



Evil met

Humanity

My Destiny...

*I hold a beast,
an angel and
a madman in me...*

Dylan Thomas

*This fanzine is dedicated to Mr. Ron Perlman.
Not only for bringing Vincent to life and giving him humanity, beauty and credibility.
But also for inspiring me, and many others, to use our imagination and create our own stories,
for keeping the dream alive, still, after so many years...
And for writing "Easy Street" which inspired me for the scene at the Fall in this zine...*

Carine Cattellion

*In this city of night
In this city of millions
There are countless stories
This is one...of two lovers who shared a bond that changed their lives forever
It is my story
How compassion opened my heart to a world where goodness and truth
were stronger than hate or fear
Then, one day, she was taken from me by the forces of evil she had battled so bravely
And now, alone with her memory, yet armed with her courage,
I have sworn to fight those who would kill or harm or destroy
I hope that one day, I will find what all men seek to find..
My destiny.*

A faint, warm glow lit the world Below...a peaceful world where friendship, truth, and love ruled... a safe world... a secret world... his world.

Slowly, Vincent made his final patrol through the familiar tunnels before nightfall, eventually ending up at the Mirror Pool.

These days were close to an anniversary he wished he never had to remember. Yet, he had no choice. It was the anniversary of the greatest loss of his life, and at the same time, the birth of his most cherished treasure.

Sitting cross legged on the bank of the pool, he let his mind wander through his memories. There were happy memories that still made him smile, but then came the others. Flashes of himself losing control in a blind, feral rage, lashing out at the world around him. Flashes of Catherine being taken away. Flashes of months gone by in sheer agony, culminating in the most painful tragedy of his life, Catherine, dying in his arms.

It had been three years. Three long years in which he had healed from his ordeal and finally found some semblance of peace. Three years in which he had found love again...the love for his son. Yet his nightmares remained, telling a different story.

He rose and left this magical place, which mirrored both the world Above and his own.

On the way to his chamber, he passed Father's study and found the tunnel patriarch examining some old construction plans. Vincent came down the flight of metal stairs and greeted him softly,

"Father..."

The older man looked up, welcoming him with a gentle smile.

"Vincent... all is well?" he asked, taking off his reading glasses and observing his son as he approached.

"It is. All is quiet, nothing to worry about." Vincent answered, his eyes drifting over the papers scattered across Father's desk. It seemed there was never an end to the construction plans and books. Father's next question snapped him out of his thoughts.

"That is good to hear... Have the children returned?"

Vincent knew immediately where the question came from. Father was worried, as he always had been these past few years.

"Not yet... but I expect them soon."

Both men exchanged glances, ever since Vincent had decided that his son needed to know the world Above, Helpers had organized trips to the city for all the children who wished to participate.

"Did Jacob go?" Father asked, though he already knew the answer.

Vincent nodded. "Of course... so I should go."

After a brief goodbye, Vincent turned and headed off, eager to avoid any further questions that might throw him off balance, even if they were asked out of deep concern.

Hearing light footsteps approaching, he turned around just in time to see a three-year-old dash into his chamber.

"Dad!!"

In one fluid movement, Vincent caught the boy mid-run, sending an excited scream of joy echoing through the air. His son had just returned from a day out with one of the Helpers. The boy immediately started shouting, still bursting with excitement about his day. He loved the world Above just as much as

the world Below where his father lived, exploring both with the boundless eagerness only a child possesses.

“Peter took me to the zoo!...”

Vincent lifted his son into his chair and sat cross-legged before him. “I’m listening, Jacob.”

Words tumbled out in a rush as the boy eagerly tried to tell his father everything he had seen. For a three-year-old, his vocabulary was remarkably advanced. But suddenly, Jacob stopped and looked at his father, studying the familiar face. He tilted his head to the side, in exactly the same way his father always did. The boy didn't realize how much they were alike, but his father did.

“I saw a lion, Dad... he looked a bit like you.”

Little chubby hands caressed Vincent's face. Since Catherine’s death, Jacob was the only one allowed to touch him like that.



Silently, Vincent studied his son, waiting for the next question. He noted the blonde hair falling onto small shoulders in exactly the same way his own did, and the blue eyes so similar to his own. The boy was strong for his age, moving with that same feral grace, and he was incredibly agile. The older he grew, the more his heritage showed, yet he possessed human features, his mother’s legacy, which his father deeply cherished.

“He had fangs too... just like you, Dad...and claws, huge claws!” Those little hands touched Vincent's hands, showing absolutely no fear of the sharp, deadly nails. It was another touch Vincent could only

endure from his son, the boy had known nothing but love from these hands, unaware of what they were capable of.

“And he roared...”

Jacob looked up with an innocent, childish smile, completely unaware of the impact of his words.

When Vincent had first decided that Jacob should know both the world Below and the world Above, Father had warned him that questions would come at the most unexpected moments. Vincent had replied that he would provide answers. But now that the first questions were here, completely out of the blue, it struck him like lightning. He had expected the simple queries of a three-year-old, but this touched upon something far deeper. One day, he would have to tell the boy the truth.

“Can you roar too, Dad?” The admiration for the majestic animal resonated in his voice. Jacob already adored his father and his unique appearance. To him, the resemblance was simply awesome, and it made no difference at all.

Vincent took a deep breath and answered, his voice barely audible,

“Yes... I can.”

Jacob looked at his father, sensing a hint of reluctance in the brief reply. “How come I’ve never heard it?”

It took a massive effort for Vincent to remain seated. He searched for the right words to give a plausible answer to a three-year-old toddler.

“Dad?...”

“As I said...I can, but only when I am angry... or very upset.”

With a short nod, Jacob instantly changed the subject, eager to talk about the birds and the other animals he had seen.

From the corner of his eye, Vincent noticed Father standing at the entrance of his chamber. He rose and walked toward the older man, whose expression was filled with concern.

“I warned you, Vincent...”

Vincent nodded in agreement. “Yes, you did... and you were right. The questions have begun.”

“You answered with great care... but...” Father sighed, his eyes drifting to his grandson, who was rummaging through his toys, completely unaware of the worries troubling his father and grandfather.

“I know, Father... there will be other questions, and someday I will have to tell him who and what I am. For now, he is satisfied with my answers.”

Father looked at little Jacob and smiled.

“He is a remarkable child... he reminds me so much of you at that age.”

Silently, Vincent added,

“And he reminds me of his mother...”

It was still early, dawn had not yet broken, and her loft was shrouded in a dim twilight. Puzzled, she stared at the computer screen before her. A blinking red alert had caught her attention late last night, keeping her from sleep.

Slowly, she sipped her coffee and tried to figure out what was happening. The alert shouldn't be there. That file had been closed for years. She had attended the autopsy herself, there had been no doubt. Only questions, too many questions. And now, someone had accessed that very file within the last twenty-four hours.

Time had passed, digitalization had improved, and new security systems had been implemented, even for old, closed cases like this one. Since it had been her case, an alert was set to warn her every time someone opened the file... just in case.

Despite the ungodly hour, she reached for her phone and dialed a number she knew by heart. She listened to the ringing until a sleepy, irritated voice answered.

"Who the hell do you think you are, waking me at this hour?"

DA Joe Maxwell was not amused by the call. But he would surely be wide awake the moment she told him who she was and why she was calling.

"Joe... it's Diana... we need to talk."

Silence greeted her before he asked, sounding fully awake, "Bennett? What's wrong?"

"I got a red alert on a case," she replied cautiously. She couldn't be careful enough, given everything they had been through.

"Which case?" he asked, a trace of worry in his voice.

She knew she had hooked him, he wouldn't rest until he knew every single detail.

"Not over the phone." The warning in her voice was unmistakable.

Joe didn't need any further explanation. "Okay. Give me thirty minutes."

Exactly thirty minutes later, her doorbell rang and she let him in. Unshaved, his dark curls a mess, and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, he looked nothing like the District Attorney he was. And he looked deeply concerned.

"Tell me," he demanded, without wasting any time.

"The Chandler/Moreno file."

He stared at her, incredulous, and shook his head. "Nope...Impossible. That file is closed." A slight tremble in his voice betrayed his true feelings about that particular case.

She nodded and pointed at the blinking red notification on her computer screen.

"I know, Joe. But the evidence is right here. Thanks to an IT friend, all my cases are secured. If anyone looks at them, I get notified. Within the last twenty-four hours, someone accessed the Chandler/Moreno file."

Joe stared at the alert, trying to organize his thoughts, revulsed by the fact that this mess was back on the table.

"This sucks, Bennett...," and these softly spoken words carried a hidden warning. Neither of them had expected this, and he realized danger could now be lurking around every corner.

"I know, Joe...," she said, handing him a fresh cup of coffee. "So, what now?"

Joe shrugged, his brow furrowed. "I need to think. Do you know who read the file?"

She gave a mirthless laugh. "No... that would be too easy. I guess we'll have to dig."

"Yeah, but we have to be careful. Diana, this is bad. Extremely bad." He sounded deeply troubled.

Both fell silent for a moment, weighing their options, until Joe suddenly asked, "Do you think we should inform him?"

Diana looked up, knowing instantly whom Joe meant. She walked over to the window and stared out at the grey sky, carefully considering her answer.

"No. It's too early. We need to know more first. It would only worry him."

"Have you seen him lately?" Joe wanted to know.

Diana remained at the window, staring outside. It took her a moment to answer, as if she already regretted what she was about to say.

"Not really... It's been months since our last meeting."

"How was he doing?"

"He needed a long time to recover... and he has the baby to take care of."

"Baby?" Joe countered, pointing out the time that had already passed. "That boy must be three years old by now."

"I know. The anniversary is coming up, which makes me wonder, who would suddenly be interested in a case that seemed so obvious?"

Joe stared at her, his eyes locked on her face as if trying to read her mind for answers. Then, slowly and thoughtfully, he gave voice to his own doubts.

"Too obvious, you mean?"

She shrugged and began to pace around her loft. Outside, the first light of dawn was breaking over the city. A faint sense of relief washed over her, knowing she wasn't the only one questioning what had happened in the past.

"I don't know... The thought crossed my mind."

Joe narrowed his eyes, observing her every move. He let a long moment pass before he spoke again. "The powers that be were incredibly strong and convincing back then. We have to be more than careful. We have to watch our every step." he said, almost more to himself than to her.

Diana turned toward him, took another sip of her coffee, and replied, "I know, Joe. But we can't just let this go unnoticed. There has to be a reason."

"I'm sure there is, maybe even a logical one. I'll look into the official files... and a few others." Those last words slipped out hesitantly, as if he hadn't really meant to say them aloud.

Surprised, Diana looked at Joe. She remembered him having doubts and suspicions back then, but she had never expected him to have a hidden agenda. Yet he did, proving that this case had been, and still was, just as important to him.

"What do you mean, 'a few others'? It sounds like you harbored suspicions of your own."

"I kept my own files on the case back then," Joe admitted. "No one could be trusted. I just wanted to make sure nothing was missed."

She understood all too well what he meant. He had done exactly the same thing she had, protecting himself in a case that hit far too close to home. For neither of them had this case ever truly been closed.

"I get it. I still have all my notes, my clippings, the photos... everything I found back then. I'll go through them and see where it leads us."

At Joe's surprised look, she added bluntly, "Hey, I'm an investigator, Joe. You know how I work."

He nodded. "A damn good investigator... I know... Watch your back, Bennett... My gut feeling is telling me that something is wrong..."

With those words he left, leaving her behind with too many questions.

Immediately, she dug into her old notes and reports, spreading the papers all over her floor, bringing it all back... She hadn't forgotten a single detail, it was all still vivid and clear in her mind. Then, she opened the official case file. Because her original investigation had been so thorough, she spotted the discrepancies at first glance.

From what she recalled, the official records differed from the initial ones. Reports had been adjusted, altered, or deleted... Someone had tampered with the file. It was clearly intended to distract attention from something...or someone. It set off all her alarm bells. What was going on? What were 'they' trying to hide, and who? If only she knew who had accessed this file in the past 24 hours...She dialed her IT friend's number. Maybe, just maybe...

When the phone on the other side was picked up, she immediately blurted out, "Can you see who opened a closed file?"

"Yes...", came a short, rather absentminded answer.

She sighed inwardly. This had to be the easy part. "The Chandler/Moreno case..."

"I'll call you back..."

Nervously she waited. Her IT friend had never let her down, so she was sure he would come up with something. When her phone finally started to ring, she eagerly picked up the receiver...

"What are you into?" The voice on the other end of the line sounded alarmed.

He knew she was in law enforcement, which was why his reaction startled her. The guy was usually so completely immersed in his digital world that most of the outside world passed him by unnoticed, but right now, he was panicking.

"Why?" she asked, almost breathless, her heart pounding in her throat.

"There is no name... only a code..." and that sounded ominous.

"And what does it say? Man, please! Don't make this so hard!" she almost shouted at him, even though he didn't deserve that kind of treatment.

"US Marshals... you know, those ghost guys..."

And then the line went dead.

Speechless, she stared at the sea of papers in front of her, scanning the photos, recalling the memories, and finding herself with more and more questions. She had to inform Joe.



At the DA's office, Joe had a lot on his mind. His desk was cluttered with case files, arrest reports, briefs, transcripts, and all sorts of notes on current cases, a well-organized chaos in which he could find his way blindfolded. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to concentrate on them. Fortunately, he wasn't expected in court, so he opened the Chandler/Moreno file on his computer and started reading. As he read, he frowned. The more he read, the more nervous he became. He ignored his erratically ringing phone completely, totally engrossed in the text, growing more anxious by the minute.

Finally, he dug into the lowest drawer of his desk in search of his old, self-made file. Instantly, he knew something was wrong. Was it a cover-up, or was it something else? And if so... what could it be?

He noticed that lab reports were missing, some documents had been modified, and photos from the Carousel murders were gone. But what caught his attention most was the report on the fingerprints found on Catherine's balcony. It was simply gone. Someone had been messing around with this file.

At the back of his mind, a dreadful explanation began to take root...and he wondered if Diana had come to the same conclusion. What if they had stumbled upon something that could never be brought out into the open? A sudden thought flashed through his mind, but it was so unbelievable that he dismissed it at once.

Going through all those reports and photos over and over again brought back memories of that terrible time.

Moreno, his boss at the time, had been on the payroll of one of the most malignant villains Joe had ever known. It had all begun with an old law school buddy who had given him a ledger filled with information on major city contracts before trying to flee the country. But his car was blown up, he died, and Joe was wounded and admitted to the hospital.

The ledger and its explosive content had turned out to be a threat to powerful, wealthy men who wanted to save their reputations, their lives, and their money. Lives were ruined and many people died...Cathy, Moreno, Elliot Burch, and so many others. Even though several of them had been far from innocent, they were still people, or at least criminals who should have been brought to court.

And then, suddenly, the name Vincent came to mind. He had played a part in those killings too. However, conclusive evidence was never found against him, it had always remained a matter of suspicion and assumption. Joe had never met the man, he only knew he existed. Cathy had always been rather secretive about him, as had Elliot, and even Diana. Joe still wondered who this man really was. He realized that with everything happening now, it was time to tear down the final secrets. He had to talk to Vincent, with or without Diana, he had to face this man.

They had scheduled their almost daily appointments late in the evening at her loft. They had to be careful, there was a lot, if not everything, that needed to be kept between them.

Both had come to the same conclusion, the file had clearly been tampered with, by God knows who, and it did nothing to ease their nerves. They had meticulously sorted out what exactly had been changed or removed, and it all came down to one name, one person... Vincent... again. There was no turning back now. He needed to be informed... he needed to be warned.

Joe rubbed his burning eyes and said, "Diana... who the hell is this guy? I still don't know. He was there when Cathy died, he was there when Moreno died, and he was there when Elliot died... and I *still* don't know who he is. Everyone who was involved is completely silent about him...even you!"

Silently, she watched Joe vent his anger, and she quietly explained, "There are reasons, Joe..."

"To hell with reasons...I want answers! Now!" Joe snapped. "I can't keep driving in the dark, knowing nothing. Our most valuable witness is a ghost. And he's not just a witness, Diana, he killed people! I..."

She cut him off instantly with a tone that brooked no contradiction, making her point fiercely clear.

"Joe! Calm down. I don't need your accusations. I know what he did... and so does he. I will see what I can do, but for the time being, you'll have to be satisfied with what I can tell you."

Joe looked up, surprised that, at long last, she was willing to reveal something. He swallowed his anger and said, "Okay... I'm listening."

Diana hesitated, starting to pace the floor. "Joe, you have to realize that this is strictly confidential. Even more than that... he can only survive through the trust of others, so I need to be absolutely sure of your intentions."

Baffled, Joe looked at her. "Do you really think I am going to bring this out into the open? By now, you should know that I can be trusted..."

She studied Joe's face. She knew he could be trusted, she knew he had seen a lot that couldn't be explained, and she knew he had remained silent about it, almost as if he had always suspected there were secrets left untold.

Taking a deep breath, she finally began to speak.

"I found Vincent... He collapsed on Catherine's grave the night Elliot Burch died. Afterward, once he had recovered from his injuries, he told me that he had met with Elliot several times... in his office, at the Carousel, at the Compass Rose... So you were right back then, Joe. Elliot knew what had happened at the Carousel. Due to Gabriel's manipulations, Elliot was forced to betray Vincent, but at the very last moment, he realized he had made the wrong call. He warned Vincent that it was a setup and tried to save him from being killed. He succeeded, but he paid for it with his own life when the Compass Rose was blown up. Vincent escaped and found his way to Catherine's grave, ready to die there himself... but I was there, too. I brought him here and took care of him for three days. He was severely wounded, disoriented... dangerous..."

She paused briefly, leaving the exact meaning of *dangerous hanging* in the air, but she gave Joe no time to interrupt and pressed on.

"I took care of him and I guarded him... with my gun in my hand, scared to death of him. When he had somewhat recovered, I got to know him. I began to understand him, and I began to understand Catherine... So yes, I *do* protect him. He was the reason I requested downtime from the case. His grief came too close... it all came too close."

The silence that followed left them both to their own thoughts. Joe, completely overwhelmed by this sudden revelation about Vincent, needed a moment to regain his composure.

"I want to meet him, Diana. First I need answers to my questions... Only then can we proceed."

She studied him closely before responding. "I'll talk to him. And remember, Joe... Catherine loved this man. And he was the one who brought her home."

A few days later, the time came to unearth the final secrets...

Joe's nerves were on edge. Haunted by the unknown, he dreaded what he was about to uncover. He had once called this man a killer on a spree, having seen the victims, studied the case files, and stared at the gruesome crime scene photos, he had judged him without a second thought.

But Diana had seen him differently, as Cathy's protector, a guardian angel who kept her safe, a savior to those he loved. And then there was Cathy herself. She had loved him. Knowing her, Joe knew he couldn't be a ruthless monster. He had to be someone extraordinary, otherwise, she would never have given him her devotion or guarded his secrets so fiercely. She must have had her reasons. And, of course, there was the little boy to consider. Joe was determined to discover who, or what, this man was. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know the answers, but he had come too far to turn back.

Diana had kept her word. She had approached Vincent, and he had agreed to the meeting. The chosen rendezvous sent a chill straight down Joe's spine, the oppressive darkness and dead silence only heightening his anxiety.

They were to meet at the park's abandoned carousel, a bleak, forgotten place, illuminated only by the faint glow of a nearby streetlamp filtering through shattered, grime-covered windows. Suddenly, vivid memories of the crime scene flooded his mind, butchered bodies, pools of blood, and at the center of the carnage, his boss, Moreno. While the official evidence pointed squarely at Elliot Burch, neither Joe nor Diana believed it. It had been a ruthless frame-up, one that had claimed far too many victims and pushed both of them to the brink of losing faith in the justice system.

Suddenly, he felt a presence nearby, a faint rustling, a soft footfall, the sound of quiet breathing. He realized Vincent had to be there.

A deep, somewhat gravelly voice, low and patient, drifted from somewhere out of the darkness.

"Joe Maxwell?..."

"Yes... I assume you are Vincent..."

"I am..."

Safely hidden in the shadows, as always, Vincent watched Joe Maxwell nervously pacing back and forth.

"Diana said you could be trusted..." Vincent said quietly.

Joe froze. He turned toward the dark corner where the voice had originated.

"If she says so...", he replied, before continuing grimly, "Fuck, man... Why do I have to talk to a shadow? I want to face the people I'm talking to..."

"I have my reasons. I might frighten you." Again, that surprisingly gentle, reassuring tone that caught Joe off guard. It seemed impossible that a voice so gentle could belong to the monster behind all those mutilated bodies.

Still far from reassured, Joe blurted out, "Frighten me?! I am already frightened! All those victims... all that blood... I've been to those crime scenes. I've seen the photos. I have questions... I'm losing my mind imagining things... filling in the blanks with nightmares."

"You are afraid," Vincent replied. His tone was weary and resigned, treating Joe's outburst like a conclusion drawn purely out of habit.

"Yes, Shouldn't I be?"

Another rustling sound made Joe look up. Vincent had moved toward the dim light of the streetlamp, though he carefully kept himself shrouded in the dark. He was well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and a solid build, dressed in a long, dark cloak, his head covered by a hood that concealed almost everything. It was an imposing, ominous sight.

Then, that deep voice spoke again, calm and steady. "Joe... I will reveal the truth. I owe you that much. Yet, it is a harsh and undeniable truth."

"I still want to hear it... because of Cathy."

"You loved her." It was a simple statement, spoken from Vincent's own experience. Seeing the grief wash over Joe's face, Vincent knew he had guessed the man's feelings for Catherine correctly.

