back to reality.

"Jacob ... he will return ... he always does ... "

"I hope so Peter, I hope so."

Together, united by their friendship of so many years, their love for Catherine and Vincent and the shared secrets they were able to arm themselves for what would be the longest night of their lives.

She had walked right into their trap ... finally, after all ... and now she was afraid. Not simply afraid, no, this was on the verge of mortal fear and it made her heart hammer wildly in her throat ... She never knew that anyone could be so afraid.

What she knew, all too clearly, was that she had made a big mistake. Disorientated as she was she never should have left the protection of those subterranean tunnels in the first place, there had she been safe, but now ... now her life was in mortal danger, that much was obvious to her.

Nervously she looked around one more time and studied her surroundings. She was in some sort of warehouse, a lofty concrete building with a few dirty broken windows. Sometimes, she thought she could smell the oily water of East River, but maybe that was only because she had heard the sounds of ships, and ships belonged on a river, but she didn't dare to swear on it. She pulled herself together and decided not to waste her time on wild guesses, it was far more useful to try and take in the place where she was.

On her left side she could make out a huge iron gate with a door in it, which made a miserable creaky sound when it was used, each time when one of the gang members came or left, and this happened frequently, each time they slammed the door shut behind them so that the noise resounded long afterwards in that hollow place. It petrified her every time and they knew it, they knew it as well, and they used it to break her resistance.

Obviously, she was in what they called their headquarters. The warehouse was big enough to accommodate their engines, there was even an unimaginably old Buick amongst them. Furthermore, the place was used as some sort of a repair-shop; tools, chains, engine-parts were lying about. Here and there were empty beer cans and greasy rags used for some job. Closer to her were a few tables with the remains of a meal on top of it and the inevitable beer cans. In a corner there was even a fridge and some dirty sleeping bags were on the floor. Once in a while, someone slept off his drunkenness on them.

They had forced her to sit upon the cold concrete floor. Roughly they had pulled her arms behind her, chained her wrists and shackled her to a sturdy looking iron pipe. Even her ankles were put into chains and she couldn't move without making a loudish jingling sound, something that sent malicious glances in her direction at once and moving them would also cause another injury or wound.

So she stayed quietly where she was, with all its consequences. The coldness of the floor penetrated her body through and through and had made her hands as well as her feet completely numb. Involuntary she shivered and it was not only from the cold.

Very carefully she tried to move a little, just to grant her stiff and bruised limbs some relief and she coiled herself up when the pain shot red hot through her body. Her entire body was sore because they had beaten her black and blue. In her mouth she still tasted the metallic flavour of blood and for the umpteenth time all that had happened during these last couple of hours came back to her, as if to keep the memory vivid.

She had been on her way to the shelter where she had found a home, for the time being, because she still wanted to find out if she really was who they had told her she was, but that evening her thoughts had been elsewhere ...

She had asked herself whether 'he' would be there again. She still couldn't bring herself to calling him by his name, but yet, something had changed, unexplained, but it was so and it had opened for her the way to acceptance of the fact that she was indeed Catherine Chandler.

When she had seen him again after her impulsive flight her fear for him had not been any less and she had, once more, run away from him.

She hadn't seen him since that night, but slowly she got the feeling that he was there, she could almost feel his presence and knew that she was safe. It overwhelmed everything else so strongly that she hoped for a new meeting, but so far it had seemed to be an idle hope and she wondered if she would ever see him again.

She couldn't think about it any longer because suddenly she was grabbed roughly from behind by strong arms and a dirty, oily tasting, rag was crammed into her mouth, so deep that she nearly choked on it and retching she had lost consciousness.

After all! ... It had been her last thought.

Now she sat here and cursed herself for her own carelessness. She should have known that they would seek revenge. No member of a street gang, how small or insignificant it was, accepted defeat against a woman. And they had suffered defeat that first time, there had been only two of them, convinced as they were that she also would be an easy prey, just like all the others. When they grabbed her she had defended herself with a fierceness that had startled her and she was even more startled when she came out of this seemingly uneven struggle as the winner.

But now everything was different, they had been with several more, and they hadn't even given her a chance to defend herself, they had been brutal and ruthless.

Only when she had regained consciousness did she find out how brutal and ruthless they really were ...

