

The Return

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Note: This story appeared first in the Treasure Chambers "Together Forever VII - The Truth I Will Always Know" onzine in 2023.



It was already dark when he found his way into her apartment... the usual way, of course. He remembered the first time he'd done it, eight months ago, and he had to smile. The look on her face when she saw him was worth the trouble. It made his pretty miserable day so much better back then.

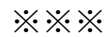
The apartment had barely changed; the soft pastel tones and elegant decorations oozed a romantic soul. He had to chuckle when he remembered their first encounter - she appeared anything but romantic, more of a choleric. There was something about her, though, that made him like her right from the start. Her obvious caring nature, her empathy after he stopped lying to her... and her warm smile. He could never forget that gentle smile which reminded him of his mother's...

The sound of the door lock clicking to open brought him back to reality, and in a second, he was ready.

Catherine opened the door and reached for the light switch. She walked in, closed the door and secured both its locks. She was just about to throw her briefcase on one of the dinky couches when she jerked, seeing him spread out comfortably on the other couch.

"Your boss makes you work really hard, you should file a complaint," he said, shaking his head. Then he grinned. "Hello, lady."

Catherine's mouth dropped, but then a wide, incredulous smile appeared on her face.
"Tony??"



The smell of hot cocoa enhanced the cosy feel of the room filled with friendship and warm memories.

"You know, you should really call me next time you want to see me." Catherine raised her eyebrows. "It would save you the effort of picking my lock every time."

The boy grinned. "It wouldn't be the same. Take it as my trademark."

"I hope you don't practice on other properties," she remarked dryly.

"Oh, no, you have the exclusive honour of that. I've been a good boy, I promise."

Catherine couldn't help but laugh. The boy she and Vincent helped to reunite with his grandparents the year before still held a big place in her heart.

"I must admit I've missed you," she said, smiling.

Tony lowered his eyes shyly. "I've missed you too." He quickly returned to his light-hearted nature. "That's why I decided to pay a visit."

"I'm glad... though shouldn't you be at home with your grandparents now? It's a bit late for you to be out."

"No worries, they know where I've gone," Tony reassured her. "I said if I'm not back by ten, they can call the National Guard. I am twelve, and I'm a traveller, you know?"

She chuckled. *Good old Tony. No one can clip his wings...*

"So, how have you been doing?" she asked with interest.

"I've been great!" the boy exclaimed with excitement. "My grandparents are wonderful. I've been helping them where I can, and they love having me around. I love making breakfast for them. Grandma said I cook better than her! Oh, but can you imagine? They want me to start school next term." He rolled his eyes theatrically. "As if what Grandfather teaches me isn't enough."

Catherine laughed, remembering his opinion about the uselessness of school. "He only wants to widen your horizons, give you the best education you can get. I know life teaches you a lot, but school's not bad either. And you can meet new friends there," she encouraged him.

"I've got friends," Tony countered. "You, for example."

She smiled, truly touched somewhere deep inside. Her hand reached for his head, ruffling his dark hair. Never mind that he didn't like it, she couldn't help herself. Surprisingly, he didn't pull away.

"Of course, we are friends," Catherine agreed proudly, eliciting a beaming smile on his face.

"Speaking of... How is... Vincent?"

Tony's careful way of asking the question warmed her heart. She was sure the boy never revealed the extraordinary man's existence to anyone. They both trusted him by letting him in on the secret in the first place.

"He's fine," Catherine replied. "I'm sure he'll be glad to know you are doing well and are happy in your new home."

"Shame we didn't get more time to get to know each other better." There was genuine regret in his voice.

"You never know, maybe you'll get a chance one day," she said enigmatically.

Tony sighed, hoping her words would come true. The truth was, he couldn't forget the leonine man, who was so essential to his successful journey to happiness. Suddenly, he remembered something and reached into his backpack, taking out a well-worn book. He showed the cover to Catherine, who smiled warmly, nodding.

"How could I ever forget?" she asked, a fond memory appearing in her mind.

He smiled and opened the volume. "Grandfather had it on his bookshelf, would you believe it?" A shy and a bit uncertain glance into her eyes told her he was nervous about something, but then he looked down at the page he had just opened and surprised her.

*"In the High... and Far-Off Times... the Ele-...Elephant, O Best Be-... Beloved, had no... trunk."*¹

"Tony!" Catherine exclaimed, unable to contain her joy. It was still a bit wobbly, but definitely not too bad after only eight months.

The boy's face was beaming with pride. "Grandfather has been teaching me to read."

"That's wonderful! It will make your start at school much easier," his friend praised him.

He went silent for a moment, smiling shyly. "I've missed your voice..." he said then. "I often remember how you read to me back then."

Catherine smiled, put down her cup, then took the book from his hands and found the page he started reading a while before.

¹Rudyard Kipling: *The Elephant's Child*, from *Just So Stories*

*"In the High and Far-Off Times the Elephant, O Best Beloved, had no trunk. He had only a blackish, bulgy nose, as big as a boot, that he could wriggle about from side to side, but he couldn't pick up things with it. But there was one Elephant - and Elephant's Child - who was so full of 'satiabile curiosity, and that means, he asked ever so many questions..."*²

Tony made himself comfortable in the corner of the sofa and listened, his heart filled with warm feelings of happiness and contentment.

Catherine read almost the whole story when suddenly she stopped and looked up at the French doors.

"What's wrong?" Tony asked, mildly alarmed.

