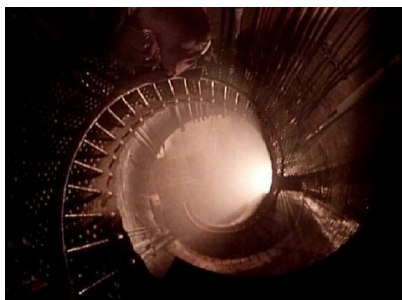


She Was Home

By JessicaRae

For Judith Nolan



She saw it in her mind, a place she had gone so many times. He always met her there, a kind smile his gift of acceptance. Not everyone had access to their special entrance, and even fewer saw it for what it truly was. This escape, this passage to peace lay right around the corner of consciousness, and she found herself standing at its entrance just as she had so many times before.

It had been a while since her last visit, and she wondered if he would meet her like he always had before. The last few days had been a whirlwind of Above stuff, that she would gladly like to forget and move on from. She had endured her second hip replacement, and the last few weeks had been a mess. The couch, the only comfortable place to be right now, felt more like a prison than a comfort, and she was tired of having to get up and take medication, sleep, eat, and try to draft the stories that her imagination created, all while lying flat on her back. She reached deep into her thoughts, thinking of the one familiar place. The sounds of the world behind her fell away as she stepped into the inviting circle of light.

He was there, as he always was, a tall, straight sentinel awaiting her arrival. Vincent.

A small sigh of relief escaped her lips, and he held out a hand at once for hers.

“You have not been well,” he spoke softly.

She gave him her hand in silent accepting of his support and nodded once.

“Blasted hip. Falling apart it was, and the idiot couldn’t hold up the old tank anymore. Had to have it all redone, and wouldn’t you know it, I’m half bionic woman now. “

An amused smile turned up the corner of his lips, but his sparkling eyes revealing the mirth he felt at her rant were hidden beneath the shadow of his cloak’s hood.

“I am sure you were a model patient,” he spoke softly, yet the tone he used showed that he was not convinced of this fact, as they continued walking down the dim tunnel together.

She wrapped an arm around his strong bicep to use his solid strength as support, and he leaned closer to allow her to accomplish this easily.

“Thank you, for meeting me, Vincent, and for the confidence in my ability to behave myself. Thought maybe you’d have forgotten all about an old crab like me after I didn’t come by for a bit.”

He stopped walking at this insinuation, and this allowed her to see upward beyond the shadowed edge of the hood that typically framed his face. He looked concerned, a little wounded.

"Miss Judith, we would never forget you. You will always have a place in our tunnels."

"I know," she spoke, turning away to continue the journey. "I know. It's just the blasted meds talking, don't mind me. I didn't even know anyone Below knew what was happening."

"Catherine informed us that you were having a hip operation. Even the children were concerned. We were grateful when she gave us the news that all went well."

Judith nodded silently, touched that her tunnel folk were worried about her wellbeing.

He continued the journey beside her, silent, companionable, and a steady anchor to her stumbling feet. She kept waiting for the familiar yawning gap in the passage to arrive, and the great winding staircase, but they never came.

"We aren't going the usual way, are we?" she asked suddenly, and a warm chuckle echoed above her.

"No," he replied simply.

"Well, what gives? We are going to the tunnels, aren't we? I didn't toddle all the way out here to not at least have some tea in the library and set the old body down for a while."

Vincent paused in his stride to aid her stepping down a small stairway, his voice encouraging and kind.

"You will have your tea in the library, Judith, do not worry. But I am taking you along a different path. There was no way you could safely jump across the gap with your hip in this condition or navigate those stairs. Not only would your doctor have a fit, but so would Father, and you know how he can be when he's upset."

Judith nodded once, in agreement of the proposed rearrangement of the plans. She couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed that Vincent couldn't have at least carried her across that gap. It wasn't the Grand Canyon after all, merely the width of a decent brook. But she was too tired to voice her wishes and satisfied that tiny ache with the reality that at least she was back in the tunnels. It was better than the hospital, that was sure.

In the distance, the rumbling of water began as the buzzing of a tiny bee. She was familiar with this place. It seemed as if they were getting closer to the underground stream one moment, then the water's song would fade for a while. The dark tunnel seemed to stretch on and on, and for Judith, the journey felt more arduous than it ever had before. Her new hip was beginning to ache, but there was no way she was going to stop at this point. She was nearly home, and no pains were going to stop her from getting there at all costs.

"You really should be resting," Vincent said softly, glancing down at her. She gripped his bicep more tightly and fixed him with one of her no-nonsense frowns.

"Mister, you just keep right on going. I have survived worse knots than this, and I am not about to become a wimp now. Move it."

His face turned up in a fond smile again, and he patted the hand that was still squeezing the daylights out of his arm.

"Tough lady, aren't you, Judith?"

She snorted, not daring to say any more. She could talk a strong talk, but the recent hip operation had

drained her of some of her normal fire and the healing scars were starting to smart. Surely the library could not be that far away now.

"You can't keep pushing yourself," Vincent spoke again, when she stumbled, disguising the slip as exaggeratingly avoiding a stone lying in the path. He stopped abruptly, carefully trying to disengage her fingers from his arm.

"Here, let go for a moment."

"No way, not going to go back now," she replied stubbornly, and he touched a finger to her chin.