Without mercy they dragged her to her feet and everyone in turn vented their aggression on her, but she never gave them the pleasure of hearing her scream. Bravely she endured the pain without uttering one single sound, but in her eyes they could read how much she despised them. Among her torturers were also the two she had humiliated before by escaping them and, to avenge themselves they beat her wherever they could reach, nevertheless taking care that she didn't lose consciousness.

They never gave her a minutes rest, her lips completely smashed and swollen, blood running down her chin, and from the gap in the brow above her right eye. Her cheekbones were bearing the marks of knuckle-dusters, her nose was bleeding and in her neck one could see the purple marks of strangulation. But when the leader of the gang arrived all hell broke loose. He was a strapping muscular man, dressed from head to toe in black leather, and he was the only one in the group who had his hair shaved Marine style. It gave him a mean appearance, but more frightening was what he held in his right hand.

All gang members were armed, ranging from knives, bike chains, and truncheons to guns, everything, as long as it aroused awe, and the larger the better. But he carried nothing like that at all. No, loosely rolled up in his hand was a genuine rawhide whip!

For a moment Catherine thought she was dreaming but it was real and he proved at once that he knew how to use it too. With a seemingly slow gesture he wielded the murdering leather and tore her blouse, until it hung totally into shreds around her, but not once had he touched her skin. The fear made her breath fail and she stared at him, desperately trying to say something, but her voice deserted her, and only a hoarse sound came over her smashed lips. He laughed at her fear, displaying his bad teeth. His friends were taking it over from him and their scornful laughter echoed in her ears long afterwards, but finally, they had left her alone.

Exhausted she collapsed on the floor, fighting back tears from sheer helplessness. She didn't have any illusions about the coming hours, more abuse, maybe rape, and, in the end her death. This gang wouldn't back off, not for nothing or no one.

She sat completely motionless, huddled in her corner and the fear she had already endured wasn't helping her severely tortured mind at all. All hope for help was gone and as her willpower ebbed away she waited. She didn't even know that help was near.

Since darkness had fallen he had stood there, hidden in the shadows, watching the warehouse. It was obvious to him now that this ruinous building was the headquarters of the gang. The arrival of several youths clothed in leather and jeans, with long greasy hair and noisy machines had been proof enough for him. The gang would be complete by now because the street was quiet and deserted again. The only question left to him was whether Catherine was in that building or not. His eyes scanned the greyish fronts, he saw the broken windows, high above ground level, and he discovered the rusty metal fire-escape on the side of the building. It didn't look very solid but yet it had to serve his purpose, and the step over to one of those windows wouldn't cause him any problems.

He came out of his hiding place, ran across the street and jumped quickly upon the ladder, which began to grind dangerously under his weight. In less than no time he had reached his goal and with a baffling easiness he climbed to the nearest window through which he could survey the place

beneath him.

An atrocious scene unfolded before his eyes. The desolate condition of the warehouse escaped him completely, his eyes were drawn to a group of youths. They were all standing in front of a hunched up figure, their scornful laughter rang out to him, and then he recognized their victim ...

The sight of Catherine, so grievously ill-treated, at the mercy of the horrible deeds from this unscrupulous gang made him jump down through the window in a blind rage.

In a shower of broken glass and fragments of wood he landed, lithely, on his feet and, as if on command the, leather clad, youthful criminals turned around and stared at him, an opponent who didn't even appear in their worst nightmares, and he didn't give them the time to recover from their shock. He attacked them, with bared fangs and extended claws and his savage roars resounded horribly through the huge place, which paralysed his enemies with mortal fear. His murdering claws found their target and they tore the first body, then a second one ... and a third ...

The initial shock, horror turned into revenge, and they began to offer resistance, to no avail, only more blood and another dead body, until someone grabbed a gun, and took aim ... a shot went off ...

The bullet hit Vincent on the forehead, it was a badly aimed shot and caused only a graze because the hand of the marksman hadn't been very steady, but the blow was enough to put him out of action. Blood oozed from a deep wound, right into his eyes, and growling he collapsed, then everything before his eyes went black ...

The silence was total, and shocked the survivors looked at the motionless figure at their feet. The gun clattered to the floor ...

"Damn," said someone, but the word lost all power.

The leader of the gang was the first to regain his senses. He tried not to look at the mutilated bodies of his comrades, and then he winked at the few that remained.