Silently, Joe admitted what he had felt, and still felt, for Catherine. He remembered his crushing grief after her death, how he had wept for her and kept his sorrow entirely to himself. Diana had sensed it too, confronting him right after the autopsy, but he had never confirmed it. Until now... he understood the unspoken rule of this encounter, if he wanted Vincent's absolute truth, he had to offer his own.

For the first time, he said it out loud. "Yes... yes, I loved her. But I always knew there was someone else. Someone she loved more than life itself, a secret she guarded fiercely. That someone was you. So tell me... who the hell are you?" he almost spat the words out.

"Part of me is man," Vincent confessed softly, the words hanging heavily in the air, a prelude to a darker truth.

With that enigmatic answer, Joe knew instantly who was responsible for those butchered bodies. The district attorney in him revolted. He had always had his suspicions, but now he was certain, yet he dreaded what he might see.

"And the part of you that isn't? Do you even know what your victims looked like?"

"I know..." Vincent whispered, a tremor of agony in his voice. "Their faces haunt my dreams..."

The sheer weight of Vincent's despair left Joe speechless. Throughout his career, Joe had interrogated countless killers. He had questioned men who killed out of desperation, monsters who had slaughtered in blind furies, cold-blooded psychopaths, and professional hitmen. Yet none of them had ever sounded like this. Not a single one had possessed a remorse so profound, not even those broken by their own guilt and remorse.

"Then why?..."

"It's the way I protected Catherine... it's the way I protect the people I love..."

Vincent knew Catherine had always trusted Joe. Elliot Burch had trusted him too, as did Diana and even Father. He had no reason to doubt the man. It was Joe who had sent the SWAT teams to the building where Gabriel had resided, and it was Joe who had quietly cleaned up the aftermath. Vincent made his decision without hesitation.

Without a word, he stepped into the beam of light from the streetlamp and pulled back his hood, keeping his hands clearly in view as he faced Joe. He watched the shock, terror, and awe wash over the man's eyes.

"This is why I live in darkness. This is why I hide. You couldn't have imagined me, could you, Joe?"

Looking down at his hands, Vincent continued, the deep pain and self-loathing echoing in his voice.

"I have murdered. I have killed with nothing but these hands. There were many victims... too many... and I have to live with that. My entire life, I have been aware of my dark side. I have no choice but to try and accept that part of myself, because it makes me who, and *what*, I am. The guilt and shame that comes with it are a burden I must carry until my dying day. Catherine knew that. She accepted it, and she loved me unconditionally."

The raw confession left him spent, and he fell silent, struggling to claw back his shattered composure. To lay himself bare like this felt completely unnatural. These were the sacred, tormented truths he had only ever shared with Father or Catherine. It was easily one of the most agonizing moments of his existence, but in this heavy silence of the park, he knew it was necessary.



Joe regained his speech and asked, "You said that part of you is a man... but that other part?..."

"I don't know. I will never know. I was born... and I survived..."

For a while, they fell silent, each looking uneasily at the other. Joe was both bewildered and curious as he studied the strange face before him. He noted the broad nose, the cleft upper lip, the saffron-colored stubble on his cheeks, and, with each spoken word, a glimpse of sharp fangs. A long, tawny mane fell over broad shoulders and down his back. Something feral emanated from him.

But what caught him completely off guard were those deep-set blue eyes, eyes that revealed a pure human soul carrying an immense burden. Looking into them, Joe finally understood why Catherine had loved this man.

Vincent watched the understanding sink in. He saw the acceptance, and he broke the silence once more. His head lowered, hiding behind the golden veil of his mane. His voice was a raspy murmur, vibrating with a tightly coiled pain. He knew he had to finish this. Joe had seen the bodies he had left behind, after all, he had stood in the blood of his victims.

"But there is also a much darker side, Joe. It is terrifying and shameful. When that side takes over, I am lost... lost to myself. And in my eyes, you will see where my demons hide. It is violent and lethal. Only Catherine could save me from that madness. She could rescue me from that deepest darkness."

He raised his chin, forcing Joe to look directly into the storm in his eyes. He watched the primitive fear flash across Joe's face again, but when he spoke next, his voice was remarkably controlled.

"You have been here before."

"Yes... it was a crime scene. Are you going to tell me what happened back then?" Joe asked, hoping he had heard the worst of it by now. He couldn't have been more wrong.

"I was supposed to meet Elliot here... and it turned out to be a settling of scores between evil and money, with Gabriel holding the reins. Elliot was betrayed by one of his own bodyguards. Moreno's guard tried to shoot him, and I... I prevented it. Moreno saw me and came after me. I took his life... with my bare hands. Yet, he wounded me. The NYPD never found the blood traces I left, but one man did, the killer Gabriel sent after me. He forced his way into my world and killed my friends. He came to kill me, but he failed, leaving a trail that led straight back to Gabriel. I brought him to where Catherine died, so Gabriel would know I was hunting him. I had to leave my own safe shelter, my home, in order to keep the people I love safe. The war was on... and it was my war."

Joe was baffled, but he also saw what this confession had cost the man. He saw the pain and the raw reality of what Vincent had to face, and he swallowed his own rising emotions.

"So the blood on Elliot's coat...", Joe murmured, the pieces clicking into place. "It was yours?"

Vincent nodded, deliberately averting his eyes. He was terrified of what else his gaze might expose.

"Yes. I barely made it back alive. My father had to remove two bullets."

Joe stared into the gloom, struggling to digest the sheer scale of the horror.

"I think I'm beginning to understand," he whispered, though deep down, he knew no ordinary man ever could.

They gathered around the large library table in Father's study, the four of them, Father, Diana, Joe, and Vincent. It was Diana who had insisted on this meeting. It was time to explain exactly what was going on, why Joe's meeting with Vincent had been so critical, and why they needed to warn the community down Below. There was simply too much at stake. For the very first time, Joe had entered the secret world beneath the city streets.

Alternatingly, Diana and Joe told their parts of the story, unveiling a series of deeply disturbing recent incidents. They started with the red alert on her computer, the missing evidence in the Chandler/Moreno file, and the mysterious reference to the US Marshals.

Finally, Diana put their darkest suspicion into words, and it was as if a bomb had dropped. "She must still be alive."

"No!" Vincent was on his feet instantly. The faint vibration of a feral growl echoed in that single word.

Every fiber of his soul desperately craved that miracle, but his logical mind held him prisoner to a brutal certainty... she had died in his arms. He had carried her body home, he had grieved at her grave and he was still grieving.

Before anyone could react to his outburst, a frantic cry echoed from the nearby tunnel.

"Dad!!!"

A blonde toddler dashed into the study, screaming for his father. Vincent immediately dropped to his knees, opening his arms to the clearly terrified little boy. He embraced him tenderly, held him close, his voice instantly shifting to a velvet, soothing whisper.

"It's okay, Jacob... nothing is wrong. It's okay."

"But I... I... heard... you... I... I felt..." The words were broken by hiccups and heavy sobs.

With a worried sigh, Vincent gently answered his son, wiping away the tears still streaming down his chubby cheeks. "I know you did... but I am all right."

At last, the boy seemed to accept the brief explanation and listened attentively to his father's next words.

"I am going to take you to Mary. Father and I need to talk to Joe and Diana. It is very important, Jacob. You will feel that. But whatever happens, whatever you feel, know that I am safe here."

With that, Vincent rose, took his son's small hand in his own, and together they left the chamber.

Back in the study, the remaining ones listened to the fierce protests of a three-year-old dead-set on proving his independence. Despite the grim nature of their meeting, the boy's stubbornness coaxed a warm smile from Father.

"Dad... I can go alone... I'm a big boy," came the clear child's voice, his grief already forgotten.

"I know you are a big boy," Vincent's deep rumble replied, "But I am walking with you anyway. I have a message for Mary."

As the dialogue faded into the labyrinth of tunnels, a heavy silence settled over Father, Joe, and Diana.

"Jacob is a remarkable child," Father said lovingly, the pride of a grandfather evident in his voice.

Diana had only seen the boy as an infant, and Joe had never seen him at all. Both were astonished. They had never expected such an exceptional child. A typical three-year-old toddler they could handle, but a three-year-old with such mature reasoning was beyond comprehension.

Seeing Vincent as a father added a completely new dimension to him. He was clearly a loving, warm, and sensitive parent. The sight of that chubby little child's hand enveloped in that powerful hand, armed

with deadly sharp claws, left Joe mesmerized. If only the boy knew what those hands were capable of. Yet, at the same time, Joe began to understand Catherine better and better.

A brief moment later, Vincent returned. He dropped heavily into his chair and looked around the table.

"Jacob feels what I feel," he explained briefly to Joe and Diana, while exchanging a worried glance with Father.

In the silence that followed, Vincent braced himself for what was to come. It wouldn't be easy. He had to restrain his emotions, or at least try to, for the sake of his son. But he had no choice, he had to hear what Joe and Diana had uncovered.

"I need to know the truth... if it *is* the truth," he said, emphasizing the last words clearly. It was more than obvious that he had his doubts.

Joe was the one to answer. "We believe it is the truth... otherwise, we wouldn't be here."

The two men exchanged a long look, Vincent seemed to accept the answer and he gave a tight reluctant nod, "Then I need to hear it."

Joe nodded, realizing he had to choose his words with extreme care. "Diana discovered that the person who accessed the file was a US Marshal."

"They handle the Witness Protection Program... is that what you are suggesting?" Father interrupted.

Together, Joe and Diana confirmed, "Yes."

"It is the only explanation that makes sense... and it is the only acceptable one," Diana added, continuing immediately, "You know my investigations were thorough, both in the Chandler case and the Moreno case. Joe and I realized... no, we knew from the beginning, that these cases were connected. We discovered bits and pieces, but it was impossible to prove anything. Only when Joe cleared out the Gabriel estate did we find most of the answers. By then, too many people were dead, and we had no leads, no proof. The case was permanently closed... until now. We can't ignore this. There is too much at stake."

Joe took over, acutely aware of the impact their statements were having on Vincent, his son, Father, and the entire world Below.

"As the DA, I can question the Marshals about it. There has to be a reason why one of them accessed that file. Maybe the upcoming anniversary has something to do with it, or maybe something else came up. I don't know. But US Marshals are incredibly discreet, very careful about those under their protection. Reading a file out of curiosity is completely out of the question. And there's more, several reports are simply missing, and some have even been rewritten. The file is a disaster, and everything that is missing points straight to you, Vincent. Whoever is responsible knew exactly what they were doing and why. They might be covering something up. So, yes... it *is* possible that Cathy is still alive."

Vincent had been pacing back and forth in an attempt to hide the raw emotion written all over his face. His breathing was labored, and when he spoke, his voice was choked with tears.

"She died in my arms...I..." He faltered and turned back toward the table, his face stained with tears.

"Are you telling me that it didn't happen? I felt her life slipping through my fingers..." His fangs glinted dangerously in the soft candlelight.

"Vincent..." Father tried to cut through his son's escalating fury, but it was useless. The walls Vincent had built around his heart were collapsing, buried under a sudden, overwhelming tidal wave of emotion.

"Are you telling me that all that sadness... all that grief was for nothing?!" A soft, low growl followed these desperate words, but the final blow had yet to come. "Are you telling me that I killed all those

men... in vain?! The weight of what I did... the blood on my hands... the guilt I carry every single second is *mine*, and mine alone!" This time, his fury was unmistakable, finally unleashing both his profound grief and the heavy toll his victims had taken on his soul. The old, careful restraint so characteristic of him was entirely gone, shattered to pieces by these incomprehensible revelations.

The silence that followed was leaden. Father went to Vincent at once, trying to comfort him by reassuring him that there had to be an explanation for all of this, and that they needed patience. Slowly, his son regained control, silently cursing himself for losing his composure in front of Diana and Joe.



Joe and Diana were both deeply shaken, they had never expected such a volatile outburst. Joe gestured toward the entrance of Father's study,

"Maybe we should talk later..." and he began to rise, but Vincent stopped him.

"No. I need the truth... now!" His voice was still rough, not fully under his command.

His blue eyes flared with a chaotic mix of grief, anger, and guilt, all breaking through at once. The horrifying memories, the inconsolable sorrow, and the weight of what he had done fought their way out of the dark, overwhelming his senses until he lashed out with a savage snarl, his bare fangs flashing as his fractured soul screamed for answers.

Joe remembered the revelations Vincent had made at the Carousel. Now, witnessing a part of it unfold right in front of him, he was terrified. Yet, he also knew he was neither the enemy nor the threat. Part of him understood the reaction. If he were confronted with such tragedy and injustice, he would be furious too.

Diana remained calmness personified as she began to reassure Vincent. She remembered all too well the days he had spent at her loft, completely out of control while healing from his wounds. She also remembered how he had saved her from being killed by drug addicts when she first arrived at the Park Entrance. His words back then had been loaded with contempt and horror, because she, too, had witnessed his dark side.

"No, Vincent.. .not for nothing...," Diana said, "Some evil force made you.. .made all of us believe that she was dead."

Joe overcame his fear and added, "We don't know why, and we don't know who. That is exactly what we need to find out."

Vincent regained his composure, though he was still on a razor's edge. Defeated, he shook his head and demanded rudely, "Then do it."

Father, who had remained silent, watchful, and deeply concerned, chimed in.

"I think we need to know more. If it is true, as you two suspect, then this must be revealed and resolved. Maybe... just maybe..." He left the sentence unfinished, but they all knew exactly what he meant.

After a brief farewell, Diana and Joe left the tunnels, promising to return once they had discovered more.

"I have to go see Jacob... he..," Vincent said, making an attempt to leave Father's study. He needed to get out of this place, it felt as if these familiar surroundings were suffocating him. But before he could even set foot on the metal stairs, Father held him back.



"No, you're not... For God's sake, Vincent, look at you... you are completely out of control. The boy wouldn't understand," Father said empathetically. He knew he had to, at all costs, make Vincent realize that he would only frighten Jacob in his current state. He hoped his son would eventually understand why he was being held back.

"But he will be upset," Vincent resisted. He remained where he stood, his back turned toward his father, clearly ready to leave at a moment's notice.

"Just like you are, Vincent... I am worried." As Father spoke those last words, he bracingly expected the usual rejection, the insistence that there was no need to worry. Instead, Vincent remained silent, which

was the most disturbing reaction of all. A quiet, introverted Vincent could be far more dangerous than a rebellious one who vented his frustrations, sometimes even violently. This grim silence was ominous. Yet, no rejection came.

Vincent let Father's words sink in before he answered. His voice was barely audible when he finally spoke. "So am I, Father."

Father walked over to Vincent and gently placed his hand over his son's, which was tightly gripping the stair rail.

"Tell me, Vincent..." Father asked softly.

Vincent lowered his head, desperately seeking much-needed shelter. It was abundantly clear to him that he had to confide in his father, not only for Jacob's welfare, but for his own. He felt as though he were drowning in a pool of overwhelming emotions. If he did not master them, he risked burdening his little boy with feelings the child could never understand. Vincent knew he was not himself, he had lost the kind, empathetic, and reliable man he used to be. His recent short-temperedness frightened even him, and he desperately wanted to prevent another violent breakdown.

"I am afraid, Father... everything is slipping through my fingers like sand. I only feel anger, rage, and a deep sadness that I cannot control, a sadness that threatens to completely take over at times."

Trying to give voice to his chaotic feelings, he pushed himself away from the stair rail and began to pace the study, trying to sort through his thoughts.

"You mean.. .like before?" Father's fear was obvious. He dreaded the prospect of another dark period looming around the corner. He watched Vincent stride through the room, apparently in search of something, most likely his own peace of mind, his much-needed tranquility.

"No, Father... this is different. It's a sadness I have never felt before. An immense grief... a grief I cannot cope with. I go to her grave at night, hoping to comprehend these feelings, but all that is left are my tears. I still have so much to say to her. I still condemn myself for losing our bond." His gravelly voice sounded even rougher than usual.

"The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words unsaid and deeds left undone...,(*)" Father said softly, knowing his son would understand the profound meaning of those words.

"There is so much truth in those words, Father... but no words can lessen this grief. And then there are the nightmares. All that bloodshed, all that violence...haunting, terrifying, and violent. It keeps me from sleeping."

Vincent could barely manage to hide the raw pain emanating from his words.

"You must watch yourself carefully, Vincent... your condition was already poor when this all started. You have had to endure too much, both physically and emotionally, and you haven't recuperated well. I know this has all been very demanding, and it still is. But it is not only you I am concerned about, there is Jacob, too.

"I am afraid that only when you can master your own emotions can you go to your son," Father said softly yet firmly.

He hoped these words would not antagonize his son. He understood Vincent all too well, but there was also that little boy to consider, a child who had no idea what his father was going through, yet sensed it all. There was no suitable way to explain to a three-year-old that this was his fate simply because he was Vincent's son.



Vincent was not even offended by these words, he knew they were spoken out of concern and love. He replied,

"I know, Father... but it feels as if I am failing him now. He needs me. He needs me to reassure him, yet I cannot go to him because of my own turmoil. It is unfair!" For a moment, his almost legendary stubbornness surfaced, only to vanish as quickly as smoke in the wind.

"It is, Vincent... but making him even more upset than he already is will only make things worse. It will cause you even more pain and grief, and you have truly had your share, Vincent." Father concluded.

Defeated once again, Vincent sank into a chair. He bowed his head, once more hiding behind his long golden mane, his own personal shelter. His voice sounded deeply hurt as he tried to explain his feelings.

"I know, Father... I thought... I hoped that all of this was behind me. My physical wounds have healed, yet the wounds in my soul have not. They are more profound than ever before. Not even my love for Jacob can ease this pain. It hurts... more than the night she died in my arms. And I cannot handle this pain."

"Don't turn away from this pain, Vincent... let it wash over you. Let it even crush you. You loved her with all you had, and now you are still grieving because of that love. Grief is the deepest proof that love existed, it carves through you and leaves you hollow. It feels like a wound that never fully heals. Your love for her will not disappear, it will transform into memories, poems, music, and into Jacob. That is the proof that something beautiful existed and mattered. Grief comes in waves, some days are heavier than others, but that is how it works. Allow yourself to feel it, and accept both the loss and the love. Honor it, because it is sacred.(*)"

Fighting his own tears, Father embraced his son tightly, feeling just how much Vincent needed this unspoken comfort.

They both remained silent, allowing those last words to offer some comfort. After a while, Vincent recovered somewhat, took a deep breath, and asked,

"Father... what if they are right? What if she is still alive?"

Father sighed, took off his glasses, and rubbed his tired eyes. "I don't know... if, and only if, it is true..."

"Then I need to find her....," came the soft reply, barely a whisper, yet filled with determination.

Father knew at once that they had another long and difficult path ahead of them. He had heard that kind of determination before, when Vincent had been desperate to save his son. And Father also knew that he would be there, every step of the way, for his son... and his grandson.

Father got up, took his cane, and placed a hand on Vincent's shoulder. "Come... we will go see Jacob together."

No further encouragement was needed.

They found the boy in the nursery with Mary. He was huddled in a corner with his arms wrapped around his knees, a frightened look in his blue eyes, and tears glistening on his chubby cheeks.

Mary looked worried, she had been unable to comfort the little boy. He had simply refused her reassuring embrace and comforting words. He only wanted his father.

Vincent took his son into a tight embrace, his own heart aching as he saw and felt his little boy's profound sorrow.

"It is all right to be worried, Jacob... but I told you that I would be safe, and I was. Look, Father was with me."

"But... but... you were angry... and sad." the boy murmured, his voice trembling.

"Yes, I was. Diana and Joe had something to tell me that made me sad... and angry. It was not their fault, yet they had to tell me."

Jacob crawled onto his father's lap, snuggling close to him and almost disappearing into that reassuring, fatherly embrace. He was so exhausted that it didn't take long for him to fall asleep, with Vincent watching over him like a guardian. A deep nightly silence descended upon the World Below, leaving everyone alone with their own thoughts and feelings, keeping both Father and Vincent from sleep.

Joe was still confused after the meeting with Vincent, shaken by his raw reaction. The man's emotional state was obviously still a wreck after Catherine's death. For his son's sake, he had to be strong, yet it was clear that Vincent, too, was a victim of Gabriel's evil mind, with his son being his only remaining reason to survive.

Seeing the little boy had been a shock. It was the first time Joe had seen Catherine's son. He was a beautiful child, there was little physical resemblance to his father, and all the more to his mother, yet it was undeniable that Vincent was his father. Those same blue eyes, the same intense gaze, the same grace... he was unmistakably a very intelligent child, a trait he had inherited from both his parents. His verbal expression had been extraordinary as well, another legacy from both Catherine and Vincent.

Deep in thought, Joe left his office. The phone call he had to make required no witnesses or potential eavesdroppers in the crowded district office, so he went outside.

A short, almost snapped greeting came through the line, "Hello..."

"DA Joe Maxwell... I need to talk to you," Joe said, deliberately keeping his tone superficial.

"Why?..."

Inwardly, Joe cursed. This would not be the easiest conversation. He decided to sound just as cold and impersonal as the man on the other end, who had no business knowing how deeply involved Joe truly was.

"Because it is important."

A heavy silence followed, as if the man on the other side of the line were weighing Joe's words. When the answer finally came, it was just as short and cold as before, yet it seemed to Joe as though he were hearing an entirely different voice.

"Seventeen hundred hours. Empire Diner on 10th." The man sounded distinctly military. Then, the line went dead.

Well before five p.m., Joe entered the diner, found a table in a far corner, and took a seat with his back against the wall. At five p.m. sharp, a man walked in. He looked so remarkably ordinary that Joe knew at once he had to be a Marshal.