"You do not have to go back. But you cannot walk any further, Father will have my hide, and yours too, if you show up in the library with a limp. Put your arm around my neck, here, and I will carry you."

"About time," Judith muttered to herself, planting one arm firmly around the cloaked figure as directed. This earned her another chuckle. He was careful, intuitive to what hurt and what didn't, and to her delight, she found it much easier going through the shadowy tunnels perched high above the stone floor.

"This is nice," she commented, fingers grasping the rough cloth of his cloak, as if trying to prove to herself that this was not a dream. He nodded, his voice a gentle rumbling from her much closer vantage point.

"Anything for you, Judith. You are one of us, you know."

"That's nice to know," she replied, a reflective tone to her acceptance of the stated fact.

"You seem sad," he noted, moving quickly along the route to the library, ducking his head every so often to avoid the low ceiling.

How could she express the words that flowed through her mind in waves upon waves of melancholy and joy?

"Not sad," she replied unconvincingly.

The tall man paused, looking down at her with eyes that felt as if they looked through her very soul.

"Are you sure?" he said, not as a question, but a provoking thought.

She looked away, studying the hewn walls as if they would suddenly reveal the words that she felt but couldn't say.

"It's ... not sad," she tried again. "I ... just missed you all, and Above ... it isn't as nice as down here. It's ... it's been rough."

"You need time to heal, and rest," he replied. "You will find that Above makes a little more sense when it isn't curtailed by the medications you are on right now. I promise, the darkness lifts eventually."

"You promise?" she echoed, returning a tired smile to the regal face above her, mere inches away.

"Yes," he nodded, his tawny hair fluttering in the dim light.

"That's enough for me," she said, resting her head against the broad, solid shoulder.

"Onward, Hercules."

Vincent laughed outright and shifted her weight in his arms. "As you wish, Miss Judith. As you wish."

The library was just as she remembered it. The walls were warmly lit with a myriad of flickering candles, the smell of molten wax blending with old books, dusty walls, and tea.

“Judith, there you are!” Mary cheerfully greeted her from the chess table where she was pouring tea into cups. “Are you well?” Her exuberant face turned to panic

at the sight of their visitor in Vincent’s arms.

“What happened? Vincent!” Father’s familiar, concerned voice called above them, as he rushed down the library staircase, discarding the volume in his hands onto the nearest stack of publications. It wobbled at the sudden addition, then tumbled sideways, but no one noticed.

“Judith, my dear, are you injured?” He moved quickly to her side, taking her wrist to check her pulse, by instinct. Judith shook her head.

“I just came to visit, Father. I am tired, not dying.”

“She just came down for tea,” Vincent offered helpfully, echoing her statement, and carefully seating their company in a chair beside the chess table.

“Walking? Here? On a new hip?” Father glanced incredulously from Vincent to Judith, disapproval on his face. “Judith, really...”

“I gave it six weeks,” she replied defiantly, having expected his lecture. “That was more than long enough to wait to see you all again.”

Father harumphed his disagreement with that idea, but then his face softened, and he nodded at Mary.

“Bring tea for our guest, my dear. I am sure she could use it.”

“Does it have brandy in there?” Judith asked blowing on the steaming cup that Mary handed her. Father laughed and sat down opposite her.

“No, but Rebecca and Mary made a delicious rum cake for Winslow’s birthday and there is some left if you would like.”

Judith sipped her tea and nodded at the same time.

“Shame, I wanted to drop in and say hi on his birthday but had to go see the blasted doctor instead. Bring on the cake, this old lady needs a pick me up.” She glanced coyly at Vincent. “In addition to the one I already had.”

The little group laughed, Vincent ducked his head to hide his amusement, and Father reached across the table, tapping her hand with his own.

“Welcome back, Judith. We sure have missed that witty personality of yours.”

“I’ve missed you all, too.” She replied seriously, her mind going back to the last few weeks of discomfort and longing for the little haven on earth that they called Below.

“But what I have really wanted to do is give someone a good go at chess. I’m all ready for some action. Anyone up for it?”

“Are you really ready for this?” Father asked jovially, pouring a cup of tea for himself, and adjusting a few of the chess pieces.

“Absolutely,” she replied energetically. “It’s my hip that’s knackered, not my hands.”

“All right then,” Father agreed kindly. He set a pawn forward on the board that lay between them. “It’s your move then, Judith.”

As the golden candles flickered, washing the scene with their amber light, the laughter of the small circle could be heard for hours. Father and Judith squared off in a chess fight, Mary hurried around with tea and cake, offering it to anyone who would accept it, and Vincent sat nearby in his armchair, a worn copy of Hamlet upon his knee.

Every so often, one of the tunnel children would quickly visit to present a get-well card or flower to their friend from Above. Winslow hovered nearby, offering his uninvited opinion to both sides of the game, and Samantha herded the children in and out, cautioning them to be quiet and orderly. Pascal appeared for a moment to say hello, then hurried off to his post at the pipes. Mouse appeared once, his hands covered in grease, and carrying some random invention, to briefly announce he hoped she would get well quickly.

The evening went on and on and on, a whirlwind of cheer and tea and rum cake and chess and warmth.

Her hip would be sore tomorrow, if she could even get out of bed – she knew that for a fact. Her doctor would probably scold and remind her to stay off her feet as much as possible. But today it didn’t matter a single bit.

Today she was home.