"Chain him." he ordered and he roughly dragged away Vincent's long concealing cloak.

Their hands trembled when they obeyed him and they placed heavy chains around Vincent's wrists. The bloodied claws made them shiver with abhorrence and when Vincent moved a little they backed off as one, and briefly, the chains rattled, but then it was all quiet again.

Their leader had his favourite weapon back in his hand and with a cold grimace on his face he gestured towards a crossbeam.

"Rig him up ... I have a surprise for that beast."

A chain was thrown over the intended beam and with united strength they pulled Vincent up until he nearly stood on his feet, then they stood back and waited for him to regain consciousness.

Catherine had watched the entire sequence of events in silence. When she recognized her saviour she was dumbfounded, least of all had she expected this, and with terror in her eyes she watched every single movement that he made. Yet she wasn't really afraid, she had always suspected that he was capable of terrible things and now that she saw her suspicions were real she accepted the fact that he was as he happened to be. But when she saw him, so defenceless, hanging in his shackles, her heart went out to him. Very slowly she rose, she was no longer alone and despite the hopeless situation she placed her hope on him. She also waited.

Gradually, Vincent recovered consciousness, a throbbing headache and a tearing pain in his shoulders, like they were dislocated, threatened to throw him back in that darkness but he fought against it and won. Blood stuck his eyelashes together but finally he succeeded in opening his eyes, his surroundings were somewhat pink coloured and a little hazy but he realized at once what they had done, they had chained him, like some sort of animal, again ...

Dazed he shook his head, as if he wanted to chase away a bad dream, but the cruel reality didn't yield. Slowly the environment took shape. He saw the fearful faces of his captors, afraid because they didn't know what they had overpowered. He saw his victims, their comrades, half hidden under the dirty sleeping bags which someone had thrown over them, and in a far corner, nearly opposite him, stood Catherine, almost unrecognizable by the blows she had received and in her eyes he could see something as recognition. Yet it wasn't the recognition that he wanted to see, but the sight of her severely wounded face, her torn clothes and the

thought at what they had done to her was enough to enrage him. He moved, the chains rattled, the beam grinding dangerously and then ... then they broke his

resistance ...

He writhed when he felt the pain, he couldn't describe it, couldn't define it, like a fire it spread itself through his body. It was a pain which was nothing human and his scream was bone chilling. He didn't know the cause of that pain, not yet, and when he found out, he knew that his end was near, because even the cause was nothing human.

The gang leader stood behind his back, the whip in his hand and almost soundlessly he let it come down, the snakey leather found it's prey, bit itself through thick layers of clothing, to leave a bloody lash on Vincent's back. Until, suddenly, Catherine's cry made Vincent wake up from the debilitated state in which he had exiled himself.

"Vincent!"

His head flew up and he looked at her, now he saw the recognition which he had longed to see, and his will for living returned, he put his hands around the chains running across the cross-beam and started to drag them down with all his strength. The whip could do its destructive work just one more time before Vincent's shackles gave way. This time there was no scarlet mist before his eyes, clouding his mind, now it was cold lust to kill, a hatred which could only be stilled in blood. A few minutes later it was all over and Catherine's voice reached him.

"Vincent! No! ... "

But it was too late, nothing could have stopped him, because he had fought for what was most dear to him, Catherine, the woman who meant everything to him, the mother of his son.

Silently he went to her, freed her from her chains and stood there, motionless, head turned away, his arms powerless at his sides.

It was Catherine who touched him first. She took his hand, saw the blood and held his awesome claws between her own two hands. Never before had she seen Vincent kill like this, so ruthless, never before, and the thought at what he must have gone through caused her to shiver.

"Oh Vincent ... why? .. "

Only now the truth sank in, and he enfolded his arms around her in an almost desperate embrace.

"Catherine ... "

They forgot about the time and their environment; each others presence was all that mattered. Until screaming sirens tore at the nightly silence and brought them back to reality.

Vincent heard them first and startled he lifted his head.

"Sirens ... Catherine, quickly, we must go."

She nodded, her eyes already searching for a suitable way to escape, and then she pointed to a door in the back of the warehouse, a door that had gone unnoticed before, but was now a way to freedom.