His instincts were correct. The man sat down at his table, and only after the waitress had filled their coffee cups did he speak.

"Why do you want to talk to us?" It was clearly a different voice from the ones on the phone, yet just as cold and distant.

"I need answers... It is rather delicate, I'm afraid," Joe explained briefly.

The man just looked at him, showing not the slightest hint of emotion. Joe continued,

"Why would someone look into a closed file?"

The inquiring gaze that met his made him suspect that the man in front of him already knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Information, maybe?...", the man offered.

That was something Joe could have come up with himself, he didn't need a Marshal to give him such a ridiculous answer.

"In a case where everyone died?..." To Joe's own ears, the question sounded absurd.

"Then there is no need."

"My thoughts exactly. Yet, the file was accessed... by one of your people...", Joe stated flatly.

The man took a sip of his coffee and commented, "Dishwater."

Joe grinned. On that, they could agree. Yet his question was still unanswered, and he was pretty sure he would get no real answers today.

"I'll call you." the Marshal said. And with that, the man left.

Meanwhile, Joe had been introduced to the World Below and its unique communication system. So, late that evening, he waited at the Park Entrance, deeply aware that Cathy too, had made her way to this very entrance so many times before.

Suddenly, the steel door slid open and Vincent appeared, holding a burning torch in his left hand.

"You wanted to see me..."

Joe nodded and explained, "Yes... there is some news."

Vincent hesitated briefly, studying Joe for a moment. Then he stepped aside and said, "Come with me, Joe... we need to talk."

"But..."

"Please, Joe... it is important." Vincent insisted gently.

"Everything about Catherine is important," Joe replied, following Vincent into the depths of the tunnels.

They made their way through dimly lit paths, venturing deeper into the World Below, accompanied by the clanging sounds echoing through ducts and pipes and the faint rumble of a passing subway. Joe was mesmerized by what he saw. The first time he had been down here, he had been guided to Father's study through half-lit passageways without seeing much of his surroundings. This was different, his current guide made sure he saw the beauty of this secret world, a silent confirmation of Vincent's respect and trust.

After a while, they arrived at the Mirror Pool. Vincent placed the torch in a holder on the rock wall and said, "This is where I come when I need solitude or peace... when I need to sort through my thoughts. This place holds many memories. Catherine loved it here."

Joe looked at the man in front of him, seeing the despair and inner chaos reflected in his eyes. Vincent seemed somewhat calmer now, resigned to whatever fate still had in store for him. Yet despite that, he still reminded Joe of a boiling volcano on the verge of eruption, or rather, a predator ready to tear its prey apart at any moment.

Joe rejected that thought immediately. With everything he had seen and heard, he couldn't help but feel that the man standing on the shore of that subterranean pool was one of the most human beings he had ever met. Even his dark side was understandable, he was protecting what he loved. The way he did it was another story, but even so...



"Vincent...I talked to the Marshal..." Joe began without hesitation.

"What did he say?"

Joe shrugged, shoved his hands into his pockets, and answered, "Not much. Those people are trained to be discreet and secretive. He told me they only open a file when it is necessary."

"So there was a need to open it," Vincent stated unequivocally.

"He didn't confirm, nor did he deny...," Joe said. "He simply stated that there was no use in opening a closed file, especially when everyone involved was dead. Then he left, saying he would call me."

Vincent sat on the edge of the pool. As he spoke, he tossed small pebbles into the water, creating perfect, expanding circles, the flawless ripples bearing witness to a lifelong practice.

"Not everyone died, Joe... my son survived." Vincent stated softly.

"And you."

Vincent looked up instantly. "Yes... me too. Only because I saved my son. I had to. He is Catherine's son, too. From the moment he was born, I could sense him. But there are more things you have to know, Joe... I can feel your fear of me, and part of me understands."

For a brief moment he fell silent, before continuing, "You have been to Gabriel's estate." it was not really a question. The look in those intense blue eyes told Joe that there was more to come, and that it wouldn't be pleasant. He braced himself for what he was about to hear. Yet, he understood why Vincent needed to explain what had happened there, he was the only one who could fill in the blanks.

Joe answered quietly, "Yes... I saw that cage in the basement. Electrified... yet completely wrecked."

In a fluid movement, Vincent rose and began to pace, that familiar, reassuring habit when he needed to sort things out before putting them into words. He knew he had to tell it all. There was more between heaven and earth than what was written in police files. But he had to be careful, he couldn't let himself get too overwhelmed, nor could he ever let this upset his son.

"I surrendered myself... in order to save my son." Vincent said. "Gabriel had taken Diana, and she was released with a message for me. Catherine's son was dying, and the baby needed his natural father, or so he claimed. Diana gave me a meeting point, the roof of the old Battery Arms Building. There, he sedated me... and I woke up in that cage."

Horrified, Joe looked at him. It truly dawned on him that Vincent, despite the bloodshed he had caused, had been a victim of Gabriel's evil mind as well.

"You mean... he..." The words caught in Joe's throat. He couldn't bring himself to say it out loud. If it was this hard just to speak of it, what must it have been like to endure that humiliation? He was all too aware that Vincent was about to tell him exactly that.

Vincent stopped in his tracks. The memory of those horrifying moments was etched forever in his mind. He avoided Joe's gaze, yet he could not hide the deep scars this ordeal had left on him.

"He kept me in chains," Vincent answered. "There was high voltage running through those bars. He allowed me to hold my son, but only because the boy was dying and I was the only one who could save him. The moment Jacob started to recover, Gabriel took him away again. He tortured me with images of my own rage... and of my killings. He was convinced that one day I would embrace that dark side of myself. He was wrong. I will never embrace that part of me. There was also a doctor there... he took blood samples. Gabriel accused him of killing Catherine."

"We found a body next to the cage... he had been shot," Joe confirmed.

"Yes." Vincent said, "Gabriel tried to force me to kill the man. But I didn't. I controlled my rage. I only needed to get to my son...and I did."

"But how? From what we found out, the voltage on those bars was lethal," Joe said, his voice laced with disbelief.

"I know... but I had to. I had no choice," Vincent replied. "I used everything that was left in me. I let go of my restrained rage, using it to break free from that deadly trap. I found my son. Gabriel was trying to suffocate him... and I lashed out."

"But you didn't kill him. We found him dead, shot as well. He had your marks on his face, yet he was killed with Catherine's gun."

"Diana was there, too," Vincent explained softly. "She stopped me from killing Gabriel. I escaped with my son."

"She told me what happened there," Joe nodded,

"She told me she shot Gabriel straight through the heart with Catherine's gun. I had already seen the body and knew it couldn't have been you. You would never use a gun, not with your... abilities." The moment the word left his mouth, Joe knew he had crossed a line. He cursed himself inwardly for being so blunt.

"My abilities, Joe?!" Vincent echoed, the pain evident in his voice. "Please, don't call them that. They are not... it is the pure tragedy of what I am."

Joe opened his mouth to apologize, but Vincent cut him off, "I can only defend those I love in that way. Since Catherine's death, that rage has been boiling just beneath the surface, barely controllable. I have buried so many people I loved because of Gabriel. I had to leave my safe haven down here to protect everyone who relies on this world. Gabriel sent his killer after me. He chased me. He hunted me down. He endangered the very lives of everyone here Below because he wanted *me*. He saw me as a worthy opponent, a killer without remorse, just like him. But I am not. And I had to kill him. It was his ring that led me to Gabriel... and it was Diana who reminded me that vengeance was not the way."

"I am sorry, Vincent." Joe said quietly. "I didn't mean to offend you. I just... I don't know how to put it into words."

"You don't know how to cope with my differences... I understand." Vincent said softly, "I can hardly handle them myself, and it is in those moments that I question my own humanity. I am the one who has to live with it. I never regretted what I am, Joe... until Catherine came into my life. What we had was extraordinary. We had a bond, yet I lost it, and I couldn't save her from her death. I still blame myself for losing that connection."

"Diana understood. She understood my despair, my grief. She saved me at Catherine's grave, she guided me through the dark. When I destroyed Gabriel's drugs lab I was ready to sacrifice everything. Death had no meaning to me. It was Diana who made me realize I was wrong. I didn't need vengeance, things were already bad enough without it. So, I concentrated on my son. On the only thing I had left."

Joe walked to the edge of the Mirror Pool and looked down at his reflection in the dark water. Vincent watched him in silence, waiting patiently for a reply, if any would follow. It took some time for Joe to put his confusing thoughts into words, but finally, he turned around and looked Vincent in the eyes.

"You know I am the District Attorney," Joe began. "It is my job to bring criminals of all kinds to court. Many of them have rap sheets as extensive as phone books, street thugs, drug dealers, extortionists, kidnappers... murderers."

Instantly, Vincent diverted his blue eyes. Joe heard the sharp, painful intake of a breath, as if he had just been stabbed. When he spoke, his voice sounded even rougher and more gravelly than usual.

"Of course... you think like a lawyer."

Joe nodded and kicked away a few pebbles, carefully choosing his next words. He wanted to be completely open and honest with Vincent. After all, he had every right to that honesty.

"Yes... I have to follow the law. I live by the law. I still strongly believe in justice, if only to keep our world safe."

At those words, Vincent looked up at him, his eyes narrowed and focused. "So do I...and I live by the rules of our world down here. We have our own rules and values, which I respect. They are not so very different from yours."

Joe nodded, "I understand..."

Then, suddenly, Vincent sneered, his voice dropping into a dark, sharp, and unmistakably sardonic tone... "You can't bring me to court, Joe."

Joe looked at him seriously, watching the fierce glare flare up in Vincent's eyes. "That is not my intention, Vincent... You do not belong in a courtroom. You are far more human than all those who do belong there."

Vincent bowed his head, seeking protection behind the wild abundance of his long mane.

"You have no idea what the aftermath feels like," he said softly..."When that feral rage slowly ebbs away... leaving me with the knowledge that, in those moments, there isn't much human left. I am the one who has to wash off all the blood... both literally and figuratively."

A heavy silence fell between the two men. For the second time, Vincent had confided in Joe. He felt he had to - Joe was risking everything, once again, without a second thought. He was entitled to know everything that had happened and the toll it had taken, especially now, with what lay ahead.

Having finally given voice to his deepest feelings about those painful memories, Vincent changed the subject. This shift, somehow, restored his much-needed stability.

"If you and Diana are right in what you believe... then there is a possibility..." The words failed him, he couldn't bring himself to say them out loud.

"We believe we are right, Vincent. There is no other explanation," Joe answered, still deeply moved by everything Vincent had revealed..."And that means Cathy is still alive... somewhere. We need to find her, if she wants to be found, that is."

"What do you mean?" Vincent asked, astonished.

"Sometimes, people in the witness protection program get so sick and tired of their secret lives that they try to escape it, even from under the wing and protection of the Marshals. It's not an easy life. It's incredibly demanding, and some think that if they can just avoid the Marshals, life will be better. But nothing is better. You're always hiding, always looking over your shoulder, with no one to watch your back. And there is nowhere left to go."

Thoughtfully, Vincent stared into the reflection of the Mirror Pool. "Then is it possible she might find her way to the Tunnels?" he concluded, looking up at Joe, who instantly caught the glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"I don't know... maybe. We have no clue about her condition or what she's been through," Joe replied, being as honest as he could. Vincent would see right through any lies, and he deserved the truth, even if it wasn't as hopeful as he wished... "And she is surely aware of the dangers she will face if she returns. But for now, we have to rely on the Marshals for answers."

"I understand."

Both men watched the reflection of the night sky in the still surface of the Mirror Pool, each submerged in his own thoughts.

It was Vincent who finally broke the silence, "I'll walk you back."

In a familiar, shared silence, they made their way back to the park entrance where their paths diverged, Joe to the world Above, and Vincent to the world Below.

Father entered Vincent's chamber and sensed at once that something was amiss.

"Vincent... what is wrong?"

Vincent shook his head, refusing to share his feelings, too afraid of upsetting his son.

"Vincent... you are closing yourself off. Please, tell me. I know Joe was here."

There was no pretending that nothing was wrong. His father knew Joe had been Below, and that he had just lost the only certainty he had left. In its place, a fragile 'maybe' had taken root.

"But Jacob...," Vincent began, trying to deflect from what truly needed to be said.

"I know, Vincent. Jacob will be upset, he likely already is by now. But if you don't talk, if you keep this silence locked inside, your balance will be endangered, with all the consequences that brings. You cannot afford to lose control with the boy so close by. It would be devastating."

"You don't have to remind me!" Vincent snapped, barely managing to swallow the snarl that threatened to follow his angry outburst.

"Then talk to me, Vincent. I know how hard this is for you... but you have come this far. Please... you don't need to spare me...you need to spare yourself...," Father insisted.

He knew all too well that while Vincent looked controlled and at peace on the outside, chaos reigned deep within. He was balancing on the verge of another breakdown, and that had to be avoided at all costs.

Vincent took a deep breath, unable to repress the tremble in his voice.

"I know, Father... it is all so confusing. I barely survived Catherine's death and everything that followed. I nearly lost my own life saving my son. These past few years have been so difficult... and it is Jacob who constantly reminds me of my struggle to find some faint peace, for his sake. But in my dreams... I..." He shook his head, visibly in pain, and took a deep, labored breath before he continued. "And now... now there is a possibility that... his mother is still alive."

Despite his own swirling emotions, Father tried to remain calm and maintain his self-control as he asked,

"What did Joe tell you?"

"He spoke with a US Marshal. The man said it's unusual to reopen a closed file unless there is a critical need to, especially *this* file, where most of the people involved are already dead. He promised to contact Joe again."

Thoughtfully, Father took off his glasses. "So... if, and only if, Joe and Diana are right... Catherine might be alive."

"Yes."



That single, softly spoken word carried a tempest of conflicting feelings, the fragile hope that it was true, the grief of everything he had lost, and the agonizing fear of disappointment if it all turned out to be a mistake. And then, there was more.

“Father... I told Joe what happened at Gabriel's estate.”

Astonished, Father turned toward his son. “All of it?... Dear God, Vincent...”

The older man still shivered at the memory of his son returning to the tunnels. He had seen the burns and bruises on Vincent's palms and body. He had listened to the horrifying story of being held captive, tortured, and forced to kill. Father knew what this nightmare had done to his son's gentle soul, and he knew the price Vincent had paid, and was still paying, was devastatingly high. Even now, three years later, it still haunted him. Fortunately, there had been Jacob, the ultimate solace and the greatest support that could possibly exist... but still.

“Joe was the one who conducted the investigation... he cleared out the mess they found there,” Vincent said. “And part of that mess was mine, Father. Gabriel tried to break my spirit. He took pleasure in watching me suffer, and he wanted me to destroy everything he wished to see ruined. It almost cost me the last of my humanity.”

In a reassuring gesture, Father placed his hand on Vincent's shoulder. He could feel the tight tension in his son's muscles, and he prayed Vincent could maintain his self-control as he spoke.

“I had to tell him, Father. He has every right to know the truth. He only had photos, police reports, and his own memories... He had no idea of the truth. *My* truth.”

“It took immense courage to confide in him like that, Vincent,” Father stated softly. He embraced Vincent in silence, knowing that this embrace would mean more than any spoken words ever could.

There came no reply, only a quiet withdrawal back into his own silence.

It felt like doomsday.

It was a dark, clouded, chilly night, and Vincent was waiting on Diana's roof. Through the slightly open window, he could hear her rustling through case files and paper clippings spread across her table and desk. A few hours earlier, he had seen them too, but he had kept his distance. The photos were too painful a confrontation, so he had retreated to the roof, desperately trying not to drown in his own memories. Around midnight, the doorbell rang and instantly, his nerves were on edge.

It had to be Joe, accompanied by a US Marshal, the man who had been responsible for Catherine.

He heard the elevator doors slide open, followed by the voices of two men, Joe and a stranger. Silently, Vincent braced himself for what was to come. His heart raced, his mind went numb, and his emotions were barely under control.

It was all beyond comprehension. Instinctively, he wanted to pace the roof, yet he had to remain unnoticed, not all secrets could be revealed, so once more, the darkness became his only safe haven because he knew his shadow could betray him, yet he wanted nothing more than to face this man and demand answers about Catherine.

Frustrated, he shook his head, even the mere thought was forbidden. His mind turned to little Jacob. The boy would surely sense how confused his father was, and though he wouldn't understand these turbulent feelings, it would upset him. Fortunately, Father was with him, gladly taking care of his grandson despite these demanding circumstances.

Father had understood why Vincent needed to be here, why he had to hear what the Marshal had to say, and he had offered his help immediately. Vincent had accepted gratefully, knowing his son could not have a better guardian that night.

Leaning against the brick wall, Vincent pulled his long cloak tighter, disappearing completely into its trusted protection where he felt safest. And he waited, ready to flee the moment it became necessary.

An abrupt question from Joe caught his full attention, and he focused entirely on the voices below. He listened as the story began to unfold...

Joe had entered Diana's loft accompanied by a slender, dark-haired man with a sharp, angular face and piercing dark eyes. Dressed in a grey, tailor-made suit, he looked like someone who would easily blend into a crowd on the street, a man you would forget in an instant.

Diana caught Joe's eye, a silent confirmation that Vincent was hiding on the roof. He had insisted on being there, and they had respected his wish, understanding his need to listen. Yet both were deeply worried about the news that was about to be delivered, and what it would provoke, not just for them, but for their silent listener above.

After a brief introduction, Joe cut straight to the chase, "You were in charge of Cathy's case?"

The Marshal nodded. They did not know his name, and even if he had given one, they would have questioned its authenticity, so they had agreed on anonymity.

"Just to be sure... understand that what I am about to tell you is strictly off the record," the Marshal began. "This stays between the two of you and me. The Chandler case was the most daring and challenging assignment of my entire career. And there is far more to it than what is written in the official files. A lot more. I know that... and I am pretty sure you know it too."

Diana and Joe remained silent, exchanging a telling glance. They feared this man was referring to all that had to remain untold and they would soon find out just how much he truly knew.

"So yes, I was in charge....," the Marshal continued, "From the very first moment she was held captive on the Gabriel estate."

The first blow of the night hit them instantly. Both Joe and Diana froze, staring at the US Marshal in utter disbelief, acutely aware that Vincent, too, had just heard this shocking revelation.

"Excuse me?!" Joe spat out, incredulity painted across his face.

"What do you mean?" Diana asked sharply. She wondered what this news would do to the lonely man on her roof, realizing with dread that this was only the beginning.

The Marshal, completely unaware of the silent presence above, replied calmly, "Exactly what I said. I was involved from the earliest moments of her captivity."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," Joe blurted out, unable to hide his astonishment. He pressed on immediately, "Explain to me how that was even possible! Not even the DA's office knew this. We were worried sick when she disappeared. We searched for months. I was suspended because of my search! What the hell was going on back then?!"

"This is what we do, Mr. Maxwell," came the calm reply. The man was entirely unfazed by Joe's outburst. "We maintain a profile lower than low. We are invisible. We leave no traces."

Diana took over, her tone thoughtful and deliberate. "How could you manage that? After all, she was held captive by one of the most dangerous villains I have ever encountered. He even killed Elliot Burch. He had an army protecting him."

"I can't explain all of it."

"For God's sake, man! You can't be serious," Joe snapped, unable to contain his emotions. "It's been three years. You have to talk now!"

"I will tell you what I can," the Marshal said firmly. "But you will have to be satisfied with that. I cannot go into specific details."

"Dammit, yes you can!" Joe's anger flared.

"Joe! This isn't helping." Diana tried to calm him down.

Joe immediately realized that his own unrestrained shock and anger would be picked up by Vincent. If he himself was losing control, how on earth would Vincent cope with his own emotions? He swallowed his next outburst and apologized.

"I'm sorry... but this is very demanding on me."

He knew the underlying message would be clear to everyone, especially to their silent witness on the roof.

Diana continued, "Tell us. We want to know, we need to know. We both investigated the Chandler/Moreno case. Both cases were connected, both were Gabriel's doing."

The Marshal nodded in agreement. "Yes. It was Gabriel pulling the strings. He was pure evil. But we had an insider. He risked his life to save Catherine, and he succeeded. Though, in the end, he was killed."

"Killed? How?" Diana couldn't hide the concern creeping into her voice. "He was shot by one of his so-called colleagues, who was on the verge of discovering what our man had done."

Without showing her relief, Diana pressed further, disgust dripping from her voice.

"Still, who was in charge? Whose twisted mind came up with such an insane plan?"

"Moreno."

"What?!" Joe exclaimed. "That can't be. He was on Gabriel's payroll. He was as dirty as they come."

"He was..." the Marshal admitted,

"Yet, the moment he realized Catherine was going to deliver her child in captivity and that her very life was in danger, he secretly changed course."

"He knew?"

The Marshal gave a silent nod. "He knew more than you think, and he regretted what he had done. He wanted to save her. He would have brought himself to court, but he was killed before he could act. So, it became my case. I had to keep Catherine safe."

They had to let the information sink in. Neither of them had ever imagined Moreno turns out to be the good guy in the end.

"Okay..." Joe said. "Continue."

"Months passed, and there was no opportunity to free her. Our inside man could only do his best to minimize the damage by altering the drugs she was being given. If he had been caught early, there would have been no way out, and we wanted to keep that window open. The night she gave birth, we finally managed to get her out."

"No way!" Joe's anger flared again. "I saw her in her bedroom. She was dead."

"She wasn't."

"Wait!" Diana interjected, throwing Joe a warning glance to calm him down. "I was at the autopsy. That was Catherine Chandler on that table."

"No..." the Marshal said flatly, "It wasn't."