"We have a visitor, and I think he'll be happy to see you again," she replied with a mysterious smile and stood up, walking over to the door.

When she opened it, her young friend opened his mouth wide, and his eyes lit up.

"Hello, Vincent..."



They were sitting on the balcony, all together on a blanket and soft cushions on the tiled floor, leaning against the half-wall and catching up as if they had parted only yesterday. Tony sat between the two adults, enjoying the nearness of his special friends, whose company he had the pleasure of enjoying only for a short time back then. Among all the lively talk about his life during the past eight months, he felt something from his early childhood resurfacing, something from the days he shared with his mother and father...

He was excited to see Catherine again, but ever since Vincent's arrival, he could barely take his eyes off the man with the magical face in a dark cloak. The information that Vincent *climbed* onto the balcony to the 18th floor just reinforced his admiration for the mysterious man.

"Earth to Tony," Catherine said cheekily, seeing her friend's musing look.

"Oh, sorry," he apologised, mildly embarrassed. "I was just thinking about the past."

"Memories are not something to apologise for, especially if they are good ones," Vincent remarked with a small smile.

"I was thinking of the night I saw you for the first time," Tony stated, his eyes fixed on his friend. "I'd never seen anyone like you before."

Vincent chuckled, used to this kind of reaction from children. "As I told you then, there's never been anyone like me before," he said.

²Rudyard Kipling: *The Elephant's Child*, from *Just So Stories*

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude,” Tony apologised, embarrassed. “It’s just... How can you even walk down the streets? And where do you live?” He was fascinated.

“I have my cloak, and I have the night,” Vincent replied. “I know every street, every alley, every hidden corner in New York. And because I can’t be seen in daylight, I live Below, in the Tunnels.”

There was no doubt that the boy would keep this knowledge for himself. Of that, the leonine man was sure.

“So that’s why you knew the way to Grandfather’s house back then...” Tony concluded in awe.

“Yes. There are many maps, blueprints of the city. I’ve memorised most of them a long time ago.”

“Cool!” The boy couldn’t suppress his amazement, making Vincent and Catherine chuckle. Then his face grew more serious.

“What is it, Tony?” Catherine asked with care.

“Down there, in the Tunnels... Don’t you feel... lonely? I’m sure I would.”

His concern touched Vincent’s heart, and he smiled. “Maybe I would... if I was *alone*,” he remarked. “But I’m surrounded by people who like me and have been my friends ever since I was born. They chose to live Below because the world Above failed them in some way. In the Tunnels, we all live with respect and love for each other, no matter what we look like.”

“It sounds like a perfect place,” Tony mused with awe.

Vincent smiled, shaking his head. “Just as there are no perfect people, there is no perfect place. But we try to live together peacefully, to help each other and live each day to the fullest, with gratitude.”

“How come *you* don’t live in the tunnels?” The boy turned to Catherine.

For a brief moment, she felt a pang in her heart. *Why indeed?* She dared to look at Vincent, and his eyes told her he knew what she was thinking. She lowered her eyes shyly then started to explain.

“I am a Helper, as the Tunnel people call someone who lives Above, but knows about them and regularly helps them in various ways.”

“Could I become one too?” Tony was genuinely interested.

“Once you get older, you might very well, if the Tunnel Council agrees to it.”

Tony inadvertently embraced his knees, engrossed in hearing all about the wondrous new world. “How did you learn about the place?” he asked then.

Catherine sighed then chuckled. “It’s a long story, but almost two years ago, I was

attacked. I suffered bad injuries and was left for dead in Central Park... That's where Vincent found me. He brought me Below to find help. His adoptive father is a doctor. Since then, we've been..."

She stopped, hesitating for a second. Her eyes found Vincent, who was watching her intently. *Almost-lovers...*

"Friends," she added finally, unable to look away from the blue depths of the man she loved.

"Oh... I see..." Tony remarked with a grin, observing them with keen interest.

Catherine looked into the child's eyes, seeing comprehension in them. "Anyway..." She shook her head, trying to change the topic. "The world Below is a very special place, protecting Vincent and the people who live there. Do you understand what I mean, Tony?" she asked carefully.

"Sure," the boy answered. "You can count on me. I'll keep it a secret." He winked at her then turned back to Vincent. "Grandfather mentioned you once, not long after he welcomed me to the family.

"What did he say?" his friend asked calmly, remembering his brief yet necessary visit to the old man not even a year ago.

"He said a mysterious dark angel visited him the night before the Kris and made him think about justice and second chances."

Catherine glanced at Vincent, who answered with a gentle smile.

"You are very perceptive, Tony," he remarked. "Thank you for keeping my secret."

"I owe you one, It's the least I can do for you," the boy replied proudly and leaned back again.

The three friends sat in companionable silence for a few moments, watching the dark evening sky above them. Each immersed in their memories, each blessed to share this moment with each other.

"Will I ever see you again?" Tony asked suddenly, looking at Vincent, with unusual shyness.

"If you wish to," Vincent replied, smiling. "You know how to find me."

"Cool," the boy breathed happily.

"A bit more cocoa before you have to go, Tony?" Catherine asked, getting up, and holding her empty cup.

"Sure, go for it, lady," he answered, passing her his own cup. The warm smile on his face spoke about his gratitude for much more than a hot drink.



“Time doesn’t take away from friendship, nor does separation.”

- Tennessee Williams -