Vincent saw his long cloak, thrown on the floor, he grabbed it and hung it around Catherine's shoulders, but when she tried to utter some protest he made it clear, with one single gesture of his hand, that he wouldn't tolerate any arguments.

Before they left the building Catherine halted abruptly. "Vincent ... this is not possible ... "

"What? " he asked and looked at her, surprised.

Time was pressing and now that he had her back he didn't want to take any risks, but when he saw her looking at the bodies he knew that she was right. Leaving the warehouse like this would be pure madness. With what the police already knew and with what they would discover here there would be too much evidence and they wouldn't rest until they had found him. It meant a danger larger than life.

There was only one solution, wipe out all tracks!

As if she had guessed his thoughts Catherine said quietly, "Fire ... "

There was fuel enough, the motorbikes, the car, the spare jerry-cans, and without another word she emptied a few cans and threw a burning match into the liquid, the fire spread at once ...

In one movement, Vincent grabbed her hand and started to run towards the back door, while behind their backs the warehouse, with the dreadful mutilated bodies, changed into a roaring inferno from which they barely escaped.

The warehouse was irretrievably lost, flames licking like fiery orange-red tongues at the walls, doing their destructive work thoroughly. With a thundering noise the roof had come down, burying everything underneath. The only thing left for the fire department was to preserve the adjacent buildings from further damage. The entire area was marked off with the yellow plastic ribbons from the NYPD, and the few people who had been in the neighbourhood had been evacuated. Now they could only wait until the fire had spent itself which would take some time.

There had been a survivor, a man with severe burns, and who looked like he had been attacked by some wild animal. The doctor who had come with the ambulance didn't have much hope for his survival.

With grim features D.A. Joe Maxwell stood watching the burning building. Even at this distance he could feel the heat and it was as if the night sky was glowing with fire. Behind him, several police cars were parked, with rotating red lights, and he heard the officer on duty talk over the radio. In front of him were the fire-tenders, fire-hoses unrolled, and closer to the building he saw a few men, with oxygen tanks on their backs, go at the fire, but in his opinion, even if they pumped the entire Hudson and East River through those hoses, the fire couldn't be quenched. It was horrible.

It was most unusual that he, as a D.A., was present, but when the name Catherine Chandler had turned up, out of the blue, they had phoned him.

Catherine Chandler ... Cathy ... Radcliffe ... !!

His heart cried out for her.

He had, roughly, picked up the phone, he had just gone to bed after a busy and more than nerve-racking day, but when the cop on the other side of the line had come up with a thousand excuses, and then had him put through to the officer of the watch, he had known that it was important.

The man. had not minced words and when he dropped her name, the usual eloquent Joe had been completely speechless.

Cathy was dead ...

On his way to the scene of the disaster he told himself that it had to be one terrible mistake.

Radcliffe was no longer alive ...

From a great distance he had already seen the blazing fire and became watchful. Then he saw the survivor, when they carried him into the ambulance, and ... knew enough ...

The deep wounds, seemingly caused by claws, forced him to make the connection with Vincent. He still didn't know him, and, he had formed an idea of him. He knew what that man, if he could call him that, was capable of, and he also knew that he did it for Catherine ...

"Mr. Maxwell?" the officer stood next to him and interrupted his thoughts.

"Yes?"

"The witness just died, on the way to the hospital."

Joe nodded, this was to be expected, almost nobody survived Vincent's rage.

"Now all evidence is gone," continued the man.

"Yes." answered Joe, a mysterious smile curving his mouth."Another New York mystery."

He ran his hand through his unruly curls, turned around and walked towards his car. He looked at the fire one more time,

"Goodbye Radcliffe ... take care ... your secret is safe with me ... "

Then he got in his car and drove away. He knew now that she was still alive, that she was with Vincent, and for their safety he had to keep silent. It was a sacrifice that he made willingly, but he hoped that once, for his own peace of mind, the silence would be broken. There were too many unanswered questions ...

They were safe. They had reached the Tunnels and, exhausted, they searched for support against the rock walls, their laboured breathing the only sound disturbing the silence.

Vincent was the first to move, he took her hand and said softly, "Catherine ... "

It sounded so familiar that it brought tears to her eyes. "Yes ... Vincent ... "

He wanted to say something but she interrupted him, "No wait, first, ... the baby?" and she could hardly get the words out of her mouth.