They had no reply to this news. Neither of them had seen it coming. Stunned, they stared at the man.

Finally, Joe managed to say, "We're listening."

"It wasn't Catherine Chandler in that bedroom."

"But..."

"And it wasn't Catherine Chandler who died on that roof."

In complete disbelief, they stared at the man sitting before them. Diana's thoughts flew immediately to Vincent. How would he handle this news? After all, he had been on that roof. She had died in his arms, and he had brought her home. At least, that was what everyone, including him, had believed. Yet it seemed it had all been a setup. It would utterly crush him.

"This is the most insane thing I have ever heard," she whispered, breathless.

"We managed to switch the bodies."

"I don't understand... I really don't," Joe stammered in utter astonishment. He had seen Catherine in her bedroom, there had been no room for doubt.

"Mr. Maxwell... there was a lot going on, much of which could never be revealed," the Marshal countered. "You were at all those crime scenes. Not everyone was shot... Moreno wasn't shot. And at Gabriel's estate, you surely must have seen the cage in the basement. You saw those bodies. You both know there was someone else involved... an unknown killer who had been held captive. And I am certain you both know exactly whom I am referring to."

The word was out. Once again, everything pointed directly to Vincent. Yet the Marshal seemed to understand their need for secrecy, looking at them with a knowing gaze.

"We all know Catherine Chandler had her secrets. It was something that made my job infinitely more complicated. I had to protect her... and her secrets."

"Then who died up there? Who took her place?" Joe demanded, trying to wrap his mind around the revelation.

"A drug addict...," the Marshal stated flatly. "For the high-grade stuff, she did anything we demanded. It wasn't a clean solution, but at the time, it was the only one we had." The man left the full implication of anything, hanging ominously in the air.

"But the autopsy report noted a birth close to her time of death," Diana interjected, almost dreading the answer.

"As I said... everything... and you can be sure, her baby is safe." The words were spoken in an ice-cold tone.

"What happened after you took Cathy into your custody?" Joe broke in.

"We took her out of the country. It wasn't safe to hide her within our own borders. She went to Europe to recover and to receive the best possible care. After all, she had suffered a traumatic delivery, months of imprisonment, and severe drug abuse. It took a long time for her to find herself again. And then came the questions."

"Her son...," Diana said softly.

"Yes. We never found that baby. The crib was empty, and our inside man was dead by the time we could question anyone. My theory is that the child is in the care of our unknown friend, likely the father. I can't be sure, but if his name happens to be Vincent, then my theory is correct."

"Vincent?" Diana barely managed to keep her voice steady.

The Marshal gave her an inquiring look. "Yes. Surely you must have stumbled upon that name during your investigation? If you looked closely enough, that name was written all over this case."

Neither of them confirmed it, but they realized the Marshal was close... far too close.

"So Cathy is in Europe?" Joe asked, a deliberate attempt to steer the conversation away from Vincent.

The Marshal smiled understandingly.

"Not anymore. A few months ago, she decided she needed to return to New York. She said she had to find her son. I spent hours talking to her, trying to make her change her mind, but nothing can overcome a mother's heart. So, I prepared for her return."

"How?" Joe asked the obvious question.

"If she just reappeared, there would be questions. There was too much evidence left behind that could ruin her life, and she didn't deserve that, not after everything she had endured."

"You took care of the file...," Joe concluded.

The man neither denied nor confirmed it, and Joe knew enough. This man would not betray Catherine, which meant he would not betray Vincent either.

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know. She left Europe without a word."

"And?"

"Normally, in a case like this, the Bureau would take over."

Alarmed, Joe and Diana looked up, acutely aware that a federal investigation would endanger Vincent and the world Below. Those agents left no stone unturned, they would dig until they unearthed something. They couldn't risk that, but they had to play it safe.

"Normally? Meaning what?" the District Attorney in Joe took over. This was his territory, this he could handle.

"Exactly what I said. In a standard witness protection case, the Bureau gets involved when something goes sideways. But as I've mentioned, this case is highly complicated. Therefore, it is anything but standard."

"I see." Their relief was almost tangible.

"I am certain that sooner or later, she will surface here in the city. That was her ultimate goal. And she knows she has to be careful," the man said, adding, "Rest assured that your secrets are safe with me. I only hope mine are equally safe with the two of you."

With those words, the Marshal turned to leave, but Joe stopped him.

"One more question... Why? Why did you jeopardize everything?"

For a moment, the man remained silent. Then he turned back to Joe and replied, "Because I saw how she suffered... because I know what it feels like to lose a child... and what it feels like to lose the one you love..."

Joe looked at the man appraisingly before responding, "I understand. We found the father of her son, the man she loves so dearly. So we too, know what suffering looks like. I hope that is answer enough for your question."

The man simply looked at them both, then walked out.

The moment the elevator began its descent, Diana and Joe headed straight for the roof.

On the roof, Vincent had overheard Marshall's testimony, and it tore his heart to pieces. The more the man revealed, the more Vincent cringed in almost physical pain, fighting desperately to suppress the chaos of his emotions.

He was shattered by the revelation that Catherine was alive. He had watched the light fade from her eyes, had felt her life slip away. Yet, through some unimaginable machinations of a twisted mind, it appeared he had been cruelly deceived. It was agonizing to realize he hadn't noticed that the woman climbing the roof wasn't Catherine. A stranger had died in his arms, a stranger who merely shared her face. At the time, however, his own emotions had been in such chaos that clear thought was impossible. He had acted on pure instinct, driven by a single purpose, to bring her home ... and he cursed himself once again for losing their once so strong bond... then he would have known it, he would have felt it.

Even during the waking hours that followed in her apartment, the truth had eluded him. His grief had been so all-consuming that he had closed himself off to the rest of the world. As images of that dreadful night flooded his mind, he struggled against the weight of the memories. Trembling, he leaned against the brick wall for support. He fought to maintain control, suppressing a deep growl rising within him, he had to remain undetected. The stranger below could not know he was there, that man already knew far too much. Still, he could not hold back the tide of pain and tears.

He deeply regretted that an innocent young woman had died at the hands of evil. Her life had already been ruined by addiction, leaving her desperate enough to do anything for a fix, and someone had

exploited that vulnerability because of her resemblance to Catherine. It was reprehensible, a crime as heinous as any of Gabriel's deeds... yet it had ultimately saved Catherine's life.

What weighed heaviest on his conscience, however, were his own victims. All that rage and violence could have been avoided. It was yet another burden he would carry, a guilt with which he would never find peace. His dark side remained his greatest enemy, and nothing could ease the persistent ache of his remorse. He was condemned to endure it day after day. It would haunt his dreams until his final breath.

Slowly, the magnitude of the gift he had been given began to dawn on him. Catherine was alive, and she was looking for her son. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance to find her, to guide her back to where she belonged... with her son... and with him.

Despite the hope this news brought, there were many obstacles to overcome and at the moment he had no solutions... again. He would have to rely on others to do what he should be doing.... once again. He revolted at the thought that he was held prisoner by his own differences... He could not venture into the city streets or the country at large in order to find her... and that turmoil inside him, the forboding of something more feral, began to take over every sane thought and he had no other way then to flee... away from hope, away from all those impossibilities...

That was how Diana and Joe found him, slumped against the brick wall, visibly distraught and barely maintaining his grip on reality. He stood up the moment they approached.

"I must go..." And he barely managed to say the words, his lisp betraying just how shaken he was.

"Vincent... we need to talk," Diana urged gently.

Refusing to listen, he retreated to the far corner of the roof, creating distance between them.

"No... not now..." And with a graceful leap he was gone...

It was close to dawn when he finally returned to the world Below. He had wandered through the city streets and the park, trying in vain to sort through his thoughts and calm his frayed nerves. He had barely succeeded. When he stepped into Father's study, he found the older man waiting, deep worry etched into his features.

"I hope this isn't becoming a habit?"

Father's stern remark momentarily pulled him back to reality. The older man clearly intended to remind him of his responsibilities Below, and that wandering around was not among them. But the moment Father caught sight of the torment in those blue eyes, the reprimand died in his throat. Instead, he reached out, embraced his son, and said gently,

"Tell me, Vincent..."

Astonished, Father listened to what Vincent had to share. The sheer impact of the revelation took a heavy toll on the older man, leaving him aching with the realization of how little he could actually do to help...

A peaceful quiet had settled over the world Below.

In Vincent's chamber, Father sat to one side with Jacob on his lap, watching a game of chess between Vincent and Joe. Vincent had found a worthy opponent in Joe, and they challenged each other frequently. A deep friendship had developed between them, built on mutual respect and understanding.

Not a word was spoken, but the peaceful silence felt like a warm blanket over feelings still frayed by recent events. Both men needed to heal, they needed this peace and accepted it eagerly. Here, they

could talk freely. Here, they could vent their frustrations, and here, they could conquer their mutual enemy, the memories of Catherine's supposed death. It had left deep wounds in already scarred souls, but here, they could finally begin to heal.

Thoughtfully, Joe studied the chessboard and saw the inevitable unfolding. Vincent had him cornered, using his Queen to defeat the King.

"You sneaky bastard!" Joe spat out, knowing he could safely use his street slang here. The only answer he received was a warm smile and a soft chuckle from the remarkable man sitting opposite him.

Joe glanced at Father and asked, "Did you teach him that?"

Father smiled, "I taught him to play chess, yes... but the tricks he learned on his own."

"You were an excellent teacher, Father," Vincent replied gently.

Diana entered, took one look at the chessboard, and laughed. "Again? That's got to hurt, Joe..."

Joe looked up and pointed at Vincent. "He always finds a way. I have no idea how, but every single time, he manages to lure me into defeat."

"Not always, Joe."

"No... sometimes you just let me win."

"That is my empathetic side."

Even their banter was joyful and warm. Diana was still amazed by it, rejoicing in the fact that both men had found such peace in each other's company.

"I hate to interrupt, but playtime is over," she said, getting straight to the point. "We need to talk."



Father understood at once. He nodded, stood up, and took little Jacob by the hand.

"Come, Jacob... your dad needs to talk to Diana and Joe."

The boy walked over to his father and whispered, "Will I feel you?"

Vincent pulled his son onto his lap and replied, "Probably...but you know you can trust Diana and Joe. They are good friends. We just need to talk, and the news might be troubling. But know that I am safe, and Father will be right there with you."

He watched them leave, then turned his gaze back to Diana. "Tell me."

"We're getting nowhere," she admitted, "Our standard methods are completely out of reach, so our options are very limited."

"I am aware of that..." Vincent answered, unable to keep the disappointment from creeping into his voice.

"What do you suggest?" Joe asked, sensing that she might have found a lead.

Diana looked at the two men sitting at the table.

"You know how I work. I try to live inside the victims. I surround myself with them. I try to find a connection, one way or another. To do that, I sift through their lives, their surroundings, through everything I can possibly find, time and time again. I penetrate their minds, and what I find is almost always frightening. I found *you*, Vincent, by digging deep into Catherine's life. By going through Catherine's books over and over again, until I found that one poem that brought me to her grave... knowing that, sooner or later, you would show up there."

Vincent took a deep breath before he spoke, yet he still couldn't conceal the pain the memory of that night brought him.

"I remember...*The paths of glory lead but to the grave (*)*... you told me that."

"Diana, please...no poem is going to lead us to where Cathy might be right now," Joe interjected.

"No, I know. But maybe a memory from years ago will. Something she said, something that meant a lot to her..."

Joe, ever the realist, shrugged his shoulders. "I don't buy it."

Vincent, however, was the one who saw the logic in Diana's words. "Maybe..." he said slowly, "I don't know... but it's worth a try."

"Just try, Vincent... you share so many memories with Catherine. We can be sure she won't return to New York unprepared. She won't walk into the DA's office, nor will she just show up here. The risk is simply too great and she knows it. So I think it must be something she once spoke about... a dream, or an early memory of something... I don't know."

Deep in thought, Vincent began to pace, his usual habit when he needed to think, when he needed to soothe his turbulent mind. Suddenly, he whirled around.

"Please... I need to be alone."

They heard the familiar lisp that always emerged whenever he was deeply upset, and they instantly understood his need for solitude.

Once left entirely by himself, Vincent let his mind wander through his memories. A laughing Catherine, soaking wet when they attended the concert, a dancing Catherine at Winterfest, a concerned Catherine when he was hurting... the shared moments on her balcony or down Below. Despite the hope that she was still alive, she was still lost to him, and that pain was agonizing to endure. But he had to try to remember.

Hours passed. His turmoil did not lessen, quite the opposite. He became entangled in his own memories with no way out. His sleep was tortured by them, until he woke with a cry.

Instantly, he got up and began rummaging through his books until he found the one was looking for, a copy of Dylan Thomas. He could still hear his own voice reading to Catherine...

*All the sun long it was running, it was lovely,
the hay Fields high as the house,
the tunes from chimneys,
it was air and playing lovely and watery
And fire green as grass...(*)*

Reading that poem brought back childhood memories, not just his own, but hers too. And then, it flashed vividly into his mind... summers at a lake!

She had a secret place there... a glen. It was a two-hour drive to Connecticut. She had been so reckless back then, wanting to take him to that secret sanctuary. He also remembered the immense pain that idea had caused Father. Vincent shook his head, desperately trying to banish the memory that, in an instant, brought back more pain than he could bear.

And before he could regain his composure, Father walked in, looking as worried as ever.

"Vincent...what's wrong? You were dreaming."

He turned to his father and said softly, "I must warn Diana. Maybe, just maybe, I remembered a place where Catherine would go."

After Joe and Diana had left the tunnels, Vincent had told his father what was at stake, so the tunnel patriarch knew at once what he meant.

"I understand. Will you tell me?"

"We caused you so much pain back then, just with the idea of going to that place. It was a lake... there was a glen... a two-hour drive to Connecticut."

Father looked up, a spark of remembrance in his eyes. "I remember. It is a possibility... but Connecticut is vast."

"I know, Father. But it is a possibility, one that cannot be denied."

"You are right, Vincent. I will send word to Peter. Maybe... maybe he knows the exact location."

In the heavy silence that followed his words, both men knew that Diana now had a mission to accomplish.

"How is Jacob?" Vincent asked.

"Upset... as expected. I talked with him, and now he is with Mary. He hasn't slept all night. But I will go and see him now. I'll tell him that you are well and that you will come to him as soon as you can."

"Thank you, Father...," Vincent whispered gratefully, yet silently cursing his fate that he couldn't be there for his son.

Darkness had barely fallen over the city when he left the tunnels.

Diana heard the soft knock on her window and went up to her rooftop, where she found Vincent waiting for her.

"I know where she might be."

In a few short words, he explained what he had remembered and gave her Peter's number to call for more information. Before he vanished into the night, he pleaded,

"Find her, Diana... please."

Speechless, she nodded. She knew it would utterly destroy him if this turned out to be a dead end. She *had* to find Catherine, there was simply too much at stake.

In the middle of the night, Vincent entered the nursery. He found Father asleep in a chair next to Jacob's bed. The little boy was still wide awake, and the moment he noticed his father, he jumped out of bed.

"Are you well, Dad?" he asked.

Vincent nodded. "I am... you don't need to worry." He tried his best to reassure his son, yet the questions kept coming.

"Where were you? I missed you..." A faint glimmer of rising panic shimmered through the boy's words.

Vincent noticed it instantly. He felt it pulsing through their bond and knew he had to choose his words carefully to spare little Jacob. There was no other way.

"I went Above."

Startled, the boy looked up.

"But you said it wasn't safe there..." Panic was creeping closer now, and his blue eyes looked frightened.

"I know I said that. For me, it isn't safe in the world Above," Vincent explained gently.

"Because you are different," the little boy said, establishing the reality with a mature sobriety that stunned his father.

Vincent tried to deflect from the inevitable. "Yes... but at night, and with great care, I sometimes need to go Above. To see the stars, the moon... and to breathe fresh air."

"But not tonight," once again, Jacob proved just how well he knew his father.

Vincent bowed his head so his son could not see his expression. He could keep nothing a secret from this little boy. He needed to buy time, he couldn't tell this little one what was troubling his mind, not right now, anyway. But whatever he chose to say next had to be the truth.

"No... I needed to talk to Diana."

"Why? Dad... I feel something is troubling you. You aren't always really here."

Completely bewildered, Vincent accepted this observation. He avoided all eye contact, knowing it would definitely betray him, and forced himself to explain.

"It was about your mother, Jacob."

"But... but you told me that...that she died when I was born," the boy said, his voice laced with confusion.

"I know. Yet there were things that needed to be said. But I can't tell you any more right now. There are still too many questions to which we have no answers."

"Will you tell me when you do have the answers?"

"Of course, Jacob. And now, you need to go to sleep."

Jacob looked up at his father's face, saw the warm, tender gaze, and settled himself under the covers. He fell asleep almost instantly, leaving his father alone with his thoughts.

That was how Father found them when he woke up a few hours later, Jacob sound asleep, tucked close to his father, and Vincent not even daring to doze off. He was terrified of his own nightmares, while simultaneously struggling with the truths that would eventually have to be told.

"What happened, Vincent?" Father asked quietly.

"When I returned, Jacob was still awake," Vincent answered softly.

His father needed no further explanation. "I understand... he can be very persistent."

Vincent nodded and added, "I know...But he needs answers."

"And you are not able to give them to him, are you?"

"No... there are still too many uncertainties."

"In general, or only your own?"

Surprised, Vincent looked up and saw Father's concerned grey eyes observing him.

"Both, Father. But Jacob knows... he feels my worries, my concerns. So I told him I had to see Diana about his mother."

Father nodded approvingly. "Perhaps that is the best approach. You know he is an extraordinary child. Just tell him what you know... nothing more, nothing less."

With those words, Father rose, embraced his son gently, and left for his study. He knew all too well that Vincent needed solitude to organize his thoughts.

Early the next morning, Vincent took his son to the Mirror Pool. The boy ran up and down with excitement, and his father noticed the graceful movements that were so like his own.

At the edge of the pool, Jacob looked at the reflection in the water. Seeing his father back away to avoid his own reflection, the boy placed his little hand on his father's, almost as if to reassure him.

Vincent smiled down at his son and said softly, "Jacob... it is time I tell you about your mother." Keeping the tremble out of his voice took every ounce of his strength.

Instantly, the boy's attention was captured. "But she is dead, Dad... and I can feel you still love her."

His words made it clear to Vincent that, once again, he was looking at a three-year-old who spoke with a maturity far beyond his years, a curse and a blessing all at once. He realized that being his son was not the easiest way to grow up.

"That is true... the time when you were born was a dark time. Some evil men were after your mother. You know she worked with Joe at the District Attorney's office."

Jacob nodded. "Yes... she was a lawyer."

Vincent nodded in return and continued softly, almost speaking to himself. Yet the little boy listened with so much understanding that his actual age seemed entirely secondary.

"Your mother was a very courageous woman, one of the bravest people I have ever met. She accepted me for who I am, she respected our world down here, and she sacrificed so much for me. In return, she gave me the world. She made dreams possible, giving me more than I had ever dared to dream of. She was a part of me, and yes, I loved her. I still do. But then... she was taken from me. From everyone who loved her. And only when you were born did I find her again. But I was too late..."

Further explanation failed him, the words choking in his throat.

"She died while you held her," Jacob finished, speaking the words Vincent couldn't bring himself to say.

"That is what I believed. That is what Joe and Diana believed... what everyone believed."

Jacob frowned, and for once, he couldn't put his thoughts into words.

"Why?... What?..." He was so utterly at a loss that the proper words eluded him, a flash of frustration crossing his face that prompted his father to continue immediately.

"Someone made us believe that your mother had died. It was a very sad and difficult time. Fortunately, I was able to save you and bring you home." Deliberately, Vincent left out the horrific events of that night.

Suddenly, two little arms flung around his neck in a fierce, tight toddler's embrace. In that hug, Vincent found the courage to go on, his son had every right to know what was happening.

"Thanks to Diana and Joe, we know there is hope. They discovered the truth," Vincent explained.

"What does that mean, Dad? Will she come back... to us?" Jacob asked with the childlike eagerness of great expectations.

"I hope so, Jacob. But we have to be patient. Diana is looking for her right now." Vincent tried to gently curb his son's eagerness, wanting to shield him from potential disappointment.

"Tell me more about her..." came the next question. It was a request Vincent was more than glad to answer. Talking about Catherine didn't take away the pain, but it offered a small measure of comfort, and so, he began to tell her story.

"Her name was Catherine Chandler. Once, I found her in the park. She had been attacked, badly wounded. I brought her down here. Father and I nursed her back to health so she could return to the world Above when she was stronger. The days she stayed with us changed our lives forever. We shared a bond... just like you and I do. She was always with me, and I protected her."

"Like you protect the world Below?"

The unexpected question hit him like a bolt of lightning, leaving him gasping for breath.

"How do you know about that?" he managed to ask, keeping even the faintest glimpse of emotion from his voice.

"The other children told me... that you always protect us," Jacob answered, completely unaware of the turmoil his question had caused.

It took all of Vincent's willpower to remain calm and composed. He could not, must not, lose his grip on himself now. He cursed his own blindness. He should have known. Some of the older children were old enough to know that he protected their world and the ones he loved. Surely, they would have talked about it. No matter how much they loved him as their teacher and mentor, they all feared the protector of their community. And now, he had to explain this to his little son. He had been a fool to believe he could keep this part of himself a secret.

"I do..." he replied gently, already dreading the next question.

“How?”

The question was asked out of pure curiosity, yet it made Vincent shrink back.

He turned his head away so he wouldn't have to look at the innocent boy in front of him. Without a single word, he simply showed him his hands. He couldn't bring himself to say it out loud. For the first time in his short life, his son had to learn who his father truly was. Jacob accepted it by simply taking his father's strong hands into his own small ones, understanding now that these claws could offer not only love... but also protection.

Diana shivered in her hiding place. It was freezing, the surroundings were completely deserted, and dawn was just beginning to break.

For days on end, she had been waiting here, fueled by the gut feeling that she was not alone in this godforsaken place. Someone else was here, someone incredibly careful and highly trained in the art of concealment. Although she had no concrete proof, she was almost certain it had to be Catherine Chandler.

She had dialed the number Vincent had given her, it belonged to Dr Peter Alcott, who had been able to provide more details about the place Catherine used to visit in her childhood.

He had expressed doubts about the exact route, but thanks to maps, navigation, and Joe's logistical advice, she had managed to locate this desolate spot near a lake and a neighboring glen. There were a few log cabins scattered throughout the nearby woods, and she had found the perfect vantage point.



Hours and days of observation had dragged on without any sign of life, and she had just begun to question whether she was in the right location, when the sudden snap of a twig under a soft footstep put her on high alert. She caught a flash of movement, and then, silence returned.

Hours later, she spotted someone through her binoculars. It was a frail-looking woman, dressed in worn, olive-green outdoor gear designed to blend into the landscape. Her dark blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail beneath a dark green baseball cap that shielded her face. She moved with extreme caution. Diana tracked her every step. Finally, she watched the woman disappear between the trees toward one of the most remote cabins. Diana crept to her feet and trailed after her.

For a brief moment, she observed the cabin from within the dense cover of trees and bushes. She noted a front door, a small porch, and windows at the front and side. At first glance, the cabin looked deserted, but she knew better. Carefully, she closed the short distance between the tree line and the front door.

Diana knocked softly on the wooden door, having no intention of further frightening whoever was hiding inside. There was no reply. No one opened the door, and nothing could be heard except the natural sounds of the surrounding woods. Yet, she knew someone was there. She believed she knew exactly who it was, and she understood the reasons behind the silence. She knocked again and spoke softly.

"I mean you no harm, Catherine. I only need to talk to you." she said, keeping her voice low.

Silence followed. It felt as if even the wildlife was holding its breath, not a single leaf rustled.

"Catherine Chandler? I know you're in there. Please..." she tried again.

Still, there was no answer. Not a sound was heard, not a movement was seen, and Diana waited patiently.

Suddenly, she froze. Behind her, a sound shattered the quiet, the unsettling, unmistakable click of a gun being cocked. Even for an experienced law enforcement officer, it was a terrifying sound. Keeping her hands held high and clearly visible, she slowly turned around. She found herself facing a slender, pale woman with dark blonde hair, a gun pointed directly at her.

"What do you want from me?" the woman asked. Her voice revealed not a single trace of emotion, and the barrel of the gun remained perfectly steady.

Diana didn't need a second glance. She made a mental note, just as she had done on her computer three years earlier. Back then, she had found Vincent. Now, she had found Catherine Chandler.

It felt as if ice-cold water were running through her veins. She had noticed a sudden presence looming nearby. For months, she had been living here as a fugitive, unsure of how to take the next step toward her goal. She knew she was usually safe here at this time of year, yet now she was no longer alone. She wondered if it was a mere coincidence, or if her greatest fear had finally come true, that someone had tracked her down.

During her scouting, she spotted a tall woman with thick, reddish hair woven into a tight braid. Like herself, the stranger was dressed in shades of green to remain unnoticed. It was obvious the woman was searching for something, or someone. Catherine made up her mind, she had to know what she was up against. She had come too far to lose what little she had left, she had already lost far too much.

One day, she located the intruder and tracked her every movement. *The prey has become the hunter*, she thought grimly, gripping the gun she always kept close at hand. Given everything she had been through, the weapon provided a much-needed sense of security.

She managed to close the distance, unseen and unheard. With her gun raised and ready, she demanded, "What do you want from me?" Her voice was entirely cold and emotionless.

When the woman turned around, Catherine found herself looking at an open, gentle face. Large grey eyes stared back at her in wonder, and a thick, copper-colored braid fell over one shoulder.

"I only need to talk to you," the woman repeated softly.

Even though Catherine still didn't trust this stranger standing near her cabin, she had questions that desperately needed answers. An inquisitive gaze met hers, and somehow, she felt that no immediate threat emanated from this woman.

"And how did you find me?" Catherine demanded to know.

"I had a guide," the woman answered truthfully.

"A guide? Nobody knows I'm here." Catherine's uncertain gaze instantly shifted back into a hostile glare.

"I know... but someone once told me that nothing is impossible," came the soft, reassuring reply.

That immediately caught Catherine's attention. Those words were entirely familiar. Her green eyes locked onto Diana with a frightened, uncertain gaze, and Diana realized she was dealing with a fragile, deeply traumatized woman. She had to tread very carefully.



"And who are you?" Catherine asked. Her voice was still stripped of any emotion that might reveal how she was feeling. Diana decided to be completely transparent.

"Diana Bennett. I'm with the police department. Joe Maxwell asked me to look into your case."

A faint smile touched Catherine's lips. Good old Joe... always ready to help, always worried when she was in trouble. If he was involved, there was a chance that fortune was finally on her side.

"How do you know so much?" Catherine asked, and for the first time, she allowed a sliver of emotion to bleed into her words.

Diana heard it and knew they were on the right track. "It's a long story... but to put it simply, evil met humanity."

Catherine's eyes narrowed when she heard those words. It made her think. Evil... Gabriel had been evil, pure, malignant evil. According to what Diana said, evil had met humanity. Instantly, the thought of Vincent flashed through her mind. Could it be possible? Had his humanity met Gabriel's evil? She didn't know yet, but with everything that had been said in this brief moment, she knew Diana held the truth. She realized she could trust her. Briefly, she closed her eyes and sighed, though she remained on her guard, the gun still gripped tightly in her hand.

"I want to hear it." Catherine demanded. "The entire story, without holding anything back."

Diana nodded. "Sounds fair to me."

Catherine stepped closer, opened the cabin door, and motioned for Diana to go inside.

Once Diana was seated on an uncomfortable couch, she stated, firmly yet gently, "Your secret is safe with me, Catherine."

Astonished, Catherine looked up, fear and uncertainty flaring in her eyes once more.

"My secret..." Her voice caught in her throat. Suddenly, she doubted whether she even wanted to hear what Diana had to say, but she knew it was inevitable.

"Your son."

Instantly, tears welled in Catherine's eyes and something within her began to shift. Understanding crept in, along with a fragile hope that maybe, just maybe, she might recover what she had lost.

"What do you know about him?" she asked, her voice laced with fear.

"I know that he is safe. That he is loved and deeply cared for," Diana answered gently.

"Do they know... do they know that he has an extraordinary father? That there might be a heritage he carries?"

A faint smile touched Diana's lips, and she decided it was finally time to cautiously reveal the full truth.

"His father was the one who saved him from your captors. And he is a beautiful boy."

"His... father..."

The gun dropped instantly, landing with a dull thud on the wooden floor. A sudden emotional outburst followed, as tears streamed down her cheeks, Catherine sank into a chair. Diana gave her the time she needed to find her composure again. The naturally empathetic and gentle Catherine was finally resurfacing. It took quite a while before she was able to focus on what Diana had to say.

Diana began her story, but she was all too aware that it was not her place to recount the most gruesome details, so she stuck to the broad outlines. She spoke of the abduction, the staged death, and how she had first found Vincent at the cemetery. She admitted how terrified of him she had been back then. Then she explained the massive search, and finally, the rescue of her baby. She also detailed the sudden red alert on the Chandler/Moreno file, the missing case reports, the Marshal, and the conclusion she and Joe had ultimately reached.

Hours and a pot of coffee later, Diana finished her story.

Catherine looked up. She had listened breathlessly, absorbing all the information from three long, lost years. She had been completely unaware of the tragedy that had affected so many people, the Marshal

had never told her anything. Diana had just confirmed that Gabriel's evil had indeed collided with Vincent's humanity, yet Catherine felt there was still much more left to be said.

"And Vincent?... How is he?"

She caught the brief hesitation in Diana's response. "He is... well. But I can't speak for him. He has to tell you that himself."

"You said he found my boy... he is still with him, then?"

Diana nodded and smiled. "Yes...he is doing well, and Vincent is raising him. Though he's no longer a baby, he's a wonderful toddler now." Diana replied.

"Have you seen him?" came the next question, eager to know more.

"I've seen them both... recently. It was Vincent who brought up this place."

A gentle smile broke across Catherine's face. "Of course... we once had a wild plan of coming here together."

A silence fell, one in which both women found a comfortable peace. Then, Diana carefully asked, "Catherine... I have to ask. What are your intentions? Do you want to go home?"

"Home?... I don't know. I don't really have a home anymore. In fact, I have nowhere left to go... I only wanted to find my son... and maybe..." She stopped, leaving the rest to silence.

"You *do* have a home. A peaceful place with people who would love nothing more than to welcome you into their midst. A place where Vincent is waiting... with your son. And you know it is safe there."

Hopeful, Catherine looked up, almost afraid to believe Diana's words. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely... Whenever you're ready." she answered, giving Catherine the time to adjust to the thought that there was a place she could go, a place where she was safe, where she would find everything she thought she had lost.

The next morning, both women set off for New York.

It was late that morning when an urgent message, addressed to Vincent, echoed through the pipes. Joe wanted to see him immediately.

Vincent, who was on patrol in a distant part of the tunnels, stopped dead in his tracks. He whirled around and sprinted toward the park entrance. When he opened the secret door, slightly out of breath, he found Joe pacing restlessly.

"Was it urgent?" Vincent asked.

"Diana found her! She found Cathy!" Joe blurted out, his voice rising in sheer excitement before he caught himself, suddenly remembering where they were.

Vincent stared at him, barely able to process the words. To anchor himself, he pressed, "She found Catherine? Where?"

"In Connecticut. The exact place you described," Joe replied.

Reeling from the shock, Vincent slumped against the stone wall. Gasping for breath, he managed to choke out, "How is she?"

"She's well. They are on their way home."

Blue eyes filled with tears of joy met brown ones that were glistening with unshed tears.

"Tonight... Cathy will be home tonight."

"I have to talk to Jacob. I have to tell him that his mother is coming home." Vincent whirled around to rush back into the tunnels, but suddenly he halted and looked back at Joe.

"Joe... thank you. You have no idea what this means to Jacob... to me."

Joe smiled warmly. "I think I do, Vincent. But it's Diana you should thank."

The two men fell into a tight embrace before saying their goodbyes.

Vincent sought Jacob in the nursery, but the room was empty. Instead, he found the boy in Father's study, curled up on his grandfather's lap, weeping inconsolably. Father's soothing words offered no comfort, it was only when Vincent stepped into the room that a quiet calm began to settle over the boy.

"Jacob... what brings you such sorrow?" Vincent asked softly, knowing only too well the source of this profound grief.

Sobbing, the little boy turned, his voice trembling as he tried to speak.

"I...I felt...I..." He could find no words to describe the overwhelming tide of emotion, and the frustration only deepened his distress.

Vincent gently gathered the boy into his arms, releasing Father from his nearly impossible task. For a fleeting moment, seeing the unshed tears shimmering in Vincent's eyes, Father feared he would have to comfort both father and son. But then, a tender smile graced Vincent's face.

"It is all right, Jacob...I know how unsettling this must be. Joe needed to see me, and he said it was urgent. So yes, I was deeply worried... but Joe brought good tidings."

Jacob and Father looked at Vincent in wonder. The rare, hopeful tone in his voice told them that, for once, the news was truly wondrous.

"Diana has found Catherine. They are on their way home."

"Thank God..." was all Father could whisper. He reached out, drawing both his son and grandson into a close, silent embrace, letting his arms speak the gratitude that words could no longer hold.

He stood at the park entrance, his golden mane waving slightly in the evening breeze. The warm lights from the tunnel emerged, casting an almost enchanting glow over him. In his large hand, he felt Jacob's small palm, resting there with absolute confidence.

Behind them, Father and Joe waited in tense silence.

Out of the darkness, two women appeared, walking side-by-side. The sudden shock of recognition hit him so hard it was physically painful. A soft groan escaped his lips, causing Jacob to look up anxiously.

"Dad?..."

"Jacob... there is no need to worry, but I see your mother now..." His voice was barely a whisper, a breath lost to the night air when he said her name,

"Catherine..."

And then, his voice broke completely.

She remained at a distance, drinking in the sight of that familiar face. He looked weary, stripped of the proud, powerful presence he had once carried so effortlessly. Slowly, her gaze drifted down to the toddler by his side, clinging tightly to his father's strong hand, a child bearing a certain resemblance to his father yet, at the same time, so very different.

Suddenly, she froze. Just looking at the boy brought the agonizing memories of that horrific night flooding back, making her hesitate. She had absolutely no recollection of what had happened afterward. She had awakened in an unfamiliar hospital room, a shock that initially convinced her she was still held captive. It had taken a long, agonizing time for her to process that she had been rescued and was finally safe. The traumatic delivery had shattered her, leaving deep physical and mental scars, while the forced drug abuse had done the rest.

And then, she heard Vincent's voice, deep, warm, and infinitely comforting.

*Though lovers be lost,
Love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion(*)*

The memories of how this all had begun surged through her mind like a torrent.

She remembered Vincent going through the most destructive breakdown of his life, ending up at her apartment and reciting that exact poem for days. She remembered the desperate words he had spoken in that brief moment before he fled into the night. Later, when he was back in the safety of the tunnels, the darkness had prevailed. She envisioned the ominous, dark cave where he had sought shelter, his agonizing struggle with his own shadow self and how he had come so close to dying, until she saved him.

Afterward, he had suffered from severe amnesia. And just when he was finally on the road to recovery, everything had shattered at the District Attorney's office. She had never been given the chance to tell him that she was pregnant.

Diana's reassuring voice gently pulled her out of her memories. "Catherine... it's all right. They are waiting for you."

She glanced to the side and saw Diana standing close by. The woman had shared only the broad outlines of what had happened over the past few years, but even that had been enough to fill Catherine with uncertainty and nerves. Then, her gaze met his, those deep blue eyes that had always managed to catch her off guard.

Softly, her voice trembling, she said, "You once told me that whatever comes, whatever happens... that you loved me."

She fell silent, tears choking her voice at the raw remembrance of that moment. For all this time, she had cherished those words, holding onto them as a safe haven and one of the few anchors left to her.

She saw him gasp for breath. She watched as her words struck a chord, dragging up a memory he had desperately tried to bury. Yet, even in his shock, he reached down to comfort the little boy, who was looking up at them, visibly upset. Then, he simply said...

"I do."

Just two words. Virtually inaudible, yet spoken from the absolute depths of his heart.

She needed nothing more. Breaking through her hesitation, she went to him. And the familiar, warm embrace that welcomed her told her everything she needed to know - she was finally home.



After a while, his embrace tightened slightly, and he whispered,

“This is Jacob... your... our... son...”

Catherine looked down at the little boy. Meeting his gaze, she was surprised to find the exact same blue eyes as his father's. He had the same golden hair, and he was absolutely beautiful.

“Hi, Jacob...,” she said softly, sinking to her knees before him. For so long, she had desperately hoped to find her son. She carried only a faint, hazy recollection of him from shortly after his birth, and now he was standing right here, holding his father's hand.

Jacob's eyes took in every detail of her face. Carefully, he reached out, his small hand softly touching her. She remained perfectly still, patiently giving him all the time he needed while she observed him. But she gasped softly when he suddenly said,

“You are my mom... I can feel you, too.”

Surprised, she looked up at Vincent. She had never expected such an extraordinary welcome, but knowing he was Vincent's son, it felt entirely natural. Gently, she took his small hand in hers and replied,

“I am, Jacob... I am so sorry that I wasn't there all this time. I...”

“Dad told me...,” the boy interrupted gently. “He said you were far away and couldn't come any sooner.”

A tender smile touched her lips at the sound of him calling Vincent *Dad*. Looking up, she saw Vincent watching her greet their little boy, his blue eyes brimming with tears. She rose to her feet and stepped into his arms, embracing him closely, laughing and crying all at once. His tender kiss was everything she had longed for.

When they finally turned toward Father and Joe, she felt Vincent's warm hand searching for hers. Their fingers intertwined. She noticed how carefully he avoided touching her with his sharp claws, letting her feel only their hard, cold presence against her skin.

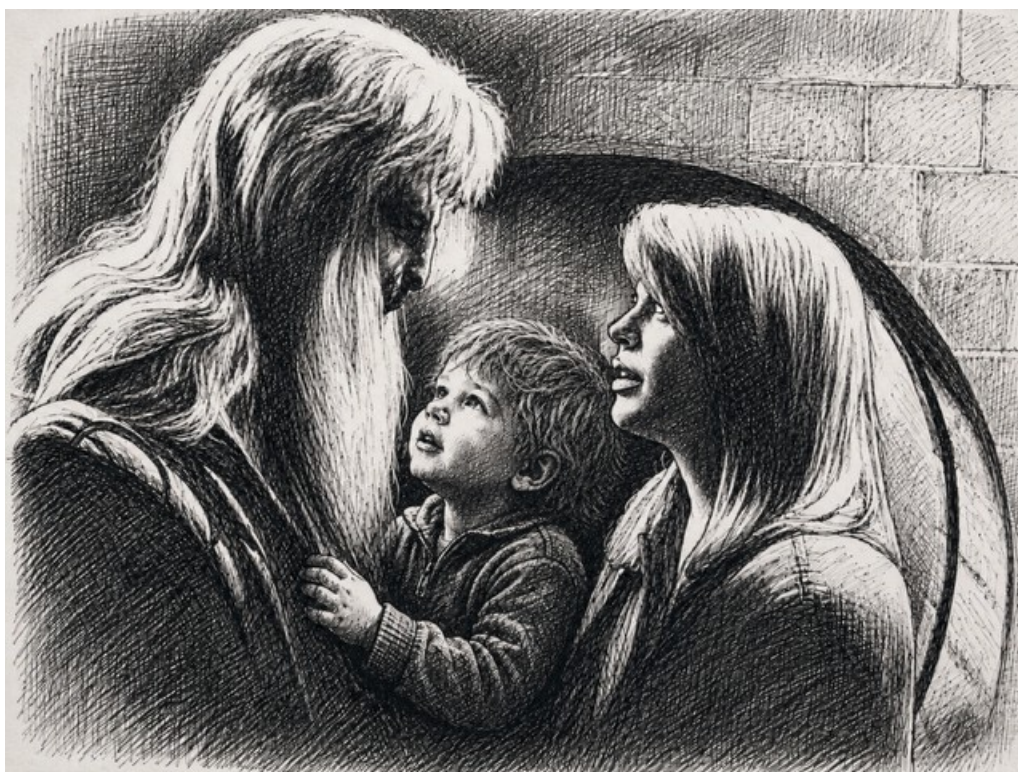
“I have missed you...,” she whispered softly, glancing up at him.

Beside her, she saw his lips part into a brief, beautiful smile.

After greeting both Father and Joe with equally warm and loving embraces, they entered the World Below, where the tunnel inhabitants were waiting to welcome her home. It felt like a true blessing to be received by so many people. After her long exile, she greeted every single one of them with the same heartfelt warmth. Hours slipped away as she spoke with everyone who had gathered to see her.

By the time the gathering drew to a close, Jacob had fallen fast asleep against Vincent's shoulder. On the way to Vincent's chamber, they stopped to lay the little boy down in the nursery.

Surprised, Catherine looked at him and asked, "Why does he sleep in the nursery?"



She felt Vincent's gaze resting upon her. When he spoke, his answer came with a trace of reluctance.

"He feels what I am feeling... and most of the time, it frightens him. He does not need to witness my nightmares or their aftermath. They are violent and dreadful, Catherine. He does not need to see that part of me."

Her eyes met his, and she instinctively sensed that there was far more behind his words than he was willing to share right now. Understanding his pain, she simply nodded. Together, they left a sleeping Jacob in Mary's tender care.

Moments later, when they were finally alone in Vincent's chamber, the sheer weight of her exhaustion hit her. Out of old habit, just like years ago after her father had died, she prepared to say goodnight and head to the guest chamber. But Vincent gently stopped her.

"We have a child, Catherine... Surely there is no need for you to go to the guest chamber."

A soft smile touched her lips. "You are right."

With a quiet, mutual understanding, she made herself comfortable among the soft pillows and covers of his bed, instantly enveloped by a profound sense of safety and belonging.

"You need to sleep, Catherine... I will watch over you," he whispered gently, tucking a warm blanket around her. She drifted off into a deep sleep before he could even finish his sentence.

Later that night, as he lay beside her, he felt her body tense. She was dreaming, and in the clutches of her nightmare, a cry escaped her lips. Knowing how deeply she had suffered during their time apart, Vincent wrapped his arms tightly around her, softly whispering,

"You are safe now..."

At his reassuring words, she crawled closer into his embrace, seeking his warmth. Holding her, Vincent wished for nothing more than for her to find peace and overcome the horrors she had endured, for he knew all too well that he had failed to do so himself.

The World Below had welcomed her with endless kindness, love, and generosity. It made her feel safe at last, and only then did she realize the immense strain she had been carrying. Exhaustion hit her like a wave, and for the first few days, she slept almost continuously. As the weeks went by, she slowly regained her strength, yet her fragility and vulnerability remained almost tangible.