"Don't you remember anything?"

His question made her fear the worst but the tender glance in his eyes reassured her.

"I am just beginning to live again."

Vincent nodded thoughtfully. "The baby is safe ... his name is Jacob ... " and then his voice broke, he let go of her and leaned against the rough wall behind him, with his eyes closed. He felt her hand, wiping away his tears and slowly he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close,

"I have missed you so Catherine ... it was terrible ... "

She could only nod, for her, these last months had been a series of confusions, already beginning to fade from her mind. There were terrible moments, like her long seclusion, the birth of their son, then a bottomless black hole, and afterwards, afterwards she had felt like a drowning person barely escaping from the deadly claws of the water. And there were also only some vague fragments, not worth the name memory, the streets of New York, life as a tramp, the shelter and somewhere among all that a glimpse of the Tunnels. It was all she had and she would need Vincent to fill in the gaps, but that could wait, now she only wanted to feel him, to touch him, to make sure that he wasn't a dream.

And in her turn she wrapped her arms around him. She was startled when she heard his sharp intake of breath and under her hands she felt warm sticky blood. That memory would never fade, the memory of how they had humiliated him into the very depths of his soul, by treating him like some kind of animal

and she knew what damage they had caused with that.

"Vincent," she whispered softly, "You have to let someone take care of that."

He avoided her eyes and shook his head, "You need it more than I do ... and quickly."

Hand-in-hand they began the long journey to the inhabited part of the Tunnels and to Father's chamber. Due to their exhaustion and their injuries they advanced slowly. The ground was so uneven that Catherine stumbled, more than once, and, in the end, nearly fell. Without a word Vincent took her in his arms and carried her for the remaining part of the way.

She wanted to protest, pointing out his own wounds but the look in his eyes made her hold her words. Finally, after all these months of desperation and grief, he was able to do something for her, and he did it with so much love, so much tenderness that it nearly broke her heart. She put an arm around his shoulder, with her hand through his thick shaggy mane, laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. She smelled the wool and the leather of his clothing mixed with the faint odour of candles and something that was uniquely him. For the first time in a long while she smiled and the rhythmic movement of his steps made her drowsy.

When she woke up, much to her surprise, she found herself lying in a soft warm bed and she recognized the room, the Guest Chamber. A place where she had been in the past, a place where she had known grief but also a place where she had found comfort. Now she was here again ...

At her bedside sat an elderly man with a more than worried look in his grey eyes.

"Father ... "

The worried look disappeared at once, to make way for joy. "Catherine! ... "

He bent towards her, tears running down his cheeks when he gave her a kiss, his voice sounded shaky.

"Welcome home my dear child... welcome home, we have missed you down here."

Very carefully she tried to sit up and at once she felt Father's skilful hands supporting her and adjusting her cushions.

"How do you feel?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Under the circumstances very well, the pain is bearable."

"They knocked you about dreadfully, didn't they?" He rather stated the obvious and she got the impression he was trying to distract her.

She looked at him and asked, "Father ... where is Vincent?"

He tried to show a reassuring smile but he had the old Catherine in front of him and realized that she had already seen through him. He said,

"In his chamber."

"How is he?" came her next question and he had expected it.

"Reasonable ... he's asleep."

Even before his words had died away Catherine let her legs slide from under the covers and she made ready to leave the bed.

"I want to see him."

"Catherine! You need rest!" admonished Father, but she was determined. She guessed that something was wrong, otherwise Vincent would have been at her bedside, not Father.

"Don't try to stop me Father! Not after all these months!"

Father desperately tried to stop her without making her more anxious although he knew that it was far too late for that.

"I won't, but he is asleep now ... he needs it, just like you and ... and ... "

"And what Father?!" She stood right in front of him, close to losing her self-control; She demanded to know the truth and he was going to tell her.

"I had to give him something."

Her voice sounded shrill when she repeated his words and somewhere in her mind she heard a far away echo of Father's voice telling her that sedatives had the opposite effect on Vincent.

"You had to give him something?! ... What? .. Father, what's wrong with him?"

"Catherine ... he was in a lot of pain and very restless ... I gave him a painkiller, something harmless, but he was so exhausted that he fell asleep at once,"

Catherine nodded, understandingly, yet she didn't waver over her intentions to see Vincent.