Vincent was always near, constantly taking care of her, listening, and offering comfort whenever she needed it. Piece by piece, she told him everything that had happened to her, the captivity, the drugs, and the birth of their son. She filled in all the blanks, her rescue from Gabriel's estate by a team of Marshals, her exile in London, and her time in rehabilitation to recover from her injuries and the mental trauma. Later, she had lived in the heart of London, working at a small law office and living in a modest apartment. Through it all, a deep sadness for everything she had lost hung over her, until she finally decided to take matters into her own hands and return to where she truly belonged.

She had been fully aware of the risks involved, but for her, there was no other choice. The Marshal assigned to her case had done everything in his power to talk her out of it. Yet, for every argument he made against her return, she offered half a dozen reasons why she had to go. He remained unconvinced until the day she asked him point-blank if he knew what it felt like to lose a child, or to lose the love of his life. He never answered the question, but the very next day, he admitted he finally understood why she had to blow her cover.

Risking his own career, he did everything he possibly could to ensure her return was as safe as possible. She had worked long enough at the District Attorney's office to know exactly how an investigation into a missing coworker would be conducted. They would have turned every stone upside down multiple times. Deep down, she feared they had uncovered something linking back to Vincent, and if that were true, any evidence that could expose him or lead to his discovery had to be completely erased. She told the Marshal what could pose a threat to her, and especially to the man she loved, and he quietly eliminated those threats. The rest was up to her. She left Europe without letting him know the details of her travel plans, navigating a grueling journey since official, normal transportation was out of the question. Once back on American soil, she made her way to Connecticut, the safest haven she could think of, until Diana found her. Vincent listened, barely saying a word, but providing all the silent comfort she required. He wiped away her tears, whispering comforting words as he held her close, offering all he could.

In the days that followed, she truly got to know Jacob. The boy was remarkably strong and smart for his age, resembling his father in so many ways, yet remaining complete at the same time. She noticed that, just like Vincent, he was left-handed. He was eager to learn everything about her, cherished the stories

she read to him, and loved simply being near her, as if trying to make up for all the lost time in every way he could. He constantly surprised her with his maturity. Often, when speaking with him, she had to remind herself that he was only three years old. He was playful, a little rascal at times, yet he was never reckless and already deeply respected the laws of the tunnels. He shared everything with the other children and always looked out for his playmates. Yet, she also witnessed a striking shift, the moment his father was near, the playful little boy instantly transformed into a remarkably serious and thoughtful child.

Father kept a close eye on her too, ready to offer any help he could to get her through this, to listen, or simply to sit by her side while she tried to forget all that had happened. His soothing voice never failed to comfort her. It was Father who revealed how devastating the news of her supposed death had been, how deeply it had shattered their lives, and how he, along with several other tunnel inhabitants, had attended her funeral.

Only Vincent had been forced to remain Below during the day, but he had gone to her grave at night, returning there faithfully until the truth finally emerged that it had all been a cruel lie. Father told her everything he possibly could, though he carefully omitted the most threatening and horrifying details. He spoke of Jacob growing up, a boy as extraordinary as his father, yet uniquely capable of living in both worlds. And he expressed how profoundly happy they all were to have her back, before finally admitting how deeply worried he still was about Vincent.



Now that she was safe in the tunnels, Diana became a trusted friend. She shared more details about her investigation, explaining how she had first found Vincent at the cemetery, knowing he would eventually return to Catherine's grave. However, Diana also left out the extent of his injuries and his agonizing inner struggle. She spoke of her own abduction by Gabriel, and how he had forced her to lure Vincent

into a trap, which ultimately allowed Vincent to save their son. Yet, Diana skipped the grim details as well, leaving Catherine to only guess how terrible the ordeal must have been. Finally, Diana told her how they had ultimately uncovered her hiding place, allowing her to return to the place where she truly belonged.

Above all, there was also Joe, dear, sweet Joe, a steady and silent presence, always there whenever she needed him. She rejoiced in seeing the deep bond of friendship that had formed between Vincent and Joe. It was Joe who explained how corrupt Moreno had been, but acknowledged that, in the end, it was ironically thanks to Moreno's actions that she was still alive. He detailed his own investigation, his suspension, and how he had become the District Attorney after Moreno's death. Joe also spoke of Elliot's death, briefly mentioning that Vincent had been present, and touched upon the events at Gabriel's estate. Yet, even Joe left out the darkest details.

All of them did everything in their power to make her feel comfortable and to help her heal from everything she had suffered, selflessly putting their own pain aside for her sake. Catherine felt immensely blessed to have such caring and devoted friends. At the same time, as she listened to their stories, their perspectives on the case, she began to realize the staggering weight of the efforts they had all made, and she also realized they were holding back. They hadn't told her everything. Whenever she pressed for more, they all gave the same answer - Vincent held the keys to her questions. She was certain he did, yet he told her absolutely nothing. He was always on his guard, deftly avoiding her inquiries, his heavy silence speaking volumes.

It was Vincent who had sacrificed the most. He remained tight-lipped about everything that had transpired, never breathing a word of how excruciating his grief had been, or what he had endured to rescue their son. He completely effaced himself, asking for nothing while offering everything he had. Yet, she could not ignore the toll it had taken. She saw the profound exhaustion etched into his features, the sharp, harsh lines on his face that had never been there before, and the lingering sadness that still haunted his eyes. She felt it deep in her bones, there was still so much left untold.

In the middle of the night, she woke up and found Vincent completely awake.

"You should sleep...," she whispered.

"If only I could...," he replied, carefully avoiding her eyes.

"Why? What is disturbing you so much?" She sat up in bed, her concern deepening. "You know you need your rest. You can't keep pushing yourself too far."

"I know... but..." Defeated, he shook his head and got out of bed, pacing the room.

She watched him closely, seeing how deeply he was still suffering. More than anything, it was obvious he was trying to conceal his pain just to keep her from worrying.

"Vincent... I asked you to share everything with me. No matter what," she insisted, desperately hoping he would finally open up about what had happened to him.

"I remember, Catherine... but no. You have been through so much. You had to endure such a horrific ordeal... and it was all because of me."

"That is not true!" she countered softly but fiercely. "Gabriel had nothing to do with you." But even as she said it, she felt herself losing ground. He was putting up his walls again, refusing to speak of his own trauma.

"Oh yes... he did," Vincent countered, his voice catching. "He had everything to do with me. He had seen me... and..." He abruptly fell silent, staring into the shadows, not knowing how he could ever bring himself to tell her this part of the story.

"And what?" she pressed.

"No, Catherine... not now. You are still recovering from everything you've been through."

"Vincent, yes, I have been through a lot. It was the nightmare of my life. I thought I was never going to heal from it. I thought our son was lost to me forever, and I was convinced that I had lost you too. Until I managed to escape my exile, until Diana found me, and until I learned what she and Joe had discovered. She told me that it was you who kept fighting, you who never gave up... and it was you who saved Jacob. I owe you everything."

Resolute in his silence, Vincent shook his head, refusing to yield.

"I confided in Father... and there is Joe. He is a dear friend. That should be enough," he said, his tone final. "Now, please, go back to sleep. It is you who needs to recover."

That evening, she brought Jacob to the nursery for the night, she still regretted that the boy had to sleep separated from them. Yet, she understood Vincent's arguments all too well. Whenever he did manage to fall asleep, he was tormented by nightmares he still refused to talk about, and Vincent had been right... they were terrifying.

On her way back, she froze in her tracks at the sound of Vincent's voice. "I deserved that one..."

Then came the familiar voice of Joe. Apparently, he had come Below for another game of chess, and from what she could hear, Vincent had lost.

She stayed where she was, unwilling to disturb the two friends. Their time together was valuable, they still confided in each other, and she knew all too well that Vincent truly needed those moments.

"I'm not used to this, Vincent... I missed your focus," Joe stated.

"I know, Joe... I...", he left the sentence unfinished, but Joe was not about to let it drop.

"You're distracted. What's troubling you?"

Vincent didn't answer. Joe pressed on, "Father is worried."

"He always is... a habit since I was born...", came an unexpectedly harsh reply from Vincent.

"That's not fair, Vincent. He has every right to be worried. Even I can see you're not your usual self. And he's not the only one... we're all worried."

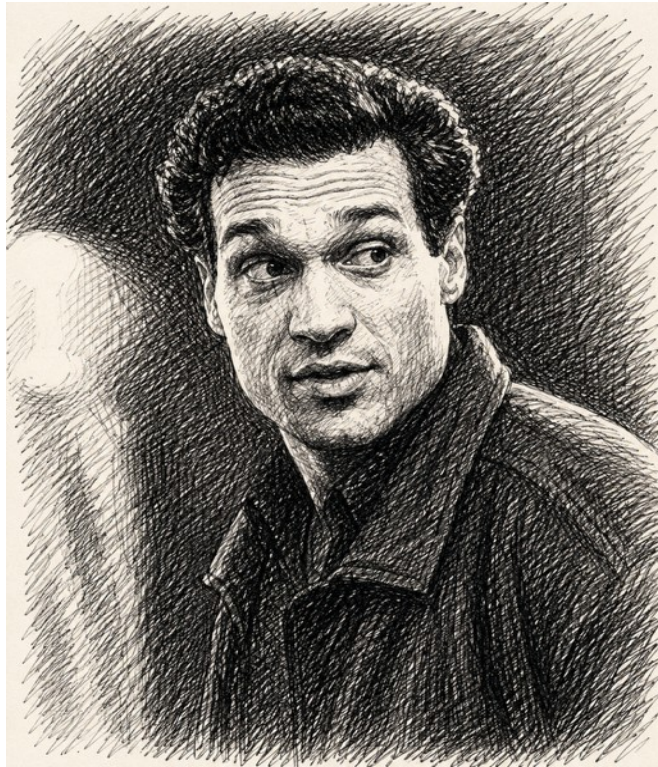
Vincent looked up from the chessboard he had been staring at. Gentle yet undeniably irritated by Joe's words, he replied, "There is no need."

Now, the investigator in Joe awakened. He had handled too many people who refused to talk about their past, too many who wanted to protect God knows who, too many who simply shut down. He decided he had to break through Vincent's stubborn silence.

"Goddammit, Vincent! There *is* a need! You just refuse to see it. You hit rock bottom a long time ago. You can't go on like this..."

Not even such a sharp outburst from Joe could change Vincent's mind. Knowing Joe well, he had learned to tolerate his verbal explosions.

"Please, Joe... I have my reasons." As he so often did, Vincent tried to avoid confronting himself and his own feelings.



Calming down slightly, Joe replied, knowing full well he was treading on very delicate ground.

"Vincent... I know what happened before Gabriel destroyed our lives. Cathy called in sick... the flu, she said. Afterwards, she confided in me that she needed time off because someone she loved was going through a difficult time. She meant you. I know you had a severe breakdown because of someone who confronted you with your dark side in a completely insane way."

Instantly, Vincent was on his feet, spitting out venomously, "Joe... don't!"

"Oh yes, I will! Cathy told me what caused it. Don't you realize it could happen again?" Joe managed to sound equally angry.

For a brief moment, Vincent looked shocked. Then, he softly admitted, "I do, Joe... It is my greatest fear."

"That's what I thought. So you still haven't told her?" it sounded almost accusatory. Joe hoped to breach that solid wall of denial, but he failed.

Vincent leaned his full weight onto the table and suddenly snarled, "No, Joe. Leave it at that!"

Catherine was horrified to hear the beginning of a full-blown argument between the two men, sharp and completely unrestrained. Vincent seldom raised his voice - he was usually the mediator in disputes, always the diplomat. She had never known him to engage in a harsh, brutal argument, not even when Father lectured him or tried to hold him back from whatever risk he wanted to take. But this was Joe,

explosive and at his best when he could provoke his opponent. That was exactly what he was doing now, provoking Vincent to make him realize he needed to talk. And she knew she couldn't interfere.

Joe mirrored Vincent's combative posture, leaning his full weight onto the table as well. The chessboard was forgotten between them as he looked straight into rebellious blue eyes. Fierce gazes locked in a silent battle.

"Vincent... I consider us friends. If I had a friend in the World Above who had to endure what you've been through, I'd drag him to the nearest shrink."

Vincent snorted contemptuously. "And what do you think he would say about me, Joe?" he retorted instantly, his words dripping with sarcasm.

Joe knew Vincent didn't shy away from sarcasm or cynicism at times, and that was exactly what he wanted. Once Vincent was on that path, Joe had him right where he wanted him - on edge, alert, focused, and ready to take on any challenge. He took advantage of it, provoking him even further, hoping to finally bring down those cursed walls.

"No idea. But it's obvious you can't just walk into a shrink's office."

Vincent shook his head in frustration and spat out, "No, I can't. They would lock me up or hunt me down. And I've already had my fair share of that!"

With those last words, his voice rose deep, ominous, and vibrating with an anger that went beyond mere irritation.

On the inside, Joe rejoiced at his success, yet he knew he had to be careful. Vincent's emotional balance was still highly unstable. But right now, Joe needed Vincent's rebellious, angry side, a side usually kept hidden behind his gentleness.

"There you have it, Vincent. I do understand that it's a heavy burden to bear. But the risk you're taking is far too high."

With a sigh, Vincent pushed himself away from the table and began to pace, needing the movement to gain some grip on his own confusion.

"You've made your point, Joe. I am aware of the risk... but..."

The fierceness was gone, the anger dissipated, the rebellious tone vanished. Joe accepted the shift eagerly. The last thing he wanted was a truly raging Vincent before his eyes, despite their warm friendship, he still feared Vincent's darker side.

"You want to spare her from what happened?" Joe asked, leaving his own anger behind.

A silent nod followed.

"Why, Vincent?"

The answer was simple. "Because I love her."

"But that is exactly why you have to talk to her, Vincent. She has had her share of a living hell, just like you. She will understand."

Still, Vincent refused to give in. "No, Joe. She has suffered so much. She has to face her own demons... she doesn't need mine as well."

"I understand. I really do. But she is worried, and I can't blame her." As Joe spoke, he watched Vincent, seeing the doubt and hesitation. He narrowed his eyes and said softly, "It's not just Catherine, is it?"

Instantly, Vincent lowered his head, hiding behind his golden mane. Joe realized he had hit home. Carefully, he chose his next words.

"Because of Jacob?"

Joe knew the boy sensed his father's emotions, and that Vincent wanted to shield him from them.

"Yes... part of it is. I can't keep him safe from my emotions... and he can't understand it all. Surely, it must be hard on him to be my son. But really, Joe, you must understand that I can't tell her what Gabriel tried to do... I can't tell her what it was like... she might understand... but what will it do to Jacob? He is too young to understand that part... he certainly has no need to face my demons."

Joe nodded. "I understand, Vincent. Yet, she has the right to know, and only you can tell her. And Jacob has both of you to reassure him."

"I know you're right... you all are... yet, I don't know how."

Joe tried to lighten the situation a bit. Despite the seriousness of it all, he said with the faint trace of a grin, "Try it word by word."

That took Vincent completely off guard. "As if it were that simple."

"It is, Vincent. I know it will be difficult, but it's the only way. For you, for her, and for your son."

Silently, Vincent gave in. He knew Joe was right. He had no arguments left to justify his silence. He looked at him, seeing the faint grin and those gentle, dark eyes. But most of all, he saw a dear friend.

He walked Joe back to the Park Entrance, where they parted with a firm, warm embrace. Neither of them noticed Catherine, hiding quietly in the shadows.

When she woke up later that night, she discovered she was entirely alone. Vincent was gone. The place beside her felt cold to the touch, meaning he had been gone for quite some time.

Immediately, the memory of the argument between him and Joe, which she had accidentally overheard, shot through her mind. She strongly suspected that their dispute was the catalyst for his sudden disappearance. Instantly on her feet, she dressed in something practical for a tunnel search and slipped out into the semi darkness.

When Vincent had returned the previous evening, he had only casually mentioned Joe's visit and his own lost game of chess, completely leaving out their clash. Yet, she had felt his profound restlessness. He had even asked her to accompany him on his last evening patrol. Curiously, he had avoided the Mirror Pool entirely, choosing instead to head to the Whispering Gallery. There, he had stood motionless in the middle of the old bridge, holding her tightly against him, as if trying to lose himself in the distant rumble of the city noises above.

She remembered saying, "The city is hectic tonight... I can't even hear my own thoughts."

And his reply had proven that this was exactly his intention all along, "I know."

But the city's chaos had not eased his inner turmoil, and she had known then that he had another sleepless night ahead of him. Now, her fears were confirmed and he was gone.

As she hurried through the corridors, she passed Father's study. From within, she heard his voice, softly trying to reassure Jacob. The boy seemed extremely upset, crying out just as he had done so often lately. Father was clearly making his grandson's well-being his absolute priority. Having raised Vincent, he knew all too well how to comfort and care for such an extraordinary, empathic child.

Catherine bit her lip. No matter how desperately she needed to find Vincent, she could not ignore the raw turmoil of her son. Stepping inside the book-filled chamber, she found Father sitting in his armchair with a weeping Jacob tightly cradled on his lap.

He looked up, surprised to see her standing there. "Catherine... you should be asleep."

She shook her head. "I can't, Father. Vincent is gone."

Instantly, a deep look of worry flashed across Father's grey eyes. He, too, knew this was a dangerous sign, and suddenly he understood exactly why Jacob was so terribly upset.

Catherine dropped to her knees in front of the boy. Sobbing, Jacob looked at her, tears trickling down his chubby cheeks as he frantically tried to wipe them away. The sheer terror she saw in her son's blue eyes struck her with the force of concrete. This was simply too much for such a little boy.

Letting himself slide to the floor, Jacob escaped his grandfather's lap and crawled straight into her arms, eagerly burying himself in her embrace. Tenderly, she pressed a soft kiss to the top of his head.

"It's all right, Jacob...", she whispered.

But stubbornly, he retorted, completely unaware of how much he resembled his father when he acted that way, "No, mommy... it is not."

It was the very first time he had ever called her 'mommy', yet she couldn't even find joy in this special milestone. In absolute silence, she cursed the villain who had inflicted all this trauma upon her loved ones.

"Why not, Jacob?" she asked gently.

"There is something wrong with Dad... I can feel it," he cried. "He is sad... and he left us."

She exchanged a meaningful glance with Father. Without words, she knew they shared the exact same, terrifying worries.

"I know, Jacob..."

"But why?" the boy sobbed, looking up at her with heartbreaking confusion. "You are here now, with us. He should be happy."

Catherine sighed. She had to explain to her son what was troubling his father, yet she couldn't tell him everything. She could only share the fragments she knew, and even then, she had to be incredibly careful. He was still such a little boy, how on earth could he begin to comprehend how cruel and evil the world could be, especially to his extraordinary father?

"He is happy, Jacob..."

"I don't feel that!" Jacob blurted out instantly.

A wave of panic struck her. She knew Jacob was remarkably mature for his age, but this profound level of emotional awareness was something she had never anticipated. She glanced at Father, catching a look in his eyes that spoke of long-forgotten memories, of a time when Vincent was just a little boy, and Father had been forced to explain the tremendous challenges that life held in store for him.

"Jacob... you know what happened the night you were born, don't you?"

Jacob nodded solemnly. "Yes... everyone thought you died."

"Yes. And it caused your dad an immense amount of pain. Bad things happened after that, Jacob... things so terrible that they still make him very sad."

"He always tells me to talk about what I'm feeling," the boy countered, his bottom lip trembling. "So why doesn't he do that too?"

Catherine was completely lost for words at his sharp logic. She looked at Father, who appeared just as baffled by the boy's maturity. Stepping in, Father answered gently,

"He wants to protect you, Jacob."

Hearing that, the little boy seemed to quiet down, understanding that protective instinct in his father.

Catherine rose to her feet. After a brief, tender farewell to Father and her son, she continued her desperate search for Vincent.

Finally, she found him. He was standing on the cliff at the Great Falls, staring down at the magnificent, wild abundance of water crashing into the roaring pool below, making the surface boil, a perfect, violent reflection of his own inner turmoil. His long mane waved slightly in the mist-laden wind blowing from the falls. He stood there quiet, silent, and entirely lost in his thoughts.

There had been times in the past when his empathic bond would alert him to her presence instantly. But now, he was completely unaware that she was standing just a few yards away, observing him, her worry deepening with each passing minute.

Suddenly, he jolted out of his contemplation. Sensing her now, he backed away immediately. Although he seemed to be in control, the chaotic energy of his emotions was almost palpable in the air. And she understood all too well why Jacob had been so profoundly upset... but she also understood the need of his father, to protect their son from this darkness. Jacob had been right, his father ought to be happy now with her being alive and with them in the Tunnels, yet it was painfully obvious that he was not... his violent nightmares were tale telling...

"Vincent... please....," she demanded, her voice soft yet unyielding.

He remained silent, but at least he stayed where he was. He resolutely avoided her gaze, but his misery was written all over his face.

He stood on the very edge of the cliff, maintaining his balance by sheer natural instinct, while below him, the thundering roar of the falls rose up to drown the fierce, deafening turmoil of his own soul.

He had fled the safety of his chamber, just as he always did when his thoughts became too disturbing to bear in the presence of others.

Solitude was his only anchor, his desperate shield against the rising tide within, and tonight, the need was absolute. In his darkest times, he would have withdrawn to the most remote and shadowed depths of his world. But realizing he was now standing at a critical crossroads, he had not gone that far. Yet the turmoil was there, hovering deep inside him for quite some time.

This was not like before, there were no feverish hallucinations, but instead, there were the relentless nightmares. He was haunted by the vivid, agonizing memory of his own ferocious fury. His long silences, his abrupt withdrawals, they had all been necessary to desperately maintain his fragile balance. And now, even that was no longer enough, it had become a slow, tormenting descent into a quiet madness, threatening to tear away every piece of the gentle, empathetic soul he had fought so hard to maintain, drifting toward a terrifying abyss that frightened him above all else...