"Then I will sit next to him until he wakes up." and she made to leave the chamber but Father stopped her.

"Catherine ... "

The tone- of his voice made her look back, questioningly and a feeling of uneasiness crept over her.

"Catherine, Vincent has gone through a lot lately and what happened tonight hasn't done him any good."

She nodded and said softly, "Tell me what's happened."

Startled the old man looked up, "Now? Do you want to hear it now? .. "

Silently she nodded because she knew that something had changed in Vincent. She had seen it when he had fought for their freedom. She wanted to know what had brought him this

far, and knew it wouldn't be a pleasant story. She also knew he would never tell her, that he would want to spare her, like always.

She didn't know it had been so terrible that even Father didn't know everything.

She allowed Father to take her back to the bed and waited. He sat in a chair next to the bed and started to reveal what he knew about his son's martyrdom.

He seemed to float ... it was pleasant but when he moved ... the pleasant feeling disappeared at once, to make way for pain, a pain which was pushing away all the rest. There was a small bandage on his forehead and even the, almost imperceptible, pressure of it was too much. It seemed as if his head would explode any moment and when he tried to open his eyes, the light of the candle burning on the table was too bright. He moaned and turned his head away, the movement made him sick and dizzy. Then he noticed that he was supported by pillows, lying on his right side, he found it uncomfortable

and he tried to turn on his back.

It was a wrong move ... Whoever had put him on his side had known the reason why. The pain shot right through him and with the pain the memory returned, growling he wanted to chase it away ...

At once he felt a cool hand brushing over his fevered brow and he heard his name.

"Vincent ... "

But he was beyond reach, he wanted to drive away the pain, to shake off the memory. His throat was painfully dry and when he tried to speak his voice sounded hoarse. Finally he managed to get the words out,

"Like ... like an animal ... they ... they had a ... whip ... and they used it ... on me ... "

Again he heard his name, reassuring, soothing. "Vincent ... "

He knew that voice.

"Catherine ... "

He wanted to rise, to see her, to touch her, but the effort was too much and he was totally at the mercy of the ruthless arms of unconsciousness which were dragging him down like some revengeful monster, into unknown depths.

"Hold ... me ... tight ...," he whispered, the words almost unintelligible, a hoarse whisper, and then he fell, and he kept falling ...

Worried Catherine sat next to Vincent's bed, even in his unconsciousness he was restless, tortured by those terrible memories, and now she understood why Father had taken desperate the steps to give him medication. Anything was better than taking the risk that Vincent would again lose that very fragile balance that made him who he was. She knew he was balancing dangerously close to the verge of that almost deadly madness.

Not for one moment would she leave his side, now that she had found him she wouldn't let him go, he was too dear to her. Little by little he quietened down until he seemed to be asleep, a healing sleep, as well for mind as for body, from which he woke several hours later.

Muffled, as if through thick layers of cotton-wool, he heard a familiar voice, singing a familiar lullaby and he was thrown back in time, a time when the Tunnels were infected by a deadly

disease, plague. This song had been sung in the Hospital Chamber, near the bedside of little Elly, who hadn't survived her illness.

Now he heard it in his own chamber. And the hazy silhouette before his eyes became clearer, and he saw Catherine, sitting in his chair, with little Jacob in her arms. He watched as a tiny little fist waved, a tiny little leg kicked in the air. An image from a dream ... his son in the arms of his mother ... and ... once more, it seemed as if nothing was impossible ...

"Catherine ...," and his voice still sounded hoarse.

She immediately looked in his direction, a shining smile on her badly bruised face.

"Believe it or not, but he knows that I'm his mother."

Vincent nodded slowly. "I believe you Catherine, he is very special ... our son."

He watched her when she put the baby back in his own bed and then came to him. She moved rather stiffly and he suspected that she was in a lot of pain, far more than she would admit.

Carefully she sat next to him, took his hand in hers and asked softly, "A lot of pain?"

He studied her damaged face, the bruises were coloured black and blue, her lips swollen and both her eyes nearly closed. It was all that he could see but he knew that her entire body carried the marks of ill-treatment, marks which despite Father's good care wouldn't fade but would leave everlasting

scars on her soul.

"Really, I should be asking you."

She looked at him seriously. "But I'm asking you, Vincent."

"Yes ..."

What should he tell her, that even the soft candlelight was too harsh and caused him a murdering headache, that as long as he didn't move the pain from those deep lashes on his back was bearable? That the physical pain could be endured? That the real pain was much, much, deeper?

"Vincent? .. "

"This pain is bearable ... " He spoke no further. It was not necessary because, in her eyes he could read that even without words, she understood what he meant.

She let his words sink in completely and said, "Vincent ... I'm sorry that you had to go through all this ... I wish it was different ... "

He lowered his eyes to avoid the look from those sea-green depths, in which he nearly drowned, but he couldn't avoid her words.

"And I'm not only referring to what happened in that warehouse... Vincent, look at me ... "

Reluctantly he acquiesced to her request. He could refuse her nothing, and he knew that he would bare his soul for her now. His sapphire blue eyes revealing everything, everything he could never say with words, things that even Father didn't know.

"Father has already told me what happened, what you had to endure ... it has changed you Vincent ... "

He had hoped that she hadn't noticed it, but she was the old Catherine again, and he couldn't hide anything from her.

Catherine hesitated briefly, knowing Vincent as she did, she knew that he was suffering. Maybe it would destroy him if she didn't interfere, so she continued gently, yet with an urgent tone in her voice.

"Vincent, what has changed you so? .. You are ... ruthless ... reckless ... there is a coldness emanating from you ... "

He knew what she was trying to say, after all, she had seen him, more than once, making victims, seen him kill. She was right, he had changed and the explanation was obvious.

"They have taught me how to hate Catherine ... "

She wanted to say something but he wouldn't let her,

"No Catherine ... I don't want to talk about it ... later maybe ... now I just want to hold you ... "

Willingly she lay down and carefully she nestled against him. As in a dream she heard his voice.

"Catherine ... know that I love you ... "

"You haven't got the faintest idea of how much I love to hear you saying that." she whispered. And a distant memory returned. He had declared his love for her for the very first time in her apartment, when they were standing by the window. Before their eyes had unfolded a beautiful sunset, their first ... at that time they had been convinced that the worse was behind them ... how wrong had they been.

Vincent was carried away by the same memory but never had he dared to dream that this terror would end like this. Very tenderly he placed a feather-light kiss on top of her head and he saw her smile. content he closed his eyes, he had her back ... his Catherine ...

The days were joined together in a peaceful and quiet pattern. Catherine's bruises were fading from blue-black into red-purple and in the end into yellow-green. The swellings were nearly gone and the pain had lessened. She almost moved with her former female grace again.

Vincent had followed Father's advice, to stay in bed, but only for one day. Despite loud objections voiced by Father as well as by Catherine, he had stood up the next morning. The enforced lying still made him more restless than was good for him.

The memory of what had happened was too vivid, that way he couldn't even try to suppress it, and so they had let him. He knew it wasn't aiding his recovery, because more than once blood had penetrated the heavy bandages around his torso, and he had to change his shirt. A painful and almost impossible task, which he couldn't do himself and, compelled by necessity, because he wanted to spare himself Father's lectures, he accepted Catherine's assistance. Shy and afraid he allowed her to take care of his wounds and accepted her help putting on a fresh shirt, still expecting that she would loathe him.

He knew that he should know better, this was his old Catherine, the woman who loved him because of who he was and not because of what he was, but still, there was that doubt. It was not so long ago that she had been scared to death of him.

Catherine knew it, he had told her, and she found it incomprehensible as well as unforgivable of herself. She, afraid of Vincent? Afraid of the man who was her life? And she knew that he had been hurt deeply by it, but he blamed her memory loss for it and never spoke about it again.

Hours and hours they had talked. All aspects of Catherine's imprisonment and her, so called, death had been discussed in the smallest detail. Someone must have been on her side, but not entirely, yet enough to give her a chance to survive.

Neither of them had the slightest idea who had been her unknown helper. In all probability they would never know, yet whether man or woman, they were infinitely grateful. It had been someone with a great respect for life itself, someone who had recognised the danger Catherine was in and someone who had dared to help her, regardless the risk for him or herself.

Catherine had told about Jacob's birth, how terrible it had been, how they had used force, and how they had taken the baby away from her after allowing her to see him for one brief moment. Then they had given her that last injection.