Staring into the boiling downpour without truly seeing its raw beauty, he simply stood there. He knew he had to talk, or he had to disappear. There was no other choice. Disappearing would be the easiest path, hiding in places where no soul could ever find him, surrendering entirely to his own madness.



This time, however, that surrender would mean death. His death. But he was exhausted beyond all limits, stripped of his strength and his courage. The walls he had painstakingly built, the isolation in which he had exiled himself, could no longer protect him. If he chose to talk, he might survive. He might even find himself again. But as he stood there, he asked himself if it was truly worth the struggle. He just wanted relief. He looked down, considering the simple act of diving off the cliff, surrendering his broken body to the churning mass of water below. It would be a deadly fall. It would be final. And it would all be over... it would bring relief... for him, at least.

From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Catherine drawing closer. A sudden, sharp realization hit him, it was far too dangerous for her on this cliff. She did not possess his primal agility to maintain her balance on these slick, treacherous rocks. Yet, his instinct was to pull away immediately, he didn't want anyone coming near him, not even her, his savior from the past.

"Vincent... we need to talk," she insisted gently, doing her utmost not to cause him any more pain than he was already enduring. But she knew she had to press on. For the sake of their son, his father desperately needed to speak about the things that had left such deep, undeniable wounds.

He gave a very brief, tight nod.

"I know..." His voice was barely a whisper, and he hurried on before she could speak. "I just don't know where to start... I... I..." The words failed him, and he fell silent.

"Just tell me, Vincent. I've had my own share of horrors, but we have to carry this together. I know I wasn't the only one who suffered, but the walls you've built around yourself have to come down now. You need to talk. Not just for your own sake, but for our son's. This is hurting him too much."

Slowly, he looked up at her. "I want to protect him," he explained. "He must never feel the weight that is crushing me. I can't put into words what it did to me. Gabriel tried to take away my humanity, and he

nearly succeeded. I wanted revenge, a revenge drenched in blood. In doing so, I became that which I have struggled against my entire life. Solitude became my only comfort. A deep, dark, deathlike solitude. (*)”

She remained silent, knowing she had to give him time to come to terms with his own raging emotions. He needed to find a way to speak the horrifying truth of what had been done to him, the root of a grief so deep it seemed inconsolable.

Again, he avoided her gaze. Fixing his eyes on the thundering waterfall, he quietly began to recount the most devastating events of his life.

“Gabriel was beyond evil... he made us believe you were dead, he destroyed so many lives... and he used me to do it, or at least he tried. He saw my dark side. At first, he wanted to kill me for it... then, he marveled at it. He sedated me... chained me... put me behind electrified bars. He tortured me with images of my own rage, convinced that I would grow to admire that part of myself. And he wanted your son because of me. I can't make you understand what's happening inside me... I can't even explain it to myself.”

He fell silent, reflecting on his possibilities. Either he would succumb to his dark side, or he would fight back and reclaim his right to humanity. He was well aware that to save his sanity, he had to speak. Yet, he had locked everything away so deep inside that whatever rose to the surface was not even the worst of it. For as long as he could remember, he had pushed his limits, trying to bury the painful memories. Now, he had gone far beyond those boundaries, much too far, and he was paying the price. The burden of it all was simply too much. He had to make a choice.

He tried to put as much distance between them as possible, wanting her safe if he were to lose his grip. He realized how dangerous he was now, with ferocity looming so close. But as he looked at her standing there, lost and terrified of what might happen to him, he saw the woman he loved above all else. The mother of his son. She had come so far, sacrificed so much, and endured every mother's worst nightmare, losing her child. Yet she had fought back with everything she had to reclaim what was rightfully hers. Her son. And him.

He had no right to destroy her, which is exactly what would happen if he fled again. And it would surely destroy their son. That was not an option, neither of them deserved that. He owed it to her, and to his little boy. So, he stayed where he was. Slowly, the abyss of utter despair began to ebb away.

He shook his head, took a deep breath, and chose his path. Then, he began to speak. He told her everything, every single horrifying detail. Each word sounded almost like a growl, but with every sentence, he felt his dark side slowly shrink back. Still, he kept his distance, a habit that had become second nature.

By dawn, he was finished. Utterly drained, he fell to his knees and slumped against the rock wall beside her, unable to utter another word. He had bared his soul. He had confessed every dreadful detail, telling her how he had nearly lost his humanity, how he had thrived on sheer vengeance, and how close he had come to total destruction.

It left him empty, hollowed out. He barely had the strength to stay where he was. Words failed him completely, and from deep within, a painful roar boiled up, expressing everything he could not put into words. The sound echoed off the rock walls, reverberating through the entire World Below. Never before in his life had he sounded so raw, so anguished, so utterly devastated. Then, he collapsed onto the cave floor, panting for breath, completely lost.



The World Below had heard his cry, and it had left them in utter shock.

Father was on his feet immediately. He heard Jacob cry out as well, and all at once, the tunnel community dissolved into chaos. Fearing that disaster was at hand, everyone demanded to know what was happening.

In his study, Father tried to reassure the council members who had gathered.

"My dear friends... you all know what Vincent has had to endure, and we all know the toll it has taken. Like all of you, I had hoped that Catherine's return would bring him peace. I was wrong. I know that Catherine is searching for him now, and I intend to join her. So please, have faith and be patient. I cannot give you the answers you seek, but I deeply hope he can return safely."

With those words, Father gathered a few supplies, took his cane, and made to leave his study. On the stairs, he found little Jacob in tears, with a deeply concerned Mary standing beside him. He gently kissed his grandson and whispered,

"I will return with them both, Jacob." And deep down, he prayed that this promise would not be a lie.

He exchanged a worried look with Mary and said quietly, "Please, Mary... try to keep him here. He shouldn't see his father in the state he is in right now."

Mary nodded, gently placing a hand on Father's arm. "Return safely, Father."

With a brief nod, the Tunnel Patriarch left. He set out in search of his son and Catherine, leaving everyone behind with questions he could not yet answer. He had to go, he had to find them both. And

as he walked, he prayed that his search would soon end, and that it would not be as devastating as before.

Catherine watched him, lying on the cave floor dangerously close to the edge of the cliff... and she went to him, neglecting the treacherous path she had to take in order to reach him...

With a gentle, soft gesture she put a hand on his shoulder and felt him shaking all over... he cringed under her touch, almost as if he didn't deserve to be touched...

"It is over Vincent... it is all over... I understand why you refused to talk about it... but your nightmares were giving you away... I am so sorry you had to endure this provocation... this humiliation..."

Slowly, he managed to get up and he looked at her... savoring her beauty...

Tenderly she stroked his tangled mane out of his face and felt the coarse stubbles beneath her fingers... she pulled him close, holding him, just as he had done so many times, in the quiet sanctuary of the world Below, when she needed comfort. Now it was his turn. She could feel his ragged, heavy breathing, and a deep, agonizing tremor rippled through his body. His soul was so deeply wounded, his grief so raw and consuming, that even the tears he desperately needed remained locked inside. Only when his breathing finally slowed and he looked up at her, his blue eyes still burning with a profound, aching pain, did she softly break the silence.

"Together we can survive this, Vincent..."

"I love you...", he whispered.

This time, he pulled her into his embrace. Her presence, her nearness, acted as a soothing balm upon his deeply wounded soul.

Father had followed his instincts. Vincent would not have gone to the peaceful Mirror Pool to ease his turmoil, he would have sought a place as turbulent as his own mind. He would have fled either to the dark caves and tunnels far beyond the Abyss, or to the Great Falls. Normally, Father was the rational one, yet now he simply followed where his heart led him.

At last, he found Catherine and Vincent at the Falls, at the far end of the dangerous cliff. They were comforting one another after the horrific ordeals they had endured, and a glimpse of hope hung in the air. They were talking, finding solace in each other's words.

But before Father could speak, a little bundle of blond hair came bursting into view. With racing feet and a child's voice calling out for his dad, little Jacob appeared. He had sneaked away from Mary's supervision. Paying no attention to his grandfather, the boy rushed straight toward his parents. He was instantly greeted by the fierce, protective embrace of his father and a gentle kiss from his mother.

"He is a blessing, Catherine," Vincent whispered. "He was my anchor... my only reason not to give up."

She smiled softly. "A shared anchor, Vincent. All that time, it was the thought of him that kept me going, too."

"You were right... all along. Nothing is impossible." A brief smile crossed Vincent's face, showing he was finally on the path to recovery, with Catherine by his side and their little boy between them, beaming with joy.

Father waited patiently until Vincent had regained enough strength to get on his feet. With Catherine supporting him, Vincent managed to safely navigate his way off the treacherous cliff. Stepping forward, Father greeted his son with a warm, tight embrace.

"Let's get you home, Vincent," he said softly, offering his own arm for support.

Their progress back was slow and made in complete silence. Even Jacob remained quiet, intently watching every single step his father took.

In the deepest dark of the night, they finally reached Vincent's chamber. He discarded his long cloak and kicked off his boots in an uncharacteristically sloppy manner, dropping himself full-length onto his bed. Within seconds, he was fast asleep. With Father's help, Catherine settled him a little more comfortably and pulled one of his soft blankets over him. He didn't move.

Father quietly slipped away, knowing that several community members were still waiting for news. He felt a profound sense of relief that he could finally reassure them. Vincent had returned home safely, utterly exhausted, but without injury, and mentally in a far better state than when he had left. And Catherine was by his side.

Catherine sank into Vincent's chair, her eyes lingering silently on him while he slept, she watched him with a tender gaze until Jacob's soft voice broke the heavy silence.

"Mom... I am tired."

A wave of guilt washed over her as she realized how completely she had been lost in her thoughts. She immediately pulled Jacob into a warm, protective embrace.

"Of course you are... I am so sorry. Your father needed me, but I am here now."

"I know...", Jacob murmured, eagerly enjoying her embrace.

"Let me take you to Mary..."

"No, Mom... I know a much better place," her son replied, his small hands already trying to untie his boots.

"But Jacob... your father..." she began softly, but the pure, knowing look in Jacob's eyes made her words fade away.

Jacob looked up, a serene smile brushing his lips. "His nightmares won't trouble him tonight, Mom... and I will be safe."

With those gentle words, he slipped under the soft blanket, curling up close against his father's side. Catherine watched them, her heart overflowing, completely breathless at the sight. Quietly, she resumed her loving vigil.

When Father re-entered the room, he found her still awake, her eyes shining in the dim light.

"You should be sleeping too, Catherine... you still need your rest," he said softly.

She looked up, a radiant smile gracing her face.

"I will, Father...but I just want to hold onto this moment a little longer." She gestured tenderly toward the bed and its sleeping occupants. "Jacob told me his father's nightmares wouldn't trouble him tonight. He said he was safe."

Father's gaze drifted to the bed. A wave of wonder crossed his face as he saw father and son wrapped in a peaceful, deep slumber, perfectly at ease beside one another.

"He is a truly remarkable child, Catherine... He carries Vincent's soul, and he has inherited his empathic abilities," Father whispered, looking back at her.

"He is...," she replied softly, her voice thick with emotion. "He is his father's son... in every beautiful way."

"And yours, my dear Catherine," Father added, his voice rich with gratitude. "You are an absolute blessing to his life. Seeing the two of them now, I truly understand where Vincent found the courage to love you so deeply. I am endlessly grateful to you for giving him his dream... for giving him his life."

He leaned down, pressing a gentle, affectionate kiss to her cheek, before quietly leaving her alone with the two people who meant the world to her..

A little later, Catherine decided to seek the comfort of sleep as well. Carefully, she slipped beneath the covers, holding her breath so she wouldn't disturb either Jacob or Vincent.

But Vincent was already aware of her presence. He shifted slightly, moving just enough to welcome her next to him... A soft, low murmur escaped his throat as he turned toward her, putting his arm around her to draw her close.

"You should sleep...," she whispered, marveling at his nearness and his presence.

"I am...," he breathed. His voice was a low rumble, rougher and more graveled than usual, yet dripping with a rare, sleepy affection.

A tender smile brushed her lips. She had to search the deepest corners of her memory to recall a time when Vincent had teased her like this. Melting into his touch, she lifted his hand to her lips, pressing a soft, lingering kiss against his knuckles.

"Be careful...," she murmured against his skin, "Jacob is sleeping right next to you."

"I know..."

He didn't pull away. Instead, he shifted even closer, his grip tightening gently as he pulled her closer against his body. She nestled into his embrace, completely enveloped by his warmth and safety. Then, his breath brushed her ear, warm and intimate,

"Have I told you that I love you?"

"You have...," she whispered, her voice filled with emotion. "Yet you can never say it enough."

"I'll keep that in mind..."

While his words still echoed in her heart, his breathing slowed. He drifted off, sinking into a deep, peaceful, and healing sleep.

She lay awake for a moment, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. She knew they still had a long journey ahead of them, a path that would undoubtedly have its peaks and valleys. But lying close to him, wrapped in his arms, she knew they could conquer anything, as long as they were together. Finally, the heavy pull of exhaustion claimed her, too.

On his patrol through the inner part of the Tunnels Father quietly stepped into the chamber to check on them, he stopped in the doorway. He saw the three of them, tangled in a peaceful, protective embrace, sleeping soundly. A profound sense of relief washed over him. For once, he could let go of all his worries and concerns.

A soft murmur in the semi darkness stirred her from sleep, and she found Jacob already awake beside her. Moving with quiet grace, she guided the boy through the awakening labyrinth of the Tunnels to Father's study. Around them, the subterranean world was coming to life, its daily rhythms resuming, yet Father welcomed his grandson with open arms. He cherished these fleeting moments, eagerly enjoying the chance to read to the boy from the very same leather-bound classics he had once read to Vincent.

When she returned to their chamber, Vincent was still asleep. It was a rare, fragile mercy, perhaps the first time in an eternity that peace had truly claimed him. She slipped back beneath the covers, settling beside him just to watch the gentle rise and fall of his chest. Tenderly, she took his hand in hers, tracing the contours of his powerful fingers, her gaze lingering without fear upon his sharp claws. Suddenly, she felt him try to pull away. She held on tight as he opened his eyes, a look of horror creeping into his gaze.

"How can you even bear to look at them?" he whispered. His voice still hoarse with sleep, yet strained with an immediate, aching sorrow.

She knew the agony that haunted him, knew there were dark moments when he could not endure the sight of his own hands, tormented by the memory of the violence they had caused.

"Because these are your hands," she answered softly, her voice a steady anchor. "These are the hands that offer love and warmth. They bring comfort. They are uniquely yours."

"These are hands that bring death, Catherine. And destruction."

"I know the power you hold within these hands, Vincent. But whenever that fury was unleashed, it was born of necessity. You protect the world Below. You saved my life and you saved our son."



Still, the shadow of doubt lingered, and he tried to withdraw into himself once more.

"No, Vincent, do not turn away," she urged gently, pulling closer. "They are an inseparable part of the man you are. I love every part of you... your generous soul, your gentle, caring heart, and even the fierce protector..."

"Because you understand...," he murmured, his voice breaking. "But Jacob... how can a little boy understand?"

"He understands more than you think, Vincent. He loves you exactly the way you are. It was he who told me your nightmares wouldn't haunt you tonight... that he was safe."

Silently, Vincent pulled her into his embrace, holding her as if she were his only anchor in a shifting world.

"It sounds so easy when you say it," he whispered, his voice a low, gravelly ache against her hair.

"I know, Vincent. I know the toll it takes on you. But that is exactly what defines you. That very burden is your humanity, rising above all else," she replied, her voice filled with an infinite tenderness.

A long silence stretched between them before he spoke again. "Their faces always haunted me in my dreams. Always. But now..."

He sat up against his pillows and bowed his head, his tangled mane falling over his shoulders and back, completely concealing his expression. He tried to find the right words to tell her what was causing him so much pain, why he wanted so desperately to protect her and their son from it.

Catherine gave him the grace of time. She did not press, she simply held his hands within her own. At first, she felt that familiar, instinctive resistance, the urge to draw back, to hide his claws from her sight. But as they sat together in the profound silence of the chamber, she felt the tension slowly melt away. For the first time, he truly yielded, allowing her to caress his hands with a gentle reverence he had never permitted before.

"That cage... those chains... the mental torture... it was agonizing," he whispered, the words dragging from his chest. "I was reduced to the very thing I most detest. It was as if every shred of my humanity had been stripped away. And by the time I burned Gabriel's drugs lab to the ground... I had reached my lowest, darkest point."

He paused, taking a long, ragged breath, then forced himself to look directly into her eyes.

"I tried to forget that time, Catherine. I tried to bury it so deep inside myself that it could never find its way back. At first, I believed I had succeeded. But in the end, denial only fed the beast. The memories turned into dreams... and the dreams became relentless nightmares. Until they haunted day and night."

His voice faded into a breathless whisper, the lingering horror of those days mirroring clearly in his eyes.

Catherine didn't speak right away, she knew words could sometimes feel too small for a pain so vast. Instead, she slid her arms around him, pulling him close until his head rested against her shoulder.

"Because you were fighting a war in the dark, Vincent," she whispered, her voice trembling yet steady. "Revenge is a false sanctuary. It feeds the darkness, but it cannot heal the wounds. The fact that it haunts you, Vincent... that is the very proof of your humanity. Gabriel wanted to destroy your soul, but he failed. You sought revenge because you were pushed beyond human limits, and it left profound wounds in your soul. Wounds that still haven't healed. Wounds you were hiding from Jacob... and from me. Those nightmares only hold power in the dark. Together, we can bring them into the light."

"They don't deserve the light, Catherine... there was so much blood... I killed... too many...," he groaned, the words raw, heavy, and laced with a bitter, inconsolable sorrow.

She felt the onset of his withdrawal, the familiar, freezing shift that always threatened to pull him into isolation, making her heart ache with a sudden dread. But she refused to let him slip away into the dark. She needed to reach him, to touch the deepest, innermost emotional refuge of his soul.

"Vincent... I know what happened, even if you never told me everything. The burden must be tremendous... and I know this is destroying you," she said, her voice filled with a fierce, unwavering

conviction, "And I won't let that happen. Not after everything we have been through. Jacob is your light... and I am the one who is going to guide you back to it. Don't be afraid of that light, Vincent..."

For a second, he stiffened. He fought with every ounce of his remaining strength to hold onto the walls he had built, desperate to shield her from the horrors of his mind. But Catherine's fierce love was too powerful, her grip too tenderly absolute to fight. Slowly, the agonizing tension in his broad shoulders began to fracture. A ragged, trembling breath escaped his lips, and then, he broke completely.



His confession at the Great Fall the day before had already opened the gates to his deepest grief. His profound silence then had been telling, and now, met by her understanding words, he could finally yield to the suffocating feelings he had carried alone.

The dam that had held back months of horror, guilt, and unspeakable pain finally collapsed. A low, choked sob tore from deep within, a sound so fragile and raw it broke Catherine's heart. He buried his face into the crook of her neck, his body shaking as the tears finally came, painful and unstoppable, soaking her skin. His strong hands clutched at her back, gripping her like a drowning man holding onto his only lifeline.

Catherine held him tighter, guiding him through this storm of deep-set grief, gently, resting her cheek against his tangled mane, whispering soft, wordless comforts into the quiet of their chamber. She simply let him weep, knowing that every tear washing over his face was stripping away a piece of Gabriel's cruelty, slowly restoring his beautiful, tortured soul.

Through the empathetic bond they shared, the echoes of Vincent's raw agony reached little Jacob. The safety of Father's study, filled with the warmth of old books and burning candles, could not shield the boy from the crushing wave of his father's grief. Instinctively, he slipped away once more, drawn back to his parents chamber by the invisible tether of his inheritance.

Catherine heard a soft footfall. Looking up through her own tears, her arms still wrapped tightly around Vincent, she saw Jacob standing in the entrance of the chamber, his face pale but entirely devoid of fear.

His blue eyes were filled with an ancient, knowing understanding as he witnessed his father undone by sorrow.

He didn't hesitate. With quiet, deliberate steps, his bare feet making no sound against the stone floor, he climbed onto the bed, moving into the space beside Vincent. Gently, Jacob pressed himself against his father, wrapping his small arms as far around his father's waist as they could reach, offering his own pure, unblemished warmth to soothe the raging storm.

Vincent froze for a fraction of a second, as he felt those tiny hands touching him. Then, a new wave of tears spilled over, softer this time, as he realized his son was there, completely unafraid of his darkness, holding him tight and anchoring him to the living world. Slowly, with an almost reverent care, Vincent reached back with one hand, gently covering Jacob's small fingers. In that quiet gesture, he locked the three of them into an unbroken, sacred circle of love.

Gradually, the violent tremors torturing his body began to subside. The raging storm inside him was finally spending its fury, leaving behind a profound, quiet stillness. The heavy, choked sobs gave way to long, shuddering breaths.

Vincent gently shifted so he could face his son. He leaned back against the pillows, looking down at the small boy who had helped him through one of the darkest hours of his life.

With a hand that was still trembling slightly, Vincent reached out. He carefully touched Jacob's cheek, his sharp claws held safely away, and brushed a stray lock of blond hair from the boy's forehead. Vincent's voice was lower than usual, hoarse with the weight of spent tears, but it held a warmth that had been missing for far too long.

"Jacob...", he murmured, his gaze deep and searching. "You felt it... didn't you? My pain... my darkness."

Jacob looked up, his blue eyes reflecting nothing but pure, unconditional love. In complete trust he leaned his small face into his father's large palm.

"I felt all of it, Dad... I knew that some bad things happened to you... it caused you awful nightmares... I heard you waking from them... and I was afraid... afraid for you... I also felt you yesterday, I heard you too... and then my fear was over. I told Mom you would be safe tonight."

A bittersweet smile touched Vincent's lips, his heart aching with both guilt and immense gratitude.

"You should never have to carry my burdens, Jacob. I wanted to protect you from the things that hurt me. I wanted to hide them from you... but the bond we share is simply too strong..."

Jacob shook his head gently, reaching up to place his little hand over Vincent's clawed fingers.

"You don't need to hide, Dad... you know I can feel you... I only need to know that you are safe..."

Vincent looked from his son to Catherine, whose eyes were shining with tears of relief. For the first time in months, the crushing weight on him felt manageable. He pulled Jacob close, tucking the boy's head securely under his chin, while his other arm drew Catherine back to his side.

"I am blessed with a son like you, Jacob," Vincent whispered into his son's hair, his voice filled with a quiet, hard-won peace. "You and your mother... you both are the light of my life."

As the quiet warmth of the chamber enveloped them, Vincent felt a profound emotional healing within his soul. For the first time, he truly accepted that he was on the path to recovery. Supported by the fierce, unyielding love of Catherine and the pure, intuitive strength of their son, the suffocating grip of his ordeal seemed finally broken.

Yet, as he looked down at Catherine, a sudden, sobering realization pierced through his newfound peace. He watched the gentle rise and fall of her shoulders, seeing the faint lines of exhaustion etched around her eyes. She had poured every ounce of her spirit into pulling him back from the abyss. She had

fought for their son, endured the harrowing nightmare of loss, and stood as his anchor against the dark. But she was not unbreakable.

Vincent knew with absolute certainty that their journey was far from over. He was healing, yes, but Catherine still had a long, arduous road of her own to walk. The trauma she had buried while focusing entirely on his survival would eventually demand its toll. Gently, he tightened his arm around her, pressing a soft kiss into her hair. He silently vowed that just as she had been his light in his deepest darkness, he would now stand by her side, ready to carry her through whatever valleys lay ahead, just as he had done before this all began. They would face the long road together.

Feeling the change in him, she softly whispered, "I once told Father that you were my life, that without you, there was nothing..."

"I still feel as though I don't deserve you," Vincent replied, his voice heavy with emotion. "You sacrificed so much for me. Even now, you had to endure so much pain, and yet... you put it all aside for my sake."

"You are worth everything, Vincent. If you suffer, I suffer with you. There is no other way for me." She smiled and kissed him gently, watching how Jacob held his father. The bond between father and son was truly extraordinary. "Look at us, Vincent...look at what we have. This is far more than the dream we once shared."

"I know," he murmured. "He is such a brave, extraordinary little boy. It cannot be easy for him to grow up with a father like me. Someday, he will truly understand who and what I am, and how I protect those I love. I will have to tell him the unconcealed truth about myself... and I dread that day."

"I understand, Vincent," she said softly. "But I will be at your side. You will never have to face that day alone."

They heard Father's familiar footsteps and the steady, reassuring tap of his cane approaching the chamber.

"Now, young man...", Catherine said, looking down at her son with a gentle but firm look in her eyes. "You will need to apologize to Father for running away."

Jacob looked up at her, entirely unfazed, and gave a small, innocent shrug. "I didn't run away... I just came here."

"But Father was worried."

"He always is...", Jacob retorted mischievously, bringing a smile to both his parents' faces.

"Yes, Father is often worried," Vincent explained softly, his hand resting protectively against his son's shoulder. "Because he carries a great responsibility for all who call our world here their home... and because he loves you more than words can express."

Reluctantly, Jacob climbed down from his place beside his father and greeted the Tunnel Patriarch at the entrance of the chamber.

"I am sorry, Father... but Dad needed me."

Father looked past the boy, his sharp eyes taking in the sight of Vincent and Catherine. Noticing the profound, unmistakable change in them, a warm, soft smile crept over his weathered face.

"I am quite used to extraordinary boys running away at the most unpredictable moments," he said, and by the subtle, knowing gleam in his eye, it was entirely obvious he was not referring to Jacob. He gently patted the boy's shoulder, sending him back toward the bed with an approving nod, before entering into the chamber.

He let his gaze rest solely on Vincent. For agonizing months, he had watched his son drown in a silent sea of unspoken horrors, helpless to pull him from the depths. But now, he saw a clarity in Vincent's blue eyes that had been absent for far too long. The suffocating shadows had finally lifted.

Father closed the distance between them, his cane falling silent against the floor. He didn't speak immediately, the sheer weight of his relief seemed to steal his breath. Slowly, with a gesture born of a lifetime of paternal love, he reached out and placed a warm, unsteady hand on Vincent's shoulder.

"I have spent a lifetime studying medicine, Vincent," Father whispered, his voice trembling slightly with an emotion he rarely allowed others to see. "But there are wounds that no science can mend... and I feared those wounds would take you from me. I am... deeply grateful to see you well. It is obvious Catherine was the medicine that saved your life."

He turned his gaze toward Catherine, his eyes shining with a silent, reverent gratitude, acknowledging that her fierce, unyielding devotion had accomplished what all his books and remedies could not.

Vincent swallowed the heavy lump in his throat, gazing up at the man who had sheltered and raised him. He reached up, gently but securely placing his strong hand over Father's trembling fingers.

"Thank you, Father," Vincent said, his voice low, resonant, and steady, echoing with the beautiful grace of his newfound peace. "I am so sorry you had to go through this. I was... lost in an abyss of despair. Partly caused by evil itself... and partly my own making. But I am stronger now... and I realize I have to accept help."

But as he spoke, Vincent's gaze drifted down to Catherine, who was still leaning against his side. The relief on her face could not hide the profound exhaustion that clung to her like a shadow.

"But my healing has come at a great cost, Father," Vincent continued softly, his eyes filled with a deep, protective sorrow as he looked at her. "In my darkest moments, Catherine was the one who kept me grounded. She put all of her own grief, her own terror, and the trauma of everything she survived aside, just to keep me alive. She has been my savior and guardian, but she is exhausted. Her own path to recovery is not finished and she cannot... must not carry that weight alone..."

He tightened his embrace around her shoulders, looking back up at Father with fierce determination.

"Just as she fought for me, it is my turn now to stand by her side. "

Catherine felt a sudden wave of emotion wash over her. For so long she had kept her shoulders squared and her heart guarded, acting as the unbreakable pillar for her son, for Vincent. Now, hearing Vincent's fierce, protective words and feeling Father's warm, supportive presence beside them, her guard began to slip away. She didn't try to deny her exhaustion. Instead, a soft, trembling sigh escaped her lips as she let herself sink deeper into Vincent's embrace, finally allowing his strength to support her.

"I never realized how heavy the burden was until now. But seeing him with Jacob, feeling how he is healing from the horrors he had to face... it makes every step of that road worth it."

Father smiled down at her, his eyes softening with a rare, paternal tenderness. He stepped closer and placed his other hand gently over hers.

"It took a lot of courage to do what you have done, Catherine. You are a brave, remarkable woman" Father said softly, his deep voice rich with respect, "Years ago I was utterly convinced that you would make my son unhappy... stubborn as he is, he threw my words back at me telling me that he then would be unhappy... I couldn't have been more wrong..."

With both Vincent and Father embracing her in their unyielding protection, Catherine finally let her guard down completely. A few quiet tears of pure relief slipped down her cheeks, but for the first time in a very long time, they were not tears of sorrow.

Seeing the tears on his mother's cheeks, Jacob didn't hesitate. He crawled closer, slipping his small hands around Catherine's neck, and pressed a warm, sticky kiss against her temple.

"Don't cry, Mom," he whispered softly, his blue eyes filled with an old, comforting wisdom. "Dad is safe now. We are all safe."

Catherine choked back a watery laugh, hugging her son tightly against her. "I know, sweetheart. These are happy tears. I promise."

Father watched the exchange with a quiet smile, then extended his hand toward his grandson.

"Come along, Jacob. I believe it is time for you to help me with a very important task. And perhaps, we can find something to quiet that rumbling stomach of yours."

Jacob looked from Father back to his parents, instinctively sensing that they needed to be alone. With a decisive nod, he slid off the bed and took Father's hand.

Father gave Vincent and Catherine a long, meaningful look, a silent, paternal, blessing that spoke volumes, before turning to lead the boy out.

As the last echo of Father's cane faded into the distance, Vincent turned his full attention back to Catherine. Without a word, he gathered her into his arms, pulling her tightly against his chest. His embrace was no longer desperate or frantic, it was a slow, deliberate sanctuary of warmth and protection.

"How do you feel?" he asked, his voice low and filled with concern.

She took a deep, shuddering breath before she could find the strength to answer.

"It is so confusing, Vincent... I am happy because I have found you and Jacob. I am so deeply relieved to see that you are finally healing. Yet, at the same time... the painful memory of everything we endured, of all that happened, still lingers like an ominous shadow."

He nodded slowly, his blue eyes reflecting her pain. "I know how it feels, Catherine. I know how it damages your soul. Do you want to talk about it?"

Puzzled, she turned her gaze toward him. "But this has been so demanding upon you... You have carried so much."

"This is not about me, Catherine," he urged gently, leaning closer. "My thoughts are only of you. I am concerned about you."

With a hesitant sigh, she shrugged her shoulders, her gaze drifting toward the flickering candlelight. "I don't know... I am afraid. I don't want to invite that agony back into my heart."

"Do you truly believe that hiding from it is wise?" Vincent asked softly, his words a gentle but persistent echo of her own past advice, "What were the words you so fiercely spoke to me? What is the very thing you have done for my sake for so long?"

Unable to face the truth in his eyes, she gently freed herself from his warm embrace and slid out of bed, stepping onto the cold stone floor.

"I know..." she whispered, her back turned to him, her voice tight with emotion.

In an instant, she felt the familiar shift in the air, the unmistakable resonance of his presence behind her. His breath, warm and soft against her hair, enclosed her like an unyielding shield of absolute safety.

"Are you up for a short journey?" he asked, his voice a low, gravelly caress that broke the quiet of the chamber.

"I need to feel the air," she replied, a trace of weariness in her voice, "But it is still daylight... you cannot venture Above."

A gentle, knowing smile touched the corners of his lips. "Down here there are many hidden sanctuaries, Catherine. Places beyond the park."

He pulled on his boots and draped his dark cloak around his shoulders. She did the same, her movements mirroring his. When he extended his hand, her fingers slipped into his, their grip tightening as if anchoring each other against the world.

They walked the winding, ancient tunnels in a profound, comfortable silence, born of absolute trust. Finally, the stone pathways opened up into a cavernous vault, leading them to the edge of the Mirror Pool.

"Have you forgotten this place?" he asked softly, the words echoing off the damp stone.

"No..." She looked around the cavern, her eyes taking in every detail. "How could I? Our memories are etched into these walls. "

She walked to the bank of the pool and looked at the reflection in the undisturbed surface of the water.

Vincent moved behind her, his arms wrapping around her waist, drawing her back against him. He leaned down, his whisper brushing her ear. "Tell me, Catherine."

Looking down into the water, she realized that he no longer shrank back from his own reflection, and her heart skipped a beat.

"Yesterday, at the Falls, I thought I would lose you..."

She heard him catch his breath, expecting him to withdraw almost immediately, yet he didn't. Instead, he replied with a disarming, raw honesty.

"I know... I was exhausted from barely holding myself together, so tired of that constant inner turmoil. Too many thoughts, too many emotions... I believed I could handle that rage inside myself, yet it was the silence afterward that broke me. I was only one step away..."

He paused, staring down into the surface of the Mirror Pool, watching the water smooth out their reflections.

Then, he continued. "My mind has been a prison of my own making. Ever since they took you away, I have been trapped in a relentless storm. The force I have fought my entire life to control screamed with a feral fury, demanding blood, demanding vengeance. But beneath that rage lay an even deeper, more terrifying monster, my own guilt.

"When I stood at that cliff yesterday, the thundering water promised an end to the agonizing pain in my mind. It offered absolute peace, a stillness where there was no rage, and where the guilt could no longer tear me apart. That bone-deep exhaustion would finally be over. For one terrifying, breathless moment, I truly believed that surrendering myself to the Falls was the only way to find what I wanted, what I needed... peace, quietness... and then... I saw you."

With his arms wrapped around her waist, the desperate grip of a man who had nearly let himself slip into a boiling waterfall, he fell silent once more.

"I understand, Vincent...I truly do," she murmured, turning slightly to meet his gaze. "But promise me, if you are ever that lost again, you will accept help."

"I will," he promised softly, his eyes locking onto hers with unwavering intensity. "But right now, this is not about me. I am well. This is about you, and you alone. So please... tell me."



A sudden, cool breeze drifted down from a jagged fissure high above, carrying the scent of the city. Catherine looked up, catching sight of a single glimpse of the sky, the sky of a world that had once been hers.

"What most women hold as the most sacred moment of their lives was twisted into a nightmare," she began, her voice trembling but resolute. "I never had the opportunity to tell you I was pregnant... I found out when Joe was wounded after a car bombing, and you were still lost in the dark aftermath of your breakdown."

Vincent remained silent, but she felt the sudden, fierce tightening of his embrace, his breathing against her back.

"And then, the world dissolved. Those harsh interrogations, the torture, the drugs... all of it just to force me to speak of things I knew nothing about. I lived through my pregnancy as a prisoner. All I ever heard from them was how rapidly the baby was developing, that it was not a normal pregnancy.

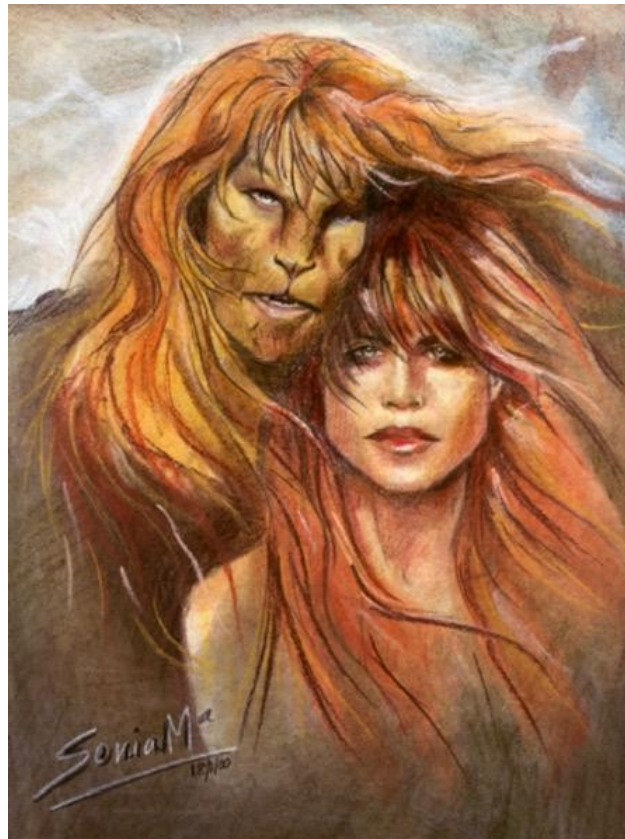
"I was so terrified... I never realized my messages through the pipes were actually being heard, nor did I know you were tearing the world apart to find me. You were so close and I never knew... but Gabriel's security cameras caught you. Jacob's birth was agonizing, and I was granted only one fleeting look at him. After that, there was only darkness, pain, and an inconsolable grief."

Her voice trembled as her tears spilled, catching the dim light of the cavern as she forced herself through the final, agonizing truth.

"There is no greater grief than losing a child... he was a part of me and when they took him away, part of me died..."

Vincent closed his eyes, pressing his head gently against the side of hers. His hands holding her close as if he could shield both her and their son from the horrors of the past.

"I felt it, Catherine," he choked out, the words scraping against his throat.



“Across the distance, through all the stone and the endless dark, I felt a tearing inside my soul. I thought it was my soul breaking under the despair of losing you. I never knew... I never knew it was the echo of your labor, or the shattering of your heart when he was stolen from your arms. I was convinced it was the heartbeat of our son. In that very moment, I felt the bond I once shared with you transform into a bond I now share with him. And then... you died in my arms. At least, that is what I believed, what we all believed...”

He fell silent, letting the remembrance pass before he continued, “A part of you did die in that darkness,” he whispered, his strong hand tenderly cupping her cheek as his thumb brushed away the fallen tears. “But you brought the rest of yourself back to me. Gabriel took your freedom, and he stole our son’s first breaths away from us, but he could not destroy the bond that reunited us. Jacob is safe, you are safe, Catherine, here, Below, in the warmth of our world, surrounded by people who love you both.”

He leaned down, resting his cheek against hers, his voice dropping to a fierce, protective vow.

“The nightmare is over. You will never have to carry the weight of that darkness alone again. We will rebuild what Gabriel tried to destroy... together.”

Her breath hitched as the sheer weight of his vow settled into her heart, replacing the cold emptiness of her grief with a fragile, spreading warmth. She looked up at him, seeing, not what he could be, but seeing the man who had always been her safe haven.

Their lips met in an intimate, fiercely tender kiss, a silent covenant sealed in the quiet depth of the tunnels. It was a kiss that tasted of salt and sorrow, but beneath the pain, it carried the undeniable, pulsing rhythm of survival. In that embrace, the last remnants of their ordeal seemed to melt away, washed over by the timeless currents of the Mirror Pool.

When they finally parted, Vincent leaned his forehead against hers for one last, lingering heartbeat. The heavy silence of the cave no longer felt like a tomb, it felt like a sanctuary.

"Let's go home," she whispered, her voice stronger now, anchored by the solid weight of his hand wrapping around hers.

With their fingers tightly entwined, they turned away from the pool with his reflections and memories. They walked back into the labyrinth of tunnels, but this time, the twilight did not feel hostile or ominous but rather like a trusted friend.

As they drew closer to the center of the underground community, the damp chill of the deeper tunnels gave way to the familiar, comforting scents of beeswax candles, woodsmoke, and old books. The warm light of burning torches and lanterns began to spill across the stone arches, casting a soft, welcoming glow over their path.

Reaching the entrance of Father's study, they stood near the top of the metal stairs. The soothing rumble of his voice, colored by his British accent, drifted upward, reading an old tale with the patient, rhythmic cadence he had used for Vincent decades ago. But it was the other sound that made Catherine hold her breath, the bright, inquisitive clarity of a child's voice, eagerly mingling to ask a question. Vincent's fingers tightened gently around hers, a silent, steady presence in the dimly lit pathway. Looking at him, she saw the warm torchlight catch the profound tenderness in his blue eyes. There was no fear left in him, there was only a quiet, fierce devotion.

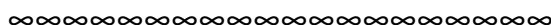
Slowly, they descended the stairs, the soft rustle of Vincent's cloak as the only announcement of their approach. As they stepped into the familiar warmth of the study, they found Father in his favorite chair, an old worn out volume in his hands and Jacob close at his side, his blue eyes wide with the infinite curiosity of childhood. Catherine paused for a fraction of a second, her heart hammering against her ribs, not out of fear this time, but out of an overwhelming, breathless anticipation. Vincent squeezed her hand, a silent reassurance, and together, they embraced the future they had so terribly bled for.

Father briefly looked at them, his face softening into a warm, knowing smile as he caught the faint glint of shared peace in their eyes.

"Ah Vincent, Catherine... all is well?"

Vincent looked down at Catherine, then back at Father, his voice gentle, deep, and filled with a profound sense of satisfaction.

"All is well Father..."





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Words of thank:

To my husband for his support

To my children and grandchildren for all the toddler stuff

To the entire cast and crew of Beauty and The Beast for their imagination, their performances and their everlasting efforts to make this iconic show and giving it it's place in history

To the contributing artists to allow me to use their artwork

To the fandom members, worldwide, who after all those years, are still active and keeping the dream alive

Artwork:

The artwork in this fanzine is used with the permission of the artists

Since I wanted some specific images/drawings which were nowhere to be found or for which no permission was given I used AI.

Cover: Vincent by Gerda Eeckelaert (eyes AI generated)

Pg. 5 - Vincent and son (AI generated)

Pg. 9 - Diana (AI generated)

Pg.13 - Vincent with hood (AI generated)

Pg.16 - Torment (AI generated)

Pg. 17 - Father by Lynn Wright

Pg. 18 - Vincent by Lynn Wright

Pg. 21 - Vincent throwing pebbles (AI generated)

Pg. 25 - Vincent by Lynn Wright

Pg. 31 - Jacob at Vincent's lap (AI generated)

Pg. 36 - Diana on the street (AI generated)

Pg. 38 - Catherine by Lynn Wright

Pg. 42 - Embrace (AI generated)

Pg. 43 - Your son (AI generated)

Pg. 45 - Family (AI generated)

Pg. 47 - Joe (AI generated)

Pg.51 - Vincent and book by Sonia M. Corral

Pg. 53 - Vincent's cry by Sonia M. Corral

Pg. 57 - These are my Hands (AI generated)
Pg. 58 - Tears in Heaven (AI generated)
Pg. 63 - Look at me (AI generated)
Pg. 64 - Vincent and Catherine by Sonia M. Corral
Pg. 66 - Shining couple by Sonia M. Corral

Bibliography:

Pg.4 - Vincent's soliloquy (Beauty and The Beast: season three)
Pg.18 - (*) Harriet Beecher Stowe
Pg.19 - (*) Jim Carrey
Pg. 32 - (*) Thomas Gray
Pg. 33 - (*) Dylan Thomas
Pg.41 - (*) Dylan Tomas
Pg.52 - (*) Mary Shelley (Frankenstein)