Since then everything was very vague, hazy shreds of memories, which she didn't even know if they were real.

Vincent had listened without saying a word and began his story by telling how he had found her, how she had died in his arms, how he had carried her back to her apartment and how he had stayed until dawn. It was still difficult to speak the words, it was as if he lived through it once again and Catherine had taken his hand in hers, to let him know that she was there and that the nightmare was over.

Then he had told her about the quest for her murderers, also the men who had held their son in their power. He told her about his request for help from Elliot Burch, how they had saved each other's lives and how, in the end, Elliot had met his death.

Silently Catherine had listened to the news of Elliot's death and in silence she mourned the loss of a man who had turned out to be a dear friend.

Vincent also told her how he had met Diana Bennett, that she had found him, seen him and accepted him. He told her about her devotion, her indispensable help and how he, thanks to her, had found their son.

And there was also Joe, good old Joe, a man with his heart in the right place. He had thrown himself on her case, heart and soul. He had been tenacious and thorough and often he had been close to the truth. Diana had always been able to prevent that happening, because as a D.A. he was in no position to disguise the truth, certainly not after what had happened with Moreno, and with the authorities on his back.

Joe ... she would miss him, and Vincent knowing it, understandingly said, "It's not easy to leave your friends behind, whether it is for their safety or your own ... Believe me Catherine, I know ... and I know how much it hurts."

She did not need to look at him to know that he spoke out of experience.

They had even spoken about the future, and it was apparent that Catherine would become a member of the community, for good.

The world Above had made her an outcast, that world had nothing to offer her anymore, only death. Her life was here now, within the security of these tunnels. The people here were her

friends, her family, here she belonged, with her son, with Vincent, and all the others who were very close to her heart, Father, Mary, Mouse ... Here she was safe and Vincent didn't need to convince her, she knew it for herself, only too well.

"For them I'm dead, " she had said, "And it's best I stay dead."

And Vincent had been right, again, it was not easy. More than once she could not control her tears and each time Vincent was there to hold her close and speak words of comfort.

And there was Jacob, their son, the miracle of whom she couldn't get enough - he was the healing balm on painful wounds.

She knew that Vincent hadn't told her everything. She knew that he did it to spare her, but if he suffered she suffered too. He should know that by now, but stubbornly he refused to let her share the humiliations he had endured.

Until the night she insisted on seeing her own grave. Vincent had tried to change her mind, but she had been very determined. Silently he had brought her to the place he hated, by a route he knew blindfolded and one he had followed daily, for months.

When she stood in front of that cold granite headstone that bore her name, she knew it had been wrong to come here in the first place, and deep in silence they had walked the long way back.

Only when they were back in his chamber had she broken her silence.

"It must- have been terrible for you."

Vincent didn't give an answer immediately, very carefully he draped his cloak on the back of a chair. It granted him some time, but he knew that the moment of truth had come, and finally he said, "Yes ... "

Tense he waited for her next question, but it was not a question, more a statement, one that she had made earlier.

"It has changed you Vincent."

And now he looked at her, he still saw present marks of the abuse, he still bore the wounds of that evening himself, and he still remembered what he had done to protect her from further harm. It hadn't been the first time he had killed that way. He had never been innocent when he had killed, but indeed, it was true, he had changed. They had taught him how to hate and that hate could only be stilled in blood. His voice sounded strangely hoarse when he began to speak. "Catherine, I can't tell you everything ... not yet, it is too painful still, but never had I dared to think that I would find peace again, until now, now I have found that peace. I never dared to think that I would find happiness, until now ... now I'm happy. Catherine ... all these months I have lived in hatred and not in love ... but the hate is dead ... and love is life ... I will never hate again. Finally I want to love ... love you Catherine ... now."

She felt his strong arms around her, she raised her eyes and looked straight into that sapphire blue infinity behind gold-coloured lashes. His eyes, and then his lips found hers, carefully.

His kiss was warm and tender, the first ... and his last words echoed in her mind,

'Finally I want to love ... love you ... now.'

Finally ... and she closed her eyes ...

*I cannot define my satisfaction, yet it is so
I cannot define my life, yet it is so
Is there any gift greater than this joy?
Can the soul offer a prayer more perfect
Than this tender silence?
~Walt Whitman.*

END